



The Arab common market: Fighters, weapons, ideologies

by Florence Gaub

The European Union is a space in which citizens move as freely as goods, services and capital, and can live, work, study and do business virtually anywhere. The Arab world is, in many ways, the exact opposite of this despite a 1957 agreement by the Arab League envisaging the same setup as the EU. Each member state of the League imposes visa restrictions on at least half – if not more – of other members (the most ‘liberal’ in this sense are the Gulf states), most tariffs are still in place and work permits are hard to obtain. Barely 2.5% of Arabs work in other Arab states, and only 5.2% of trade takes place within the region (within the EU, this figure is above 60% on average).

In stark contrast to this apparent lack of integration is, however, the fact that the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is a continuous space when it comes to conflict. Weapons, persons and violent ideologies move freely around the region, fostering instability in their wake. Conflicts in the region consequently feed off each other in a symbiotic manner: even if one conflict comes to an end, its weapons, fighters and even ideological causes, can travel to another conflict site. Most of the MENA’s conflicts are therefore bound together in a vicious circle of worsening violence.

A simple weapons market

The MENA is not only home to the top state spenders on weapons, it is also a major location for the trade in illicit weapons. This was already the case before 2011, but violence in Syria, Libya, Iraq and Yemen has increased the flow of weapons and led to substantial growth in the ‘market’. There are two main reasons for this: domestic governments are incapable of securing their own arsenals or curbing illicit trade within their territory; and external state sponsors are delivering weapons to rebel groups.

The prime example of this is Libya: following the fall of the Qaddafi regime, most of the country’s unsecured weapons were seized – either by militias who used them inside the country, or by smugglers who sought to export them. 10-15 million light weapons flooded Libya’s black market and eventually ended up in at least 14 other countries. To the east, these weapons transited through Egypt to reach militants in the Gaza Strip, rebels in Syria or jihadist groups in the Sinai. To the west and south, they surfaced in Mali, Algeria and Tunisia.

In early 2013, the Egyptian military seized at least 8,000 rifles, several hundred rockets, and



400,000 rounds of anti-aircraft ammunition. But despite the efforts of governments in the region, the illicit trade has increased since then as smugglers have refined their techniques: Libyan weapons have, for example, even appeared for sale on social networking sites like Facebook.

Most of these weapons stocks were originally produced in the Soviet Union, and imported into Libya before 1992. Although they largely consisted of machine guns, shoulder-fired recoilless weapons and rocket launchers have also proliferated among non-state actors. Guided light weapons such as man-portable air defence systems (MANPADS) and anti-tank guided weapons (ATGWs) are now in the hands of more than 20 groups in the MENA – more than half of which are active in Syria. As a result, Daesh, and four other groups can now hit targets up to 6km away. MANPADS from Libya have also appeared in Lebanon, which itself has turned into an important regional marketplace for weapons – according to one study, ammunition prices in Lebanon can now even act as an accurate predictor of fatality rates in Syria.

But state sponsors, too, are also responsible for the increasing firepower of non-state actors. Iran and Syria have armed Hizbullah in Lebanon for decades, but Teheran has now extended this support to the Houthis in Yemen as well. In the spring of this year, at least three ships loaded with small arms were seized by US warships in the Gulf – a catch which netted over 5,000 AK-47 assault rifles, 300 rocket-propelled grenade launchers and a number of anti-tank missiles. In addition, the Houthis managed to seize several military depots belonging to the Yemeni military, thereby beefing up their arsenal with heavy artillery.

Qatar has also joined the rank of state sponsors delivering weapons in both Syria and Libya. Anti-tank guided weapons from China allegedly reached rebels in both countries via Doha, while Egypt and the United Arab Emirates also stand accused of having delivered weapons (such as armoured vehicles) to Libya over the last two years, breaching an arms embargo dating back to 2011.

Weapons also proliferate in the region due to battlefield captures and illicit trade from state arsenals. Daesh's weapons and equipment are, for instance, primarily made up of Iraqi military stocks which were captured during conflict or looted – or sometimes even purchased via corrupt officials. The jihadists can now call on a host of Russian- and American-made weapons, including armoured vehicles, mortars, anti-tank missiles and surface-to-air missiles. American weapons worth over half a billion dollars delivered to Jordan (intended for Syrian rebels) and Yemen also recently ended up on the black market thanks to corrupt officials.

Lastly, small arms are frequently found in the hands of private citizens in the region, often in spite of strict laws on gun ownership. Before 2011, a third of Yemen's, Lebanon's and Iraq's population possessed a firearm, as did around a quarter of Saudis. Guns were less prevalent in Jordan, Morocco, Egypt, while a mere 0.09% of Tunisia's inhabitants were said to own firearms. Gun-related violence has consequently remained low in Tunisia even during the political turmoil it has faced in recent years.

Just like weapons, drug trafficking plays a crucial role in current Arab conflicts. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has smuggled cocaine from Latin America to fund its operations, whereas Hizbullah and other militias grew opium poppy and marijuana to finance their campaigns during Lebanon's civil war. But new synthetic drugs can be manufactured nearly anywhere. Both Captagon (an amphetamine) and Tramadol (an opioid painkiller which has properties similar to morphine) are used by Daesh and other militias to boost the performance of individual fighters and increase their propensity for violence.

Daesh also traffics drugs for financial purposes, and seeks to produce them itself to maximise profits. In contrast to AQIM, Daesh and its counterparts target Arab markets rather than European ones. The countries with the highest levels of Captagon consumption in the MENA are Syria, Libya, Saudi Arabia and the Gaza Strip, with Lebanon and Jordan acting as important

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transit points and hosting production sites. Just a few weeks ago, Greek authorities intercepted a Tramadol shipment worth \$13 million on its way to Syria. And in late 2015, Turkish authorities seized 11 million pills of Captagon in the area boarding Syria. The size of the market for these drugs varies across the region as most Arab states have imposed bans. But just as conflict and instability are increasing, so is the use of opiates of all kinds.

A conflict Schengen

It is not just weapons and ammunition which move more or less unrestricted around the region. Both fighters and their civilian victims do so, too.

Arab fighters have played crucial roles in regional conflict theatres such as Iraq in the years after the US invasion, the Sahel and more recently Syria. Al-Qaeda in Iraq, Daesh's predecessor, was founded by a Jordanian, and its foreign fighters were mainly Arabs from Egypt, Syria, Sudan and Saudi Arabia. AQIM has members from Algeria, as well as Morocco, whereas al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula is a joint Yemeni/Saudi endeavour following a merger. In Syria, Arab fighters first arrived in the early days of the conflict as volunteers – initially, with a liberation rather than Islamist agenda. One such example is Mahdi al-Harati, the commander of a Libyan militia, who travelled to Syria to assist in the creation of similar armed groups.

The number of Arab fighters traveling to Syria increased, however, with the declaration of the 'caliphate' by Daesh in the summer of 2014. Arabs began to flock to groups with clear Islamist ties such as Daesh or (the significantly smaller) al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat Al-Nusra. In Daesh's ranks, Arab fighters (excluding Syrians and Iraqis) now account for the largest component of foreign fighters by far and are estimated to number 16,000 men.

Compared to European countries, most Arab states have sent more people in absolute and indeed relative terms. The largest contingents are from Tunisia (6,500), Saudi Arabia (2,500), Jordan (2,250), Morocco (1,350),

but smaller numbers (800-900) also originate from Lebanon, Egypt and Libya. In proportional terms, the picture is even more worrying: whereas only 1 in 104,000 European citizens has volunteered to fight for Daesh, for Arab citizens this figure is 1 in 18,750. For certain countries, the proportions are significantly higher: 1 in 1,830 Tunisians, 1 in 2,600 Jordanians, and 1 in 11,600 Saudi citizens have answered the call of Daesh. 30% of Jabhat Al-Nusra fighters are also Arabs, totalling about 1,800.

Since the beginning of the international campaign against Daesh in 2014, there has been a notable reverse flow of these fighters, particularly to Tunisia and Libya. Both countries, already bogged down in crises of their own, now face the daunting prospect of returning radical and battle-hardened young men. Daesh's Libya outlet, for instance, was launched by 300 Syria veterans in

2014, mostly Libyans but led by an Iraqi commander (who was replaced by a Saudi following his death). Now, half of its 6,500 members are Libyan, whereas the rest are from other Arab countries.

Just as fighters freely move around the region (by making use of smuggling routes, corrupt port officials, and falsified documents), so do the people fleeing them. The MENA is the region with the highest number of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the world. Conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Yemen alone accounted for more than half of the world's 8.6 million IDPs in 2015. Perhaps worse, displaced citizens are a constant feature of the region: Palestinian refugees have lived in Lebanon, Jordan and Syria for over half a century, and number over 7 million in total.

But the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the ensuing violence also created a large wave of refugees in the region. Over 1.2 million fled to Syria and 700,000 to Jordan, and 1.7 million were displaced within the country. 150,000 Iraqis also fled to Egypt, and 40,000 to Lebanon.

Most Iraqi refugees in Syria were displaced again by Syria's war, which has created the greatest refugee crisis in the region to date. More than half



of Syria's 22 million inhabitants have been forced to flee their homes or leave the country altogether: 620,000 are in Jordan, 1 million in Turkey, and over 1.1 million in tiny Lebanon. Moreover, there are around 6.5 million Syrian IDPs. Equally, the war in Yemen has displaced nearly 2.2 million people, with the majority fleeing to neighbouring countries. The 2011 war in Libya meanwhile led to the displacement of nearly 700,000 people – most of whom returned only to suffer renewed violence.

Such mass population movements do not only have humanitarian impacts; they also feed into the conflict cycle. Refugees in the region have exacerbated domestic tensions and played a direct role, for example, in the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war in 1975. If large refugee camps are not under the control of the state authorities, they can become a hotbed for militantism: both the Jordanian and the Lebanese militaries, for instance, have been forced to conduct several operations against militant Palestinian networks active in refugee camps.

Where refugees are excluded from the formal economy, they often engage in illicit activities such as drug and weapons trafficking. Most importantly, large refugee populations place a heavy economic burden on states – most of which are struggling economically already – by straining infrastructure, services and the labour market. Despite being clear victims of the many conflicts plaguing the region, refugees therefore have the potential to directly and indirectly contribute to renewed conflict.

An ideological free trade zone

What truly turns the MENA into one connected conflict space is a feeling of shared destiny – exploited by militants – based on common language and culture which goes beyond state boundaries. It is this feeling upon which any popular ideology in the region has drawn over the last century: whether pan-Arabism in the 1950s and 1960s or pan-Islamism now and in the past, no political idea in the region has been able to gain momentum without appealing to a populace beyond national borders. But as Arab states have abandoned the transnational political space (they now only really pay lip service to the notion of establishing an Arab nation), ownership of this sentiment of a shared destiny is up for grabs.

Meanwhile, regimes monopolised the political space within the Arab countries: whether in Libya under Qaddafi or Syria under Assad, state

nationalism had become synonymous with the regime, and little room for other ideologies existed. In order to gain strength and legitimacy, groups moved beyond state borders and appealed to a feeling of Arab/Muslim belonging.

The gradualist Muslim Brotherhood or the revolutionary Daesh and al-Qaeda have all sought to establish branches outside of their core territory. The Muslim Brotherhood not only has outlets in most Arab countries (except for those where it has been declared a terrorist organisation), it is in power in the form of Hamas in the Gaza Strip and Ennahda in Tunisia. Al-Qaeda has at least four regional sub-branches, and Daesh has declared several 'provinces' in Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia in addition to its core territory in Syria and Iraq. In contrast, armed political entities with a purely nationalist agenda – such as the Lebanese Hizbullah, the Free Syrian Army or even the Palestinian Liberation Organisation – have failed to gain the same traction as transnational mobilisers.

The business of cross-border conflict

The region is consequently similar to the EU, but more as a negative mirror image. From Morocco to Iraq, fighters, weapons, ideologies and the people fleeing them are linked as they cross borders and legal boundaries freely. Conflicts are, in that sense, what businesses are to Europe: they move freely across the region, reinforce each other and multiply.

The fact that most conflicts today are the legacies of previous political conflicts demonstrates this even further. The Lebanese civil war was at least in part the consequence of the war with Israel; Yemen's war today is linked to failed counterinsurgency operations in the early 2000s or even the war of 1962; Iraq's violence and the existence of Daesh are related to the invasion of 2003, which itself was linked to the invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Egypt's violence in the Sinai is connected to the ousting of President Morsi, and Libya's to the war of 2011 and its aftermath. Even Algeria's and Lebanon's political crises are the legacies of the violent conflicts of the 1990s.

Breaking this 'conflict Schengen' will require the creation of a genuine Arab space in order to foster cooperation and resilience: one where states counter conflict jointly, deliver services, welfare and jobs, and ultimately provide a space where people can – legally – move freely.

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