

# In Search of a Middle East and North Africa Peace System

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## Abstract

AQ: 1 This article examines the strengths and weaknesses of the peace system in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). It views peace not merely as the absence of direct violence but as the result of institutions and systems that mitigate, defuse, and diminish conflict. The peace system of MENA operates at multiple scales and deals with multiple kinds of violent conflict. Different system components produce different forms of positive and negative peace through both formal and informal institutional channels. Consequently, peace in MENA is often uneven and unstable, with progress in one dimension coming at the expense of another. Understanding the gaps and inconsistencies within the MENA peace system can help devise a more realistic and feasible approach to conflict resolution rather than abstract and ultimately impractical ideals. The article identifies shortcomings in the current explanations for the frequency of war, explores the idea of a regional peace system that operates in regional and domestic arenas both formally and informally, and examines policy measures that might bolster or undercut the MENA peace system.

## Keywords

AQ: 2 Peaceful society, oil, imperialism, ethnic conflict, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya

## Introduction

Searching for peace in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) could seem fanciful. No region has suffered more violence and war over the last quarter century than the areas spanning the Atlas Mountains to the Lut desert, roughly coinciding with the Arabic-speaking Maghreb and Mashriq plus Israel, Turkey,

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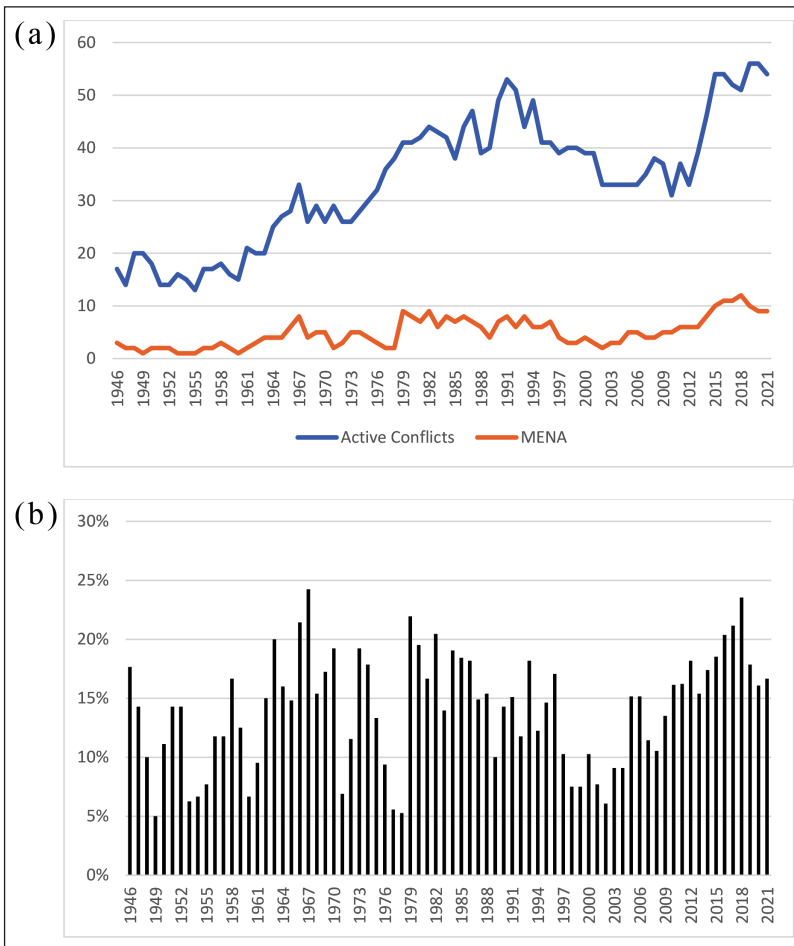
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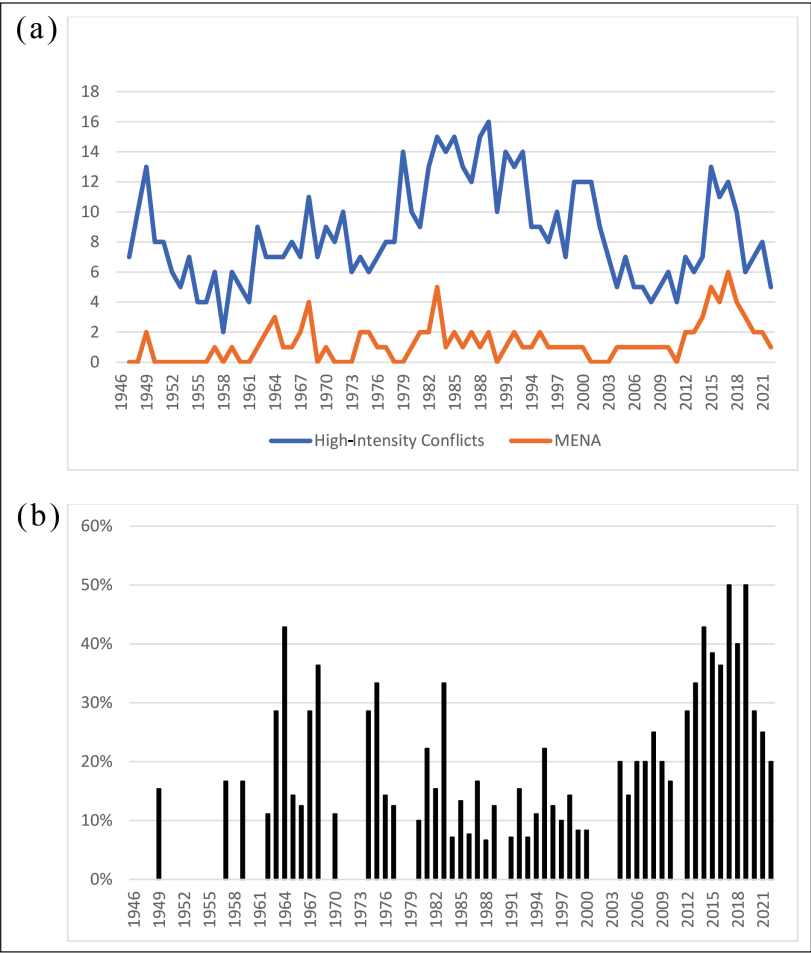
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and Iran.<sup>1</sup> MENA accounts for over 20% of all active conflicts since the turn of the millennium, according to the definitive Uppsala Conflict Data Project (UCDP) (see Figures 1a and 1b). Regarding high-intensity conflicts, which claim over 1,000 lives in a single year, MENA comprises nearly 40% of the total (see Figures 2a and 2b). The impact is nothing short of catastrophic. UCDP estimated 8,200 battle deaths in Libya, 20,000 in Yemen, and 313,000 in Syria between 2011 and May 2018. This does not count excess mortality due to shortages of food, medicine, and shelter or casualties and mass displacement, which these wars have precipitated. This conservative estimate amounts to the loss in battle alone of one in every 1,000 Libyans, seven in every 1,000 Yemenis, and 17 in every 1,000 Syrians.<sup>2</sup> The Gaza war, which began October 2023, similarly has already claimed over 20,000 lives, nearly 15 out of every 1,000 people in the combined territory of Israel/Palestine.



**Figures 1a and b.** (a) Active Conflict Annually; (b) Middle East and North Africa (MENA) as a Percent of Word Conflicts.

**Source:** Uppsala Conflict Data Set Armed Conflict Data v. 22.



**Figures 2a and b:** (a) Active High-intensity Conflicts Annually; (b) Middle East and North Africa (MENA) as a Percent of High-intensity Conflicts.

**Source:** Uppsala Conflict Data Set Armed Conflict Data v. 22.

War has a malignant tendency to reoccur and to spread. Once one country suffers violent conflict, it and its regional neighbors are liable to see more violence. Peace is often a regional affair (Acharya, 2007; Nye, 1971). For instance, the countries of West Africa and South America have gone decades without state-to-state war. In a self-reinforcing circle, states in these regions generally lacked the infrastructural and administrative capacities to wage war against their neighbors. Because the neighborhood was safe, states saw little reason to amass arsenals (Centeno, 2002; Kacowicz, 1997, 1998; Miller, 2000, 2005, 2009; Tavares, 2008, 2009). The emergence of regional organizations with strong mandates and capacity for maintaining regional peace, such as the African Union (AU) or the Organization of American States (OAS), have further helped prevent the slide to war and alleviate conflicts when they do occur (Barnett, 1995; Schubert, 1978).

In contrast to these regions less prone to war, ~~the~~ MENA is replete with both internal and international conflicts, albeit at fluctuating rates and intensities. Discussions of how to end these wars and achieve peace in the region are often prescriptive, even utopian. They propound the need to erect a new regional security architecture or invent new tools to counter radicalization. This article takes a grounded approach. It views peace as the result of institutions and systems that mitigate, defuse, and diminish conflict. The peace system of MENA operates at multiple scales and deals with conflicts of multiple kinds (Millar, 2020, 2021; Richmond, 2013). It spans from the high diplomacy of summitry and mediation to the nitty-gritty of maintaining peace in individual districts and villages. Different system components are geared toward producing peace of varying qualities and forms (Davenport et al., 2018). Some elements produce or maintain negative peace without direct physical violence. Negative peace is sustained when there is a balance of power between forces to deter any potential belligerent. Other system components aim for ~~more~~ positive forms of peace. Positive peace entails political conditions that enhance human security, freedom, and development. Examining the features of the regional peace system comprehensively and empirically can better explain the fragility of peace and the frequency of violence in MENA.

The article highlights gaps and asymmetries between the ~~various~~ subcomponents of the MENA peace system. Consequently, peace in MENA is often uneven and unstable. Progress in one dimension of peace comes at the expense of another. Understanding the gaps and incongruencies within the MENA peace system can help devise realistic and feasible approaches to conflict resolution. It can also suggest areas where further cooperation might improve peace capacities.

The article proceeds in the following order. The first section reviews the current explanations for the frequency of war in MENA, focusing specifically on imperial and colonial intervention, resource conflict, and identity clashes as drivers of conflict. Each of these explanations is, at best, impartial and incomplete. The second section introduces the idea of a regional peace system as an alternative analytical approach that can explain both the incidence of war and periods of peace. It shows how the peace system operates regionally between states and internally within the domestic arena. It contains formal and informal facets, each with varying strengths and limitations. The third and concluding section of the article examines policies that might help bolster the MENA peace system and considers the possibility of deeper transformation.

## **Disturbers of the Peace in MENA**

There is considerable folk wisdom about what makes peace so rare and war so common in MENA. This requires historical scrutiny. While MENA has seen an unusual propensity for war in the twenty-first century, it has not always been so. Although conflicts in MENA, especially the Arab-Israeli wars of the mid-twentieth century, received great attention, they were far smaller in scale and scope than the massive wars fought in Korea in the 1950s and Southeast Asia in the 1960s and 1970s. As shown in Figures 1b and 2b, MENA was only a minor

contributor to the global tally of conflicts. Much of the conventional wisdom seeks to boil down regional discords to a root cause. But conflicts in the region are so multifaceted and variegated that no single variable can account for them all. Rather, a combination of factors, working in different weights, assortments, and conjunctions, accounts for the breakdowns of violence and the persistence of war (Korany, 2016). These can be roughly sorted into three broad analytical categories.

The first category can broadly be called the imperial roots of conflict. These accounts of regional discord draw attention to the impact of imperial interventions in the region, arguably dating back to Napoleon's invasion of Egypt. The notion of MENA as a regional construct originates with imperialist geopolitical imaginations. Imperial powers, initially Britain and France, but later the United States and Soviet Union, shaped what it means even to speak of MENA (Mundy, 2019). Imperialism rendered MENA states weak and prone to violence in two critical ways. First, imperialist powers systematically blocked forming a regional state that might resist imperial power or serve as an indigenous regional hegemon (Lustick, 1997) and the region was a venue for foreign competition. Secondly, imperialists fashioned states that lacked popular legitimacy.

Across the region, states lacked popular legitimacy because their borders were misaligned with prevalent notions of political identity or because their leadership was seen as unrepresentative or compromised by cooperation with outside powers. States were congenitally flawed, making them at once fierce but weak, quick to use violence yet unable to formulate acceptable rules of governance that might assuage resistance or rivalry (Ayubi, 2014). Even when peaceful solutions seemed possible, weak states were susceptible to spoilers with a private interest in perpetuating conflict (Pearlman, 2009). Although the direct intervention of imperialist power has receded with time, the violent institutions they bequeathed have longevity. Moreover, neo-imperialist involvement, such as ongoing United States backing to Israel, serves to prevent alternative institutional arrangements from arising (Khalidi, 2009, 2013).

The problem with focusing on imperialism is that it slights the role of local agencies. The imperialist powers never enjoyed an unfettered hand in devising regional order (Harik, 1985; Wyrzten, 2022). Local actors had their interests and capacities to confront imperialist powers and shape the course of state formation to their liking. Often, the conflicts among these local actors, as well as the agendas of outside powers, determined the balance of war and peace. Moreover, the societies of MENA were hardly unique in being subject to imperialist pressures. Similar interventions shaped Latin America, Africa, and Asia, too. Yet patterns of violent conflict in these regions are different from those seen in MENA. Therefore, describing MENA's propensity for war as somehow exogenous misses an opportunity for historical depth.

A second set of broad explanations focuses on the region's political economy. It is impossible to ignore the impact of oil on regional economic development. Oil exports are the single most valuable element of regional exports. At least half the countries of the region, including Algeria, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, and other Gulf states, are heavily dependent on oil and gas exports as a component of the national economy. Even countries that lack substantial oil resources, like

Jordan, Lebanon, and Tunisia, are tethered to the oil economies through trade, investment, labor remittances, and aid.

Several studies attribute the involvement of outside power, including the US and others, to the quest for oil. Oil is the reason to prop up belligerent and repressive regional proxies. In some cases, oil is the justification to deploy force directly (Klare, 2002; Peters, 2004). Oil can also affect the behavior of regional states themselves. With cash, states can afford to build larger armies and security services to battle other states and impose their rule on restive populations. Oil-rich states tend to be more aggressive in regional affairs, leading to more confrontations with neighbors and domestic opposition (Ashford, 2022; Colgan, 2013). Iran's ability to fund militias fighting in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Iraq is closely tied to the availability of oil funds (Slavin, 2008). Studies such as Jaffe and Ellass and Nitzan and Bikler suggest that patterns of political volatility, military adventurism, and proxy warfare are tied to the boom-and-bust cycle of energy prices and petrodollar accumulation. On one hand, oil revenues provide the means to engage in violence, with windfall cash funneled into military adventures. On the other hand, the enormous wealth of oil rewards violence by increasing the spoils available to winners, whether inside or outside the region (Jaffe & Ellass, 2015, p. 121; Nitzan & Bikler, 2018).

Still, many theories linking oil to MENA's violence span from "the crude to the complex and at times arcane," as Vitalis ~~put~~ it (Vitalis, 2020, p. 3). Theories of the oil price cycle are more effective at demonstrating temporal correlations between price changes and militarism but less convincing in specifying the mechanism that links war and oil. Attempts to explain purported "wars-for-oil" based on conspiracies between international oil companies, foreign governments, and various armed groups reach a point of convulsion suggestive of magical thinking. Meierding notes that although oil is an exceptionally valuable natural resource, there are extensive obstacles to seizing and exploiting contested petroleum deposits. These obstacles reduce the payoffs of fighting over oil and, thus states' willingness to use violence to increase national petroleum endowments (Meierding, 2016).

Trading for oil is almost always easier than fighting for it. Other regions with substantial oil revenues do not see the same propensity to war. The global energy business rewards commercial cooperation as opposed to military measures. The discovery of offshore gas in the eastern Mediterranean helped hasten tacit cooperation between erstwhile belligerents, particularly Israel and Lebanon (Gürel & Le Cornu, 2014; Harari & Sözen, 2023).

The same can be said of the relationship between oil and civil war. Rebels often try to seize oil production or export terminals. The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, for instance, was famously dubbed the richest terrorist organization in the world when it took over several fields and refineries in northeastern Syria. Yet rebel groups face physical and legal obstacles in converting oil into substantial revenue. They struggle to get oil to foreign buyers, and when they did, they seldom ~~found~~ buyers willing to pay dollar for contraband goods (Ahram, 2022; Do et al., 2018; Ocakli & Scotch, 2017). In contrast, internationally recognized regimes have a much easier time monetizing oil. They can use these resources to build up the means for repression and deploy more incentives for cooptation

(Merrill & Orlando, 2020; van der Ploeg, 2018; Wright et al., 2015). Oil paradoxically emboldens rebellion but empowers regimes to prevail.

A third factor countering peace in MENA is the issue of identity. Focusing on identity ties back to the imperialist roots of conflict discussed above, but with greater emphasis on indigenous agency. The region is characterized broadly by imbalances or misfits between communal identities and political borders (Miller, 2006). Without unity of identity, no institution can enjoy sufficient legitimacy to serve as a peacemaker in domestic or international arenas. States are, on one hand, too small for pan-Arab and pan-Islamists, inadequate vehicles for communities of such global stature. On the other hand, for Kurds, Berbers, and other ethnic minorities who had seen their ambitions for independence thwarted, states were too big, forcing them to be subordinates (Heraclides, 1989; Milton et al., 2019).

Security dilemmas beset the MENA region because of this sense of misidentification with the state. These dilemmas operate at multiple levels. Internationally, states have little confidence in their neighbors, who pose as perpetual rivals. Any steps neighbors take are likely to be seen as threatening. Domestically, citizens often found the state or their neighbors as potential threats. This is the core of the “ethnic security dilemma” (Tang, 2011): Measures taken as social “self-defense,” including seeking alliances with outside patrons, are liable also to be taken as offensive or belligerent in intent. Critiques of the identity argument point out that identities are neither static nor singular. Rather, they are constructed and adopted through institutional channels. Embedded elites seek to activate or even manipulate feelings of the ethno-sectarian difference to encourage various forms of collective violence (Byman, 2014; Hashemi & Postel, 2017; Mabon, 2020; Valbjørn, 2019). This suggests that the antagonism that generates security dilemmas are contingent social features, not immutable structures. Ultimately, each of the purported root causes of warfare in MENA yields explanations too narrow or blinkered to account for the complicated and variegated phenomenon.

## Assessing the MENA Peace System

Given the seemingly overdetermined propensity for war, it is a wonder that MENA enjoys a single day of peace. Yet, peace occurs at different scales and forms across the region. The key analytical task is to account for the systemic factors contributing to these sporadic peace patterns. The MENA peace system can be divided into three tiers or hierarchical layers: First, at the macro level, regional and global institutions attend to peace. These include the United Nations and the League of Arab States (LAS), which seek to coordinate multilateral responses to violent conflict between or within states. Second, at the meso level, are states themselves. States play an ambiguous role in preserving peace. On one hand, a strong state is the primary guarantor of domestic peace and stability. On the other hand, state oppression is one of the most important factors generating political resistance. Third and finally, it is important to consider the micro-scale institutions that maintain peace at the local level. These institutions operate to avert conflicts within neighborhoods, towns, and villages.

Outside powers heavily influence and penetrate the top echelons of high diplomacy in MENA's peace infrastructure. These involve a cavalcade of mostly fruitless trial balloons, diplomatic missions, working plans, and summits. More than just their outcome, it is important to consider these initiatives' origins. Most took the names of the locales in which they were held—Geneva, Stockholm, Madrid, Oslo, and Camp David—all located outside the region. Many involved the good offices of middle-tier states like Norway and Sweden to serve as good offices (Eriksson, 2020). Others tried to leverage the overwhelming geopolitical heft of the United States. Beyond such impressionistic evidence, though, a clearer sense of extraverted peacebuilding in MENA comes from examining the record of peace operations conducted in the region, as shown in Table 1. Peace operations are military expeditions that assist in preventing armed conflict, observing or assisting in ceasefire implementation, or enforcing the terms of ceasefires and peace agreements. How and when peace operations are initiated and by whom are windows into how peacebuilding proceeds at the upper diplomatic levels.

**Table 1.** International Peace Operations in Middle East and North Africa (MENA), 1948–2019.

Mission	Location	Dates	Deployed Size (Est. Max. Uniformed)
UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO)	Israel, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria	1948–	570
UN Emergency Force I (UNEF I)	Israel, Egypt	1956–1967	6,073
UN Observation Group in Lebanon (UNOGIL)	Lebanon	1958	591
Arab League Force	Kuwait	1961–1963	5,000
UN Yemen Observation Mission (UNYOM)	Yemen	1963–1964	190
Arab League Military Observers	Yemen	1967	Unclear
Arab Ceasefire Observer Mission	Jordan	1970–1971	Unclear
Arab League Observers	Yemen	1972	Unclear
UN Emergency Force II (UNEF II)	Israel, Egypt	1973–1979	6,973
UN Disengagement Observation Force (UNDOF)	Israel, Syria	1974–	1,100
Arab League Arab Security Forces (SASF)	Lebanon	1976	2,500
UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL)	Lebanon	1978–	12,700
Multinational Force & Observers (MFO)	Egypt (Sinai)	1982–	2,600

(Table 1 continued)

(Table 1 continued)

Mission	Location	Dates	Deployed Size (Est. Max. Uniformed)
Multinational Force in Lebanon (MNF)	Lebanon	1982	2,285
Multinational Force Lebanon II (MNF II)	Lebanon	1982–1984	4,800
UN Iran-Iraq Military Observer Group (UNI-IMOG)	Iran, Iraq	1988–1991	400
UN/AU Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO)	Western Sahara	1991–	237
UN Iraq-Kuwait Observation Mission (UNIKOM-a)	Kuwait, Iraq	1991–1993	320
UN Iraq-Kuwait Observation Mission (UNIKOM-b)	Kuwait, Iraq	1993–2003	1,174
Joint Monitoring Contingent	Yemen	1994	Unclear
Joint Military Commission & International Monitoring Unit	Sudan	2002–2005	24
OAU Mission to Sudan	Sudan	2004–2007	7,700
UN Mission in Sudan (UNMIS)	Sudan	2005–2011	10,519
EU Support to OUA Mission in Sudan 2	Sudan	2005–2007	50
UN Interim Security Force for Abyei (UN-ISFA)	Sudan	2011–	4,250
Arab League Observer Mission	Syria	2011–2012	30

**Source:** Williams and Bellamy (2021).

MENA has been a proving ground for the UN peacemaking mission, beginning in 1948 with the dispatch of a truce supervision force to maintain the ceasefire and disengagement between Israel, Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. UN force was dispatched to Egypt after the 1956 Sinai war and again to Egypt and Syria following the 1973 war. Since the Camp David agreement between Israel and Egypt in 1980, a UN multinational force (MNF) monitored the border at Sinai. Peace operations worked best when third-party forces stood between two belligerent states. These forces did not have to overawe anyone to act as a deterrent. UN forces were almost always exposed and at the mercy of larger national armies. The positioning of

outside troops sets a symbolic precedent. They are held safe by international norms. Molesting these forces constituted attacks on the larger global community writ, something few regional actors would risk.

Responding to MENA's civil wars posed a much greater challenge. The UN sent an observation mission, backed by American warships, to arrest Lebanon's brief 1958 civil war. Its observation mission to Yemen's far bloodier war of 1963–1964 was inconsequential. Lebanon's civil war of the 1970s occasioned a slew of peacebuilding initiatives. The UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) mission came in 1978, followed by a US-led MNF in 1980. It is far more difficult to monitor lines of control and contain belligerents spatially in internal disputes than international ones. Here, expeditionary forces played a delicate role. On one hand, they were constabulary forces meant to keep the peace between opposing factions.

On the other hand, they were also training and advising missions, tasked to impart new skills and capacities to the central government so that it could conduct coercion on its own. These ostensibly neutral missions inevitably got caught up in political crossfire. In 1982, Hezbollah fighters bombed the MNF barracks in Beirut, killing 242 American and 58 French soldiers. While the Americans withdrew, the UNIFIL mission grew progressively more robust, including the involvement of French and NATO troops. The goal of peace operations mostly went beyond maintaining the barest negative peace. Peace operations are successful so long as bullets are not flying.

The prominence of the UN and other extra-regional powers in MENA peacekeeping is closely linked to the relative paucity of regional peacemaking institutions. The LAS, founded in 1946, has become “the single most authoritative institutional body in the region” concerning intra-Arab affairs and gradually imposed itself as a guarantor of power-sharing and political settlements (Pinfari, 2009). Yet the LAS's record of involvement in peace is hardly significant, especially when compared to similar regional organizations like the AU or OAS. LAS mediation and enforcement were notably important in stopping the Iraq-Kuwait border dispute in the 1960s and ending civil wars in Yemen in the 1990s and Lebanon in 1958 and the 1990s. But when faced with the biggest challenges, the LAS has added very little and was hapless after Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990. It took UN authorization and US-led military action to restore Kuwaiti sovereignty (Ibrahim, 2016; Yassine-Hamdan & Pearson, 2014).

The limitations of the LAS are manifest. First, like the UN, LAS faces significant collective action problems in gaining consensus for its diverse constituent base. Secondly, peace has never been a strong part of the LAS mandate. The LAS charter mentions peace only twice and basically pledges the regional organization to “co-operate with the international bodies to be created in the future in order to guarantee security and peace.” Such deferment of responsibilities for security and peace reinforces the LAS's subordinate position within the global system. Finally, because it is an organ of pan-Arab coordination, LAS excludes several of MENA's most significant military powers, namely Israel, Iran, and Turkey. For many regional conflicts, therefore, the LAS lacks even the moral authority to call the belligerents to the table.<sup>3</sup> Networks of informal and ad hoc mechanisms, hotlines, and secret back channels supplement the formal structures

of the regional peace system. In many ways, the ad hoc measures fill spaces where the formal institutional apparatus fails to reach. For example, with no regional organization capable of convening Arabs and Israelis into the same body, back channels served an especially important and often productive role. The Arab-Israeli peace process has similarly been a backroom affair, with little acclimation or input from the populations themselves (Eriksson, 2013; Touval, 1982). However, reliance on ad hoc and covert channels of communication to avert war raised new problems. It was easy to offer concessions in private discussions without direct public accountability. Eventually, though, these private communications had to become public commitments, which would be surprising and painful to accomplish (Wanis-St. John, 2011).

The civil wars of the 2010s tested MENA's peace system at the regional level. The LAS and the UN both failed. The coincidental arrival of the crisis of 2011 while Qatar held the rotating chair of the LAS seemed to offer a window of opportunity for the LAS to prove its peacebuilding credentials finally. Qatar argued that if Arab states did not take action to end the wars in Yemen, Syria, and Libya, outside actors would once again intrude on the region. Qatar's approach suggested an effort to emulate the alacrity of the AU in handling regional crises at the regional level without resorting to the UN or an outside power (Nuruzzaman, 2015; Ulrichsen, 2014). LAS's initiatives in Libya seemed to start well. By passing a resolution endorsing the no-fly zone and humanitarian protection areas, the LAS could at least claim a role in what became the larger NATO-led intervention. This momentum dissipated by the time it came to Syria, though. Damascus first agreed to the LAS peace plan in late 2011, only to scuttle its peace observer mission.

Even with the LAS bowing out of the regional peacemaking business, Qatar has continued to position itself as an international mediator, facilitating meetings and serving as a go-between for Israel and Hamas, the United States and the Taliban, and a range of other actors. Partly, this role reflects Qatar's unique geopolitical stance. On one hand, it houses a massive US military installation. On the other hand, it has made itself available as a safe haven for all exiled political elites. But Qatar is hardly a disinterested or neutral arbiter in regional affairs. Negotiations facilitate their political advantages. Moreover, Qatar is not above the fray of regional conflict, as evident from the crisis and blockade with Saudi Arabia imposed from 2017 to 2021 (Kamrava, 2011; Milton et al., 2023).

The UN's engagement in the conflicts in MENA has been more sustained, but ultimately no more effectually. The availability of outside sponsorship in Syria, Yemen, and Libya strengthened belligerents' confidence in the military, as opposed to political solutions. As a result, conflicts rarely reached the condition of mutually harmful stalemates that could have rendered them ripe for resolution. Moreover, external actors did not or could not bring coercive pressures to force partisans to the negotiation table. Neighboring states thwarted the impositions of arms embargoes. Threats to target spoilers were never implemented. There were never any realistic chances of deploying UN peacekeepers. The negotiations the UN encouraged as a path to conflict mitigation and resolution were often hurried or inattentive to important belligerents (Asseburg et al., 2018).

Finally, and perhaps most fatally, consensus within the UN Security Council on managing MENA's conflicts is fleeting. Libya in 2011 provided a rare—and ultimately ephemeral—moment of great power agreement on MENA security issues (Bergen et al., 2022). In the Arab-Israeli conflict, the United States has used its veto power on the Security Council to protect Israel from international censure for its occupation of Palestinian territories (Graubart & Jimenez-Bacardi, 2016). The most extreme illustration of the futility of the UN mediation elements in MENA occurred during the Syrian civil war, when Russia was an active belligerent but blocked any Security Council measures that might apply pressure to reduce the conflict harm (Asseburg et al., 2018).

A second level of peacemaking operates within states. Indeed, theorists as far back as Hobbes have argued that a Leviathan can achieve peace by overawing potential violators. The key problem is that the same powerful state poses the greatest danger to its population. As medieval historian Ibn Khaldun put it:

Mutual aggression of people in towns and cities is averted by the authorities and the governments, which hold back the masses under their control from attacks and aggression upon each other. They are thus prevented by the influence of force and government authority from mutual injustice, save such injustice as comes from the ruler (Khaldūn, 2005, p. 87).

Authoritarian control creates negative peace and basic human survival conditions by curtailing personal freedoms and political voice (Lewis et al., 2018; Peceny et al., 2002; Weeks, 2014). MENA has long stood out as a region of stubborn authoritarianism, even when global trends pointed to democratic expansion elsewhere in the developing world. The revolutionary movements of the 2010s exposed significant differences in how different types of authoritarian regimes dealt with internal challenges. MENA monarchies, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Morocco, and the Gulf states, were mostly spared the pressures of the Arab Spring in the 2010s. These regimes make little pretense of popular representation, which made it easier to brush aside oppositional demands for political voice. They also had more institutional means to divide and rule and coopt oppositional forces (Bank et al., 2014; Isaac, 2014).

MENA's republican governments faced greater jeopardy when the people demanded the downfall of the regime because they staked more legitimacy on the notion of popular sovereignty. Republican regimes struggled to deploy military measures to diffuse mass pressure while retaining power (Owen, 2014). The presidents of Egypt and Tunisia bowed out in the face of street protests and elite defections, often initiated by the security services themselves. Republic governments with weak state apparatus and deeply divided societies, such as Yemen and Libya, collapsed. Syria's regime barely managed to hang on.

The crises of the 2010s seemed to offer a chance to change the fundamental nature of sovereignty and statehood in the region and shift the basis of negotiations between rulers and ruled. Opposition groups coalesced under broad umbrellas, such as the Transitional National Council in Libya and the Syrian National Council. Each claimed to represent the true voice of the people despite wielding relatively little functional control within national territory. International sponsors, both Western and within the Arab world, organized donor bodies, the so-called

“friends” groups, to steer aid and assistance to the opposition (Ahram, 2019, pp. 43–69; Rangwala, 2015). But the effort to find peace by broadening the tent proved elusive. Indeed, internecine fighting among erstwhile revolutionary factions trailed the departure of the old regime (Fraihat & Yaseen, 2020). In Yemen, the international community backed the 2013 National Dialogue Conference following the resignation of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The Dialogue Conference offered a kind of simulacra of Yemen’s customary modes of conflict resolution, involving hundreds of activists and civic leaders. But inclusivity was more apparent than real, with many delegates handpicked as allies to the interim president, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, Saleh’s former deputy. As the meetings dragged into the ninth month, commentators considered the proceedings “a spectacular wedding where no one wants to get married” (Ahram, 2019, p. 63). Fighting among the ostensive revolutionary factions resumed within weeks of the NDC’s collapse.

Across the region, authoritarian modes of peacemaking steadily eclipsed any inclination to seek positive and inclusive formulas (Costantini & Hanau Santini, 2022). The moment of inclusive forums for debate was gone. The new priority was to find a division of spoils enticing enough to get belligerent elites to cease fire. Syria represents the ultimate triumph of authoritarian forms of conflict resolution as part of the regional peace system. Two contradictory tracks to peace emerged for dealing with Syria. The UN-backed Geneva negotiations hinged on achieving a power-sharing agreement coupled with electoral and capitalist reform (Abboud, 2021). Disagreement within the UN and among Arab states makes it impossible to apply pressure that would push the belligerents toward a consensus. The UN Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS) could not implement or monitor ceasefire and it often lacked Security Council backing. A string of senior UN mediator missions failed, including Kofi Anan, Lakhdar Brahimi, and Staffan de Mistura. But neither the Assad regime nor its primary international backers, Russia and Iran, were interested in letting such a liberal formula for peace succeed. They launched the Astana Process, a parallel peace plan, which pointedly excluded rebel groups that had been parties to the Geneva Process. Instead, negotiations were between the Assad regime and a handpicked group of loyal opposition figures. Regime preservation was the top priority. Iran and Russia also served as guarantors of the agreement, even as they provided the regime key military

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ment of troops and airpower (Zartman, 2019). Turkey joined the Astana Process to legitimate its incursions against Kurdish militant groups that used Syria as a safe haven. Over time, other Arab states grudgingly acceded to Syria’s reentry into the regional system (Heydemann, 2023).

MENA’s internationalized civil wars deeply penetrate society, turning erstwhile civilians into irregular fighters. Neighbor turned on neighbor as parochial grievances were inducted into larger regional conflicts. Indeed, local actors adroitly adopted new identities and new strategies to attract and retain foreign patrons. This accords with Kaldor’s controversial theory of “new wars” where ideology, identity, and pecuniary goals become interlocked and self-perpetuating (Kaldor, 2013; Mello, 2010). But the inverse is also possible. Local actors sometimes resist induction and insist on maintaining peaceable relations amid

wider conflagration (Barakat & Milton, 2020; Mabon, 2019). Mac Ginty and others highlight the notion of local or “everyday” peace as implementing micro-scale tactics to avoid conflict with immediate neighbors (Firchow, 2018; Glawion, 2021; Mac Ginty, 2008; Pinaud, 2021). This represents a third micro-scale level in which a peace system works.

These informal practices are especially important in settings already ripe for conflict, cities and subregions with grave social cleavages (Gusic, 2022). Everyday peace offers a mode of communication with enough “mere civility” to avert or delay the onset of violence (Avant et al., 2019; Bejan, 2017). Arab, Kurdish, Turkmen, and Assyrian shoppers in the Kirkuk bazaar, for instance, switch languages when addressing different merchants to avoid giving offense. Such peacemaking tactics are not broadly transportable. They require tiny calibrations depending on age, social status, and gender (O’Driscoll & Bourhrous, 2022). The digital space has become a point for translation and mediatization between Palestinian and Jewish Israelis (Katz, 2022). These local peacemaking efforts can help ballast peaceful enclaves buffeted by the whirlpool of regional violence, such as occurred in Rojava/Northeastern Syria (Autesserre, 2014; Nordhag, 2020).

Everyday peace in MENA is often overlooked in large-scale national and international negotiations. The UN and the US Institute of Peace have provided support for local peace initiatives in Libya, especially in the face of the breakdown of central authority and functionality after 2011 and the second civil war in 2014. Much of these efforts were channeled through tribal and religious leaders, who had assumed greater responsibility at the municipal levels. These leaders took a hand in mediation and sometimes tried to stem the proliferation of small arms (Ammar, 2022; Tartir & Florquin, 2021; US Institute of Peace, 2023; Vericat & Hobrara, 2018).

In Yemen, Philbrick Yadav notes that civil actors “are not waiting for Track I to deliver an agreement” before launching their locally-oriented initiatives. Instead of a broad political agreement, these efforts promote mere civility and help deescalate violence by disrupting “exclusivity, polarization, radicalization, and evocation of enmity” in local contexts (Philbrick Yadav, 2022). Yemen has a rich tradition of local mediation and conflict resolution to compensate for the relatively decentralized and weak state apparatus (Al-Awlaq & Al-Madhaji, 2018). The breakdown of the state during the civil wars of the 2010s enabled Yemenis to move forward with initiatives without any real input or constraint from central authorities. They relied on local or hyperlocal sources of authority, incorporating ~~locally known~~ lawyers, doctors, nurses, midwives, and tribal leaders (Al-Dawsari, 2012). These local actors mobilized demonstrations and other civil actions to pressure armed groups to abide by the ceasefire and maintain public services and welfare programs such as schooling. They have also served as contact points and brokers between UN humanitarian agencies and local nongovernmental organizations. In Abyan, local committees helped broker a ceasefire between the government and separatist fighters (Al-Dawsari, 2012).

The Peace Agreement Database (PA-X), collected by researchers at the University of Edinburgh, provides a useful idea of the scale and scope of local peace agreements (Bell & Badanjak, 2019; Bell & Wise, 2022). PA-X documents 159 local agreements in Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Sudan from

**Table 2.** Local Peace Agreements in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

	No. of Local Peace Agreements	Linked to Central Government or Initiative	Percentage Involving the State
Iraq	1	1	100%
Lebanon	2	2	100%
Libya	32	31	97%
Sudan	16	2	13%
Syria	82	17	21%
Yemen	26	10	38%
<b>Total</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>40%</b>

**Source:** The Peace Agreement Database (PA-X).

2002 to 2018, as shown in Table 2. These agreements touch on a broad range of issues, including grievances over targeting killing, banditry, seizure of land or livestock, corruption, ousting unpopular local officials, and the surrender of wanted individuals. Importantly, less than half of these agreements involved the central government as a party or were linked to any larger national peace initiative. They were, in effect, negotiated by locals for locals.

The impetus to impose top-down peace often jeopardized precarious gains at the local level. In Syria, local councils blossomed as the state's power receded in Idlib and elsewhere. Many of these councils originated as coordinating bodies for local protests. The councils assumed ever larger roles as *de facto* authorities overseeing educational and medical services, creating judicial and policing systems, resolving conflicts, organizing health insurance, administering bakeries, distributing humanitarian aid, managing utilities, obtaining fuel, stabilizing prices, clearing rubble, and implementing economic development projects. Importantly, these bodies drew on customary prestige and often involved former regime officials and technocrats, revolutionary activists, and tribal elders. As Pearlman argues, the Syrian local actors positioned themselves as an alternative to the sectarian rhetoric emanating both from the regime and from the more radical Islamist rebel factions (Pearlman, 2019). Locally-administered schools, for instance, encouraged intra-communal cooperation, especially among displaced populations from multiple disparate sectors of Syrian society.

In some cases, local councils also negotiated with armed actors to ensure the flow of humanitarian aid to besieged areas and facilitate the release of detainees and prisoners. In Idlib and other rebel-controlled cities, women associated with local councils organized demonstrations demanding that armed groups release detainees and adopt codes of conduct proscribing violence against civilians (Pearlman, 2019). The councils themselves could also have a direct peacemaking role. In Homs and Daraya, the local councils worked with UN officials to coordinate a ceasefire with government forces that allowed rebel forces to evacuate the city, sparing an assault on heavily populated areas (Sosnowski, 2020, pp. 279–282). But every effort to construct a nationwide top-down peace program

threatened local councils' autonomy and stability. First, the inflow of aid for foreign backers, including the United States, Qatar, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and other interested parties, spurred fragmentation and competition between different opposition elements. The local councils became less effective as the opposition succumbed to intramural turf wars and corruption. Second and even more substantially, the progress of the government-sponsored peace-cum-pacification program inevitably led to neutralizing these local initiatives. Local ceasefires at first seemed to offer a route to humanitarian relief. But as the rebels retreated, government forces quickly moved to neutralize semblances of independent local administration and liquidated the local councils as rebel sympathizers (Sosnowski, 2020; Turkmani, 2022). As Abboud put it, Astana's goal was "not simply to destroy these armed groups but to render them pliable to a political process in which they would eventually disarm or 'reconcile' with the regime" (Abboud, 2021, p. 340).

A final, but often overlooked or underestimated, element of the MENA peace system comes from religious networks. Religious extremism is nearly universally cited as a cause of violence in MENA by deepening commitments to sectarian identities that are exclusivist and supremacist. Islamist groups especially are often portrayed as belligerent (Sheikh et al., 2009), but Jewish fundamentalist groups in Israel are also involved in violence instigation (Eiran & Krause, 2018; Lustick, 1988). The institutional structure of religious organizations and faith-based leadership can also spur practices that dampen, rather than accelerate, violence. Senior Shi'a clergy in Iraq have been among the staunchest critics of what they deem the drift toward sectarianism in Iraq's political life. They often argue for a stronger national identity than a sect-based one (Sayej, 2018, p. 124). In 2019, senior clerics of the foundation associated with the Shi'a Dar al-'Ilm seminar in Najaf sent delegates to discuss responses to peace and reconstruction efforts with Christian and Sunni Arab leaders in Mosul following the defeat of the Islamic State (Alshamary, 2021; Beaujouan & Rasheed, 2022). Religions offered a toolkit and vocabulary for conflict mediation at local levels that operated distinctly from state authority.

## **Conclusion**

General opinion holds MENA as a fount of instability and bloodshed. Resources, imperialist interventions, and ethnic tensions, among other factors, doom the region to never-ending war. In searching for the MENA peace system, this article has inverted this analytical lens. Peace, often undignified and rarely newsworthy, is more common than supposed. Peace exists among states, even if it means merely refraining from full-on war. Peace comes from formal negotiations and institutions and through shadowy back channels. Peace exists among neighbors, even in the most deeply divided cities.

This is not to ignore the limitations of the regional peace system as it currently functions. MENA lacks a comprehensive regional organization for promoting peace and cooperation among regional states. It relies heavily on the UN and outside powers to enforce and broker peace negotiations. The charter and composition of the LAS limit its effectiveness as a peacemaker, especially when

compared to peer organizations like the OAS, ~~AU, or ASEAN~~. Secondly, domestic and internal peace within states relies heavily on authoritarian modes of control, which ensure peace and stability at the cost of freedom. While these regimes can maintain forms of negative peace, these gains will always be precarious in the face of popular demands for representation and voice. Thirdly and relatedly, the progress of peace at the international and domestic level is often pitted against initiatives for everyday peace. In cases like the emergence of forms of local governance and peacemaking in Yemen, the progress of peace negotiations ignored these local initiatives. In Syria, a key component of the Astana Process was to bulldoze any semblance of locally initiated peace in the name of stability. The disjuncture between these levels means that progress in one domain often comes at the cost of another.

Too often, approaches to peace mismatch the capacities of the indigenous peace system. This is a recipe for failure and even backlash. On the one hand, approaches that seek to broker grand diplomatic bargains among major regional powers, such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Israel, overlook the limitations of the prevalent regional organizations to provide good offices that might reassure or enforce peace agreements. On the other hand, approaches that seek to “fix” failed states by enhancing capacities and improving responsiveness, such as in Iraq after 2003 (Mako & Edgar, 2021), run into even more complex and wicked problems. They are prone to futility and unintended consequences. State building ultimately—at best—reinforces authoritarian tendencies and reproduces negative peace (Brinkerhoff, 2014; McCandless, 2013).

Playing to the strengths of the MENA peace system could yield more sustainable results. Instead of grand regional bargains or interminable state-building, conflict resolution can proceed from the bottom up. Rather than try to sideline or replace local councils, NGOs, religious networks, tribes, and other actors involved in everyday peacemaking, these can be the focus of empowerment. The end result will be fluid, unorthodox, and sometimes unsatisfying. A strong, responsive state remains the best protector of peace and human flourishing; but the region cannot wait for such entities to arrive. The contours of everyday peace will differ from place to place. But this peace, grounded in specific localities, will likely be open. A host of actors can organize, assemble, and enforce it, ranging from representatives of the distant sovereign, bearers of local forms of legitimacy, international agencies, and even private commercial actors. Stalemates and frozen conflicts are likelier than bombastic victories or grand peace accords. But this indeterminacy offers a real chance for innovation and—most importantly for those who have suffered the brunt of fighting—survival.

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## Notes

1. Importantly, the term “Middle East” is an exonym invented by imperialist powers in the nineteenth century to apply to areas of the Ottoman Empire. It has always had somewhat hazy characteristics (Cf. Bonine et al., 2012; Culcasi, 2012).
2. These figures are updated from Ahram (2020).
3. There have been efforts to create alternative regional bodies, such as the Gulf Cooperation Council but has not significantly outperformed the relatively low functions of the LAS in maintaining peace (Al-Ahsan, 2017; Heard-Bey, 2006).

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