



The Securitization of Everyday Life: Where are the People?

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“Extreme poverty, persisting hunger, natural disasters, political and criminal violence, the consequences of armed conflict, climate change and other environmental changes cannot be addressed by military means. These are still threats to security—in the first place the security of people but also that of states, communities and societies.”¹

States and regimes tend to focus more on physical and military security than human security and non-traditional threats. Many governments justify increased armament spending based on the possibility of military threats and external invasion. While the possibility of conventional military action is a serious concern, many of the immediate threats facing people cannot be dealt with militarily.

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, the list of common challenges facing most of the states regularly reveal conditions of fragility, fragmentation, perpetuated conflicts, authoritarianism, and de-development. Crises of legitimacy, inclusivity and representation, absence of accountability, and normalcy of marginalization and alienation, are additional common characteristics of the region’s frameworks of governance. Consequent to all these predicaments, the notion of ‘peace’ has largely shrunk to become a mere function of securitized interventions, with regimes’ ‘security first’ paradigms and security-driven frameworks – to empower security establishments and armies -- providing the engine of state (re)formation processes.

Yet, the region cannot be analyzed as a ‘monolithic and homogeneous entity’, but as was recently argued by Marwan Muasher, Arab countries can be subdivided today into three distinct categories: those “that are thriving, those that are struggling, and those that have become failing or failed states”.² However, even with this typology, the countries in the region tend to dismiss a critical element, namely, centering people, their freedoms and security, and their prospects of human development, in the core of any processes of reform, statebuilding, and governance. In other words, and as was argued by Muasher, “states also must adopt a new political framework in which citizens are seen as resources, not threats, and are treated as an equal and necessary part of the decision-making process”.³

1 Michael Brzoska, Wuyi Omitoogun, and Elisabeth Sköns. “The Human Security Case for Rebalancing Military Expenditure.” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, accessed on 30/8/2023, at: https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/2205_human_security_case_for_rebalancing_military_expenditure.pdf

2 Marwan Muasher, “Reform or Recklessness? Which Path for the Arab Region?” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 30/8/2023, accessed on 5/9/2023, at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/08/30/reform-or-recklessness-which-path-for-arab-region-pub-90459>

3 Ibid.



Said differently, we argue for moving away from the paradigm of “security is about weaponry” to a modality of “security is about people.”⁴ The centrality of the people in political systems and developmental processes means capitalizing on them as resources, not threats. The human security approach should emphasize a civilian non-armed/non-militarized method that is people-centric, law-abiding, comprehensive, and preventive. In this regard, the ‘security’ component here should be primarily guided by expanding critical social safety nets, human development policies and practices to alleviate suffering, non-traditional/non-conventional threats, and multi-dimensional insecurity. This would open up new avenues that have been forcibly blocked and denied by regimes that are fixated on securitized approaches to everyday life, which ironically violates, instead of protecting, the people and their security. As a result, we become continuously faced with the question of: Whose security?

Weaponized Security versus Freedom and Human Development

In the MENA region, like elsewhere, insecurities perceived by the regimes are not necessarily representative of or correspond to the perceived threats and needs of the people. And while the former lead governments to pile up more arms to feel that much more ‘secure’ and ‘strong’, these rarely if ever improve people’s fragile living conditions and insecurity.

In most countries across the region, securitizing the public sphere continues to grow using a wide range of tactics from hands-on repression, violence, and persecution, to the more sophisticated use of technology and surveillance systems. All this aims to do is to enlist fear and suspicion among the population in order to minimize the chances of organizing and protesting for change, while maintaining control and public order from the regimes and rulers’ perspective. As Emma Soubrier notes, governments in the MENA region invariably recognize security as regime protection; while “for outside actors it is often either unexamined or narrowly defined in relation to discrete policy preferences.”⁵

Nonetheless, as exemplified by waves of uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and many MENA countries over the past decades, built-up domestic grievances can have a significant impact on the security, cohesiveness, and structure of the state. As the cases of Libya, Syria and Yemen particularly demonstrate, states with weak social contracts and sociopolitical unity are the primary locale of present and future wars and upheavals.⁶ This leads to domestic strife as well as broader regional and international disorder, a context that often invites foreign political and military interventions, as also illustrated in Lebanon and Iraq.

4 For further analysis, see for instance: Pinar Bilgin, “Beyond Statism in Security Studies? Human Agency and Security in the Middle East,” *Review of International Affairs* 2: 100 (2022); United Nations Development Programme (2009) *Arab Human Development Report 2009 Challenges to Human Security in the Arab Countries* <https://arab-hdr.org/report/human-security-2009/>; Pinar Bilgin, “Region, Security, Regional Security: “Whose Middle East?” Revisited. In: Monier, E. (eds) *Regional Insecurity After the Arab Uprisings. New Security Challenges Series*. Palgrave Macmillan, London (2015). https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137503978_2; and Coralie Pison Hindawi, “Selective Arms Flows and Arms Control: Producing Insecurity in the Middle East ... and Beyond”, In Kamel, L. (eds) *The Middle East: Thinking About and Beyond Security and Stability*, Peter Lang Publishing (2019).

5 Emma Soubrier. “What is the role of the arms trade between Europe & North America and the MENA region? Revitalizing the Debate on the Global Arms Trade.” *Pathways to Renewed and Inclusive Security in the Middle East (PRISME)*, accessed on 3/9/2023, at: <https://prismeinitiative.org/blog/emma-soubrier-role-arms-trade-mena-synthesis/>



Thus, between these two levels of national and international analysis/intervention and the security-driven complementarity between the views of the regimes and the views of the outside actors, the people again get sidelined and marginalized. This multi-dimensional level of repression means that despite what any positive rhetoric putting a human or humanitarian spin on many a political or military intervention may suggest, the development of the people is not the focus, neither by the regime nor by the external actors. It is regimes' resilience, their over reliance on weaponry and securitization, and the "appropriateness" of external actors' foreign policy, that matters. To ensure that, both the regimes and the external actors utilize multiple instruments – including arms – to operationalize and sustain these relationships, at the expense of investing in the development, empowerment, and freedom of the people.

While the Saudi-led war in and on Yemen has been justified by the Saudi regime both in the name of its "responsibility" to protect the people and the legitimate government of Yemen⁷ against the Houthis and as a means of collective self-defense against Iranian (indirect) aggression, it is clear that it was in fact not a result of Yemeni or Saudi citizens being threatened. Rather, the war was the brainchild of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) who thought the indiscriminate air campaign and naval blockade would weaken the Houthis and eventually bring them down, while giving him legitimacy and standing in power. The Saudi leader thought that the military campaign would allow him to gain more legitimation and acceptance (domestically and abroad), much like his efforts to alter the longstanding social stagnation in the kingdom and rebrand Saudi Arabia and its society through the ambitious Vision 2030 plan, unveiled one year after the beginning of the war. In the end, the second avenue proved more efficient, especially as the war in Yemen underscored more vulnerabilities than strengths in Saudi Arabia's military policy and ability to protect its territory (exposed by Houthi sporadic retaliations and attacks on Saudi border cities and the Aramco oil facilities⁸).

More recently, Israel's war on Gaza was unleashed in the name of the country's right to self-defense against Hamas, pointing to a people's security justification for launching a military campaign. But these arguments are also extremely deceptive.⁹ The indiscriminate Israeli bombardments of Gaza that killed over 10,000 civilians in a month, including 4,000 children, is not a result of people-centered concerns.¹⁰ Rather, along with systemic dehumanizing of Palestinians, and daily violent actions by settlers in the West Bank and Jerusalem, they are clear examples of using a securitized/armed approach to avoid

6 Ahmed Morsy. "Towards a Renewed Local Social and Political Covenant in Libya, Syria and Yemen." Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, accessed on 3/9/2023, at: <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2022/sipri-insights-peace-and-security/towards-renewed-local-social-and-political-covenant-libya-syria-and-yemen>

7 The Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in Washington, "Statement by Saudi Ambassador Al-Jubeir on Military Operations in Yemen," Press Release, March 25, 2015, <https://www.saudiembassy.net/press-release/statement-saudi-ambassador-al-jubeir-military-operations-yemen>

8 Stephen Kalin and Sylvia Westall. "Costly Saudi defenses prove no match for drones, cruise missiles." Reuters, September 17, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-aramco-security-idUSKBN1W22FR>

9 Adil Ahmad Haque, "Enough: Self-Defense and Proportionality in the Israel-Hamas Conflict", Just Security, November 6, 2023, <https://www.justsecurity.org/89960/enough-self-defense-and-proportionality-in-the-israel-hamas-conflict/>

10 Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network. "Genocide in Gaza: Global Culpability and Ways Forward", 2023, <https://al-shabaka.org/roundtables/genocide-in-gaza-global-culpability-and-ways-forward/>



addressing any of the underlying decades of conflict and grievances.¹¹ As Tariq Dana points out, the “military is a source of Israeli national pride, perceived as an unassailable force that guarantees the sustainability of the Zionist settler-colonial project.”¹² The imbalanced situation becomes prone to patterns of retaliatory exchanges that upends the fragile and unsustainable status quo.¹³ Hence, it comes as no surprise that Palestinians use different forms of resistance, from strikes and protests, to attacks by militants like the one by Hamas on October 7, 2023.¹⁴

These examples illustrate that securitized and military approaches that violate people’s security are inherently limited and problematic, not least because they make peace farther away, but it considers the people, their life, and their security irrelevant to ruling elites and their governing calculus. Hence, marginalization of the people becomes institutionalized, solidified, and even normalized.

A lot of Arms and a lot less Human Security/Development

According to recent data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), global military expenditure in 2022 reached an all-time high of over \$2.24 trillion, with the United States, China, and Russia accounting for over 55 percent of the spending.¹⁵ This staggering rise in spending is taking place at a time of heightened human insecurity conditions, economic uncertainty, and high levels of inflation across the world. Many governments justify increased armament spending based on the concern of military threats to their state and standing. While the possibility of military action is a serious concern, many of the immediate threats facing the people are not from nuclear annihilation, as expressed in the quote at the onset of this essay.

On a regional level, MENA countries continue to prop up their armies with major deals from the United States and Europe. Three of the top 10 arms-importing states in the world in 2022, according to SIPRI, were in the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Egypt.¹⁶ While the United States claims to be defending democracy along with its allies at a time of uncertainty in the world,¹⁷ the data shows leading democracies “continue to arm a majority of the world’s autocracies.”¹⁸

11 Tartir, Alaa, and Timothy Seidel, (eds). *Palestine and Rule of Power: Local Dissent vs. International Governance*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019; Tartir, Alaa, Timothy Seidel, and Tariq Dana (eds). *Resisting Domination in Palestine: Mechanisms and Techniques of Control, Coloniality and Settler Colonialism*. I.B. Tauris, 2024.

12 Tariq Dana. “Israel-Palestine war: This humiliation has shaken the Israeli psyche to its core.” *Middle East Eye*, October 10, 2023. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/israel-palestine-war-humiliation-psyche-shaken-core>

13 Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network. “Scenario Matrix: Possibilities for the West Bank and Gaza”, 2022, <https://al-shabaka.org/scenario-matrix/>

14 Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network. “Grounding the Current Moment: An Al-Shabaka Syllabus”, 24 October 2023, <https://al-shabaka.org/focuses/grounding-the-current-moment-an-al-shabaka-syllabus/>

15 “World military expenditure reaches new record high as European spending surges,” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, accessed on 30/8/2023, at: <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2023/world-military-expenditure-reaches-new-record-high-european-spending-surges>

16 “International arms transfers”, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, accessed on 30/8/2023, at: <https://www.sipri.org/research/armament-and-disarmament/arms-and-military-expenditure/international-arms-transfers>



The USA accounted for 54 percent of all Middle Eastern arms imports, more than five times the next supplier, France, at 12 percent. Overall, the United States and Europe are by far the biggest providers of arms in the region with Russia and China trailing far behind. For instance, the United States accounted for 78 percent of Saudi arms purchases in 2018-2022 and 42 percent of the Qatari imports.¹⁹

Despite these numbers, the data shows “arms imports by states in the Middle East were 8.8 percent lower in 2018–22 than in 2013–17.”²⁰ This could be due to delayed weapons deliveries and/or a slowdown by some of the top importers, particularly the Gulf States, for the sake of investing in other sectors, including their own military industrial complex. The UAE, while being the 11th arms importer, saw 38 percent decrease in arms imports in 2018–22 than in 2013–17. This is likely due to the UAE’s pullback from its participation in the Saudi-led war in Yemen and other adventurous military expeditions in the region as well as investing in developing their military manufacturing capacity.

As recent years saw growing and renewed tensions in different parts of the world, the trend of increased military spending is unlikely to slow down in the coming years, nor is it likely to lead to more security. In fact, international relations theory points out that the more perceived (military) insecurity exists, the higher states spend on armaments or join coalitions to feel secure. This binary equation could easily escalate existing and deeply-rooted animosity among foes, particularly in the absence of mutual trust and diplomatic overtures.

In advancing a New Agenda for Peace, the UN secretary-general, António Guterres, called for reducing excessive military budgets, and for linking disarmament initiatives to developmental opportunities and adequate social spending. In essence, it’s a plea to advance a vision and a balanced approach that incorporates the human / people element into our overall understanding of security. This also serves as a reminder to the 2012 United Nations General Assembly Resolution 66/290, marking the first common global understanding that “human security is an approach to assist Member States in identifying and addressing widespread and cross-cutting challenges to the survival, livelihood and dignity of their people.”²¹ Mr. Guterres’ message comes at a time when hundreds of millions of people face non-military security threats on a daily basis, from famine and impoverished and inhumane livelihoods, to the growing impacts of climate change and food insecurity.²²

17 “Remarks by President Biden at the 2021 Virtual Munich Security Conference,” The White House, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/19/remarks-by-president-biden-at-the-2021-virtual-munich-security-conference/>

18 Kelsey Hartman and Lucie Béraud-Sudreau. “Arming autocracies: Arms transfers and the emerging Biden doctrine,” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, accessed on 30/8/2023, at: <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/blog/2023/arming-autocracies-arms-transfers-and-emerging-biden-doctrine>

19 “International arms transfers”, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, accessed on 30/8/2023, at: <https://www.sipri.org/research/armament-and-disarmament/arms-and-military-expenditure/international-arms-transfers>

20 Pieter D. Wezeman, Justine Gadon and Siemon T. Wezeman. “Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2022”, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, accessed on 31/8/2023, at: <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2023/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-international-arms-transfers-2022>

21 “What is Human Security?” United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, April 2018. <https://www.un.org/humansecurity/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/What-is-Human-Security.pdf>



While the international community continues its efforts to fill the funding gap needed for vital human security needs, the socio-economic shocks from COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine will have enduring impacts. The consequences are already witnessed in dwindling government incomes, tightened state budgets, and increasing levels of internal and external debts. Ironically, and amid all this, governments are still too concerned with ramping up armaments when there is an urgent need to reallocate money to promote human development needs.²³

The MENA region has been witnessing over the years, and continues to experience signs of, deteriorating social services and dignified living conditions.²⁴ Decision-makers ignored most signs and carried on policies that brought regimes to the current moment of ineffective governance, persisting corruption and cronyism, dwindling economic resources, job opportunities, and social protections as well as worsening educational levels and increased environmental degradation.

These deteriorations are captured by several United Nations reports and surveys. The Arab Multidimensional Poverty (MDP)²⁵ studies provide a close look of the real conditions of the populations, where “more than two-thirds of households in the non-oil-producing countries are poor or vulnerable,” and about 60-70 percent of surveyed families cannot easily or at all cover their basic monthly needs.²⁶ In Egypt, the most populous Arab country, official data reported about 30 percent of the population as poor before the pandemic. Now with high inflation, repeated currency devaluations, and foreign currency shortage, analysts estimate as many as 60 percent are below or close to the poverty line.²⁷ Rami Khouri highlighted research findings by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA): “In ten non-oil-producing Arab states, approximately 116 million people were classified as poor (this is about 41 percent of the population) while 25 percent were vulnerable to poverty.”²⁸ These numbers do not come as a surprise since “the Middle East appears to be the most unequal region in the world,” due

22 António Guterres. “Secretary-General’s remarks at the launch of the Policy Brief on a New Agenda for Peace.” United Nations. July 20, 2023, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2023-07-20/secretary-generals-remarks-the-launch-of-the-policy-brief-new-agenda-for-peace> <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/our-common-agenda-policy-brief-new-agenda-for-peace-en.pdf>

23 Michael Brzoska, Wuyi Omitoogun, and Elisabeth Sköns. “The Human Security Case for Rebalancing Military Expenditure.” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, accessed on 30/8/2023, at: https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/2205_human_security_case_for_rebalancing_military_expenditure.pdf

24 Rami G. Khouri, “Many Early Warning Signs Signaled Current Arab Disarray,” Cairo Review of International Affairs (2016), <https://www.thecairoreview.com/tahrir-forum/many-early-warning-signs-signaled-current-arab-disarray/>.

25 “Policy—A multidimensional approach,” Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, <https://ophi.org.uk/policy/multidimensional-poverty-index/>. See also “The 2018 Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI),” UNDP, Human Development Report, <https://hdr.undp.org/content/2019-global-multidimensional-poverty-index-mpi>.

26 Khalid Abu-Ismaïl and Bilal Al-Kiswani, “Multidimensional poverty in the poorest parts of MENA: agenda for action,” Economic Reform Forum, February 13, 2018, <https://theforum.erf.org.eg/2018/02/13/multidimensional-poverty-poorest-parts-mena-agenda-action/>.

27 “How deep are Egypt’s economic troubles?”, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/how-deep-are-egypts-economic-troubles-2023-03-03/>



to both the enormous inequality on a national (between oil/resource rich and population rich countries) and local levels (income disparity and distribution of wealth).²⁹

Conclusion: Security is about People

Using a regime/state security lens as a unit of analysis alone to understand MENA conflicts is a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby the only way to handle or resolve the conflicts is through further securitization and expansion of the State's military arsenal. Since most of the region's states are different shades of autocracy, the leaders conflate the security of the state with the security of their regimes/governments. This means increasing armaments, heightening threats and uncertainty, shrinking space for diplomacy, and tightening their grip on public spaces and debates. As a result, there is less room to understand the underlying conditions that create conflict, which more often is a result of longstanding socio-economic grievances, injustices, and bad governance. In essence, it takes us back to the imbalanced and disrespected social contracts. Therefore, the referent object of security needs changing to centers around the people and their fundamental needs – including multi-dimensional insecurity –, and their developmental capabilities and transformative potential.

Despite the intricate and complex conflicts in the region, there is always a way forward sooner or later. Conflicts and wars eventually end, but with a high cost to the population. This is evident in many countries across the region – those in actual military and violent conflict or even those stifled by entrenched autocratic regimes. Any change depends mainly on the will for political and socio-economic reforms that are critical to the survival and prosperity of the people before the regimes and states. This dual approach, which consists in reforming the centralized oppressive state and rehabilitating the population, needs leaders within and outside the system. In short, it needs agents of change that champion the people's socio-economic development and security.

28 Rami G. Khouri, "Deep Socioeconomic Disparities Exacerbate Arab Tensions", Arab Center Washington DC. <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/deep-socioeconomic-disparities-exacerbate-arab-tensions/>

29 Facundo Alvaredo, Lydia Assouad and Thomas Piketty. "Measuring Inequality in the Middle East 1990–2016: The World's Most Unequal Region?" *The Review of Income and Wealth*. Vol. 65, No. 4, December 2019; pp.685-711 <https://doi.org/10.1111/roiw.12385>



PRISME

Pathways to Renewed and Inclusive
Security in the Middle East



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PRISME

Pathways to Renewed and Inclusive
Security in the Middle East

PRISME Initiative

PRISME aims to redefine the conception of “security” in the Middle East and North Africa, as the starting point for strategic relations between MENA countries and their European and North American partners. It does so in pursuit of effective, collaborative approaches to ensuring a more peaceful and stable future. To this end, PRISME sponsors dialogue and debate between foreign policy professionals across diverse backgrounds and perspectives. These include individuals in governments, thinktanks and academic institutions located in the MENA region, Europe and North America, with a specific focus on engaging young and emerging thinkers and practitioners. Its goal is to re-define security in the Middle East, broadening the definitions of what it looks like, for whom, how it can be achieved, and how outside actors can contribute to it.

SALAM Project

SALAM (Sustaining Alternative Links beyond Arms and the Military) proposes to rethink the centrality of the arms trade in international relations with and among Middle East & North Africa (MENA) countries.

It fosters and amplifies ideas from a network of scholars and practitioners working in and with the Middle East. Issues they will address include the arms trade’s advertised role in cementing bilateral and multilateral ties between North America, Europe and the MENA region; the opportunity costs of over- or sole reliance on weaponry as security; and alternative modes of engagement that might redefine a shared strategic agenda.