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# Reconfigurations in West Asia and North Africa

CARPO Research Forum  
2020 – Conference Report

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## Acronyms

BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CRF	CARPO Research Forum
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
KOC	Kuwait Oil Company
UAE	United Arab Emirates
WANA	West Asia and North Africa

*How do we embrace the complexity of transformation in West Asia and North Africa (WANA)? And how can we make sense of regional developments in the social, (geo-)political, environmental and economic realms? The first CARPO Research Forum was dedicated to answering these questions. It addressed the reconfigurations and challenges the WANA region is currently grappling with by selecting three major themes at the global, regional and local levels. It discussed the reconfigurations of external powers in the region with a particular focus on a rising China, dealt with the looming climate peril and the arduous path of the region towards sustainable development, and finally examined the social contract, looking at regional protest waves since the 'Arab Spring.' Bringing together practitioners and academics, it provided an insight into the interplay between the global, regional and local levels in a highly heterogeneous region, thereby pointing towards future paths for development. This Conference Report summarizes the main take-aways of the Research Forum and highlights avenues for future discussion.*

## 1 Introduction

The region that spans West Asia and North Africa (WANA) is in a process of profound transformation. Despite their heterogeneous character, most WANA countries are currently experiencing social, (geo-)political, environmental and economic challenges. While these developments mostly originated in the late 2000s, they have been accelerated by the raging COVID-19 pandemic, which has exposed the extreme vulnerability of the region. CARPO's first virtual Research Forum (CRF) addressed a selection of political, economic and societal challenges that can be observed in the region, not necessarily as a result of the pandemic but most certainly put to the fore by it. Linked together by the overarching theme of 'reconfiguration,' the Forum examined a selection of three prevalent challenges in the WANA, namely: geopolitical shifts, questions of sustainable development, and widespread social contestation. These topics are located at an intersection of different contexts (local, regional and global) in which these developments take place and interact with one another. Looking specifically at this interplay of contexts, the Forum provided insights into regional developments, highlighting that local social movements cannot be understood without also addressing broader regional contexts. These, in turn, are heavily influenced by geopolitical transformations and the activities of external actors in the region, of which China is certainly one of the most ambitious. Hence, the Forum showed that in order to provide an encompassing and comprehensive assessment of current transformations, it is crucial to take into consideration geopolitical and socioeconomic developments as well as grassroots movements.

### ***Making Sense of Multiscale Reconfigurations and the 'Transition Paranoia'***

The overall theme, linking this interplay of different contexts, was introduced in a keynote speech entitled 'West Asia and North Africa in Transition: In Search of Pathways, Scenarios and Options,' by Prof Dr. Thomas Demmelhuber, Chair of Middle East Politics and Society at the Alexander-Friedrich University Erlangen-Nuremberg. He began by reassessing the "transitional paranoia" and the long-held "democracy bias" in political science and reiterated that a democratic order is only one among several possible outcomes after the breakdown of an autocratic regime. Primarily, in his reading, 'transition' implies a rupture and a profound change in the set-up of politics and society with numerous possible future pathways and varying outcomes, that spans across aspects of territoriality, questions of sovereignty by state and non-state actors, as well as the composition of society. According to Demmelhuber, when looking to the region three core developments can be identified:

First, there seems to be evidence of a geostrategic vacuum emerging in the region, created by both regional actors and broader geopolitical power shifts. On the one hand, new emerging regional players such as the UAE or Turkey have entered the stage. On the other hand, a confluence of international developments such as the declining power of the US as a long-standing preponderant system leader, as well as the rise and proliferation of extra-regional hegemonies such as Russia or China, have shaped the region.

Second, besides these extra-regional hegemonies, Demmelhuber identifies a number of regional "wannabe hegemonies" that are in constant competition in their pursuit of hegemony and leverage. Among these are regional middle powers (e.g., Egypt, Iran, Turkey or Saudi Arabia) and also new, aspiring powers (e.g., Qatar or the United Arab Emirates (UAE)). Giving one example, he referred to the ongoing battle for Sunni leadership that manifests itself in the outlawing of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Saudi Arabia and that was clearly aimed against Turkey's geopolitical role in the region. According to Demmelhuber's interpretation, these power struggles for regional dominance are growing increasingly global in nature and also include rather subtle means such as socialization and persuasion in order to avoid any regime breakdown. However, he emphasized that these power games will have no winner.

Finally, Demmelhuber presented his thesis that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is a window of opportunity for extra-regional and regional autocrats, serving them on a silver platter the chance to broaden their toolbox of authoritarian practices for regime survival and consolidating their power base. Thus, autocratic rulers within the region – but also abroad – exploit the global health crisis to advance their surveillance states (e.g., through tracing apps)

and to project themselves as better “crisis managers” than their democratic counterparts. In this context particularly China, presenting itself as a “savior” within the global crisis, stands out.<sup>1</sup>

## 2 Thematic Breakout Sessions

Introduced by the keynote speech, these transitions at the global, regional and local levels informed the thematic breakout sessions, which constituted the core of the Research Forum. In the following, we will briefly sum up the main points discussed during these breakout sessions to provide an overview of the three themes and outline pathways for future research and discussion.

### 2.1 The Global Level: A Reconfiguration of Power and China’s Emerging Role in the Middle East: Game Changer or Much Ado about Nothing?

This breakout session dealt with global and geopolitical developments that concern the WANA region. It hosted Camille Lons from the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Jacopo Scita from the University of Durham and Angela Stanzel from the German Institute for International and Security Affairs. Taking increasing Chinese engagement in the WANA region as an example, the panel addressed the geopolitical reconfigurations and constellations of extra-regional hegemonies. One particular observation constituted the baseline for the discussion: As a relative newcomer to the region, China seems to be extremely cautious in its approach to local political and security challenges. Yet the country has been forced to increase its engagement with the WANA region due to its growing economic presence (there). As the long-standing dominance of the US as both a system-leader and main security provider in the broader Middle East shows signs of decline, China’s role has become of increasing importance. Yet little is known about China’s position and objectives in the region, or of the ways in which these factors could affect regional stability and political dynamics in the medium to long term. These topics were thus mentioned, by the three panelists alike, as being crucial for future research.

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<sup>1</sup> In collaboration with the universities in Freiburg and Erlangen-Nuremberg, CARPO has set up a project entitled “Global Autocratic Collaboration in Times of COVID-19: Game Changer or Business as usual in Sino-Gulf Relations”, which is funded by the Volkswagen Foundation.

Three major hypotheses were critically discussed by the panelists: First and foremost, China is increasingly positioning itself as an alternative to the West and in particular the Western model of governance. Second, China's economic clout in the WANA region is growing but is still far from as significant as often described. And third, despite the prominent narrative of China stepping into the vacuum left by the US in the region, China's destiny in the region is all but manifest.

### ***China – a Governance Alternative to the West?***

In general, China's influence in the WANA region is certainly growing – mostly from an economic point of view. China's strategy in the region seems to focus on developing profound bilateral economic ties with all regional actors, with particular emphasis on the regional powerhouses Saudi Arabia and Iran. Regardless of existing regional rivalries, China's voracious energy appetite and its ambitious expansions through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), including land routes, maritime routes, the Digital Silk Road and the Health Silk Road, have led to increased Chinese presence and activity in the WANA region. Yet when it comes to actual political engagement, China has, at least so far, been reluctant to become involved in regional disputes. In remaining allegedly neutral, it has positioned itself as a serious alternative to Western modes of governance, argued one of the panelists. The offer of economic relations with no strings attached was raised as an example of how China manifests its apolitical logic of engagement and undermines, quietly if not exactly secretly, Western liberal values.

### ***China's Economic Clout in the WANA Region***

Closely related to the question of China's emergence as an alternative extra-regional hegemon, the panel further discussed China's economic engagement in the region in the context of its BRI. All panelists agreed that the BRI could be interpreted as a way of using economic leverage for political influence in the region in that China is seeking to expand its foreign policy influence by bilateral and economy-focused partnerships. Hence, when talking about China in the WANA, this mostly refers to China's economic presence and infrastructure projects in the context of the BRI. Today, China has become the region's largest foreign investor, thereby increasing its economic footprint. Yet, as argued by one of the panelists, China's economic clout is often overestimated. A closer look at merely economic facts provided nuance to common statements that exaggerate China's economic weight. Moving from China's actual economic clout to the impact of its activities beyond the economic realm, the discussion then moved on to China's security role. In contrast to its

economic size and measurable economic impact in the region, China has been less invested in augmenting its security role in the Middle East as its appetite for challenging the US-led security architecture remains limited. However, as discussed critically by the panelists, China's growing economic presence does come with growing responsibilities and its economic activities that have security implications, for instance port investments or 5G networks, are very likely to pull China into wider engagement with the region.

### *China in the WANA: A Not-So-Manifest Destiny*

One of the panelists pointed to the fact that China's apolitical policy approach to the WANA region relies on a certain degree of stability. Accordingly, the question can be posed as to whether China will become a rising security provider in order to maintain this stability. To put this question into context: For a long time, regional political security arrangements, in particular concerning the Gulf region, have been built upon a certain 'balance of power' between countries such as Iran and the US. The panel discussed whether Beijing had taken advantage of the changing role of the US – for a long time the main security guarantor in the Persian Gulf – to successfully develop closer relationships with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and Iran, without the burden of deploying a military presence in the region. Thereby, it brought to the fore the question of the sustainability of China's free-riding in the region. With the changing role of the US, and regional skirmishes between Iran and Saudi Arabia accelerating, the balance of maintaining good ties to Tehran and Riyadh alike has deteriorated, as has the overall security situation in the region. Yet, China's destiny of becoming a security provider seems to be 'all but manifest,' as phrased by one of the panelists. Instead, despite growing Chinese involvement in the Persian Gulf, Beijing's reluctance to substitute or even flank Washington as an active security guarantor is distinct. Hitherto there seems to be no causal link between the US' progressive disengagement from the WANA during the era of former US President Donald Trump and a growing Chinese security presence. In contrast, through its subtle and economy-focused partnership diplomacy, China remains cautious to keep the balance between Riyadh and Tehran, despite its most recent deal with Tehran, thus avoiding being sucked into regional security rivalries.

## **2.2 The Regional Level: The Climate Hedge and the Arduous Path Towards Sustainable Development**

This second breakout session provided deeper insights into the role that environmental sustainability plays in current regional transformations and addressed the questions of whether and how environmental sustainability might

shape future developments in the WANA region. Without ignoring the bio-physical ecological shift (and damages) due to climate change and environmental degradation, the session was dedicated to uncovering the involved actors and underlying power relations in terms of environmental sustainability. A guiding theme of the session was the disproportion between “the climate hedge” (Krane 2019: 160) as a matter of collective security and the general lack of environmental cooperation and collaboration at the regional level. Another topic of the session was the impact of growing environmental concerns and demands from the population (particularly prominent among the young) that may eventually evolve into a source of growing social contestation. Various perspectives on these broad themes were provided by Amnah Ibraheem from the University of Tennessee, Katharina Nicolai from the University Erlangen-Nuremberg, and Tobias von Lossow from the Clingendael Institute.

### ***Bringing Agency Back In***

When discussing environmental cooperation, it seems conducive to take a closer look at the involved actors and potential structural constraints they face. Taking as examples the six members of the GCC – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE – the first thematic input provided a comprehensive framework of multi-level challenges to environmental movements that comprise different institutions and players across the public, private, academic and civil society spheres at the national and regional levels. With regards to civil society there is rather limited potential for youth-led movements to push environmental concerns forward due to constrained channels of political participation. Also, the well-developed academic sphere in many countries only plays a minor role in policy-making processes and, due to missing financial incentives, is more engaged with teaching than research. Instead, state-owned oil companies have a profound impact in advocating green projects, though it is unclear whether this only happens for reasons of greenwashing. Furthermore, sustainable development projects in the Arab Gulf monarchies are often part of broader smart city initiatives – the presentation given by one panelist further emphasized that these resource-draining green urbanization mega-projects are closely linked to the price of oil and governmental revenue that are subject to constant fluctuations in the global market price. The panelist gave the concrete example of Kuwait’s prestigious renewable energy project, the huge solar plant at the al-Shaqaya Complex, mainly financed by the Kuwait Oil Company (KOC), which has recently been shelved due to the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, regarding the scope of regional Gulf relations, it was argued that there is indeed potential for cooperation (e.g. the GCC electricity

grid) but very little political will. Using this holistic framework as a theoretical springboard, the following contributions by the panelists discussed in greater detail the impact of regional constraints on the one hand, and the role of agency, particularly the *vox populi*, on the other.

### ***Reassessing the Sociopolitical Context of Environmental Cooperation***

The second input provided a detailed example of the lack of environmental collaboration in the region, by analyzing Morocco's regional climate change governance. On the one hand, the decades-long dispute between Morocco and Algeria has rendered as dysfunctional existing institutional settings that could be conducive to environmental sustainability. On the other hand, there are clear signs of Morocco using environmental diplomacy to increase its influence, as outlined in the kingdom's efforts to align its environmental agenda with the recent pivot to West Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa. These two contradictory examples of regional environmental management support the perspective that sustainable development unfolds in a broader sociopolitical setting that can either facilitate integration or deepen hostilities. It further highlights the growing role of environmental diplomacy as an important foreign policy instrument. As various participants stressed in the subsequent discussion, the long-standing Gulf crisis between Qatar and the self-proclaimed 'anti-terror quartet' of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt depicts another example of how intra-regional political tensions overshadow collective efforts of climate action. The same can also be applied to the long-held conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran that hampers joint initiatives of environmental protection in the waterway linking the Arabian Peninsula and West Asia.

### ***Environmental Demands as Future Litmus Test?***

As the last contribution from the panel highlighted, besides top-down constraints that are visible in an uneasy regional setting, there are also changes in bottom-up dynamics that are leading to a growing social mobilization around environmental concerns. Given that climate-related aspects such as dramatic changes in temperature and precipitation negatively affect the availability of food and water while simultaneously leading to growing energy demands, it was stressed that a lack of governmental core functions should be seen as a key element of various anti-government protests that continue to destabilize countries as well as the region as a whole. Empirical examples from Iraq, Iran, Lebanon or Yemen showed that the provision of basic services such as electricity constitutes a backbone of political legitimacy. Social contestation particularly erupts in those areas that suffer from electric power outages and where the government is unable to provide (sufficient) electricity. Moreover, this provides an additional explanation for the emergence of

several non-state actors that are taking over the provision of services. As the discussion demonstrated, social unrest is primarily the consequence of many governments' inability to provide basic services to their citizens, rather than the result of growing environmental concerns. Yet, climate change and environmental degradation are key factors in shaping the long-term guarantee of these supply chains.

### *The Climate Hedge as a Future Trajectory of Change*

The presentations and discussions in this breakout group highlighted the uncertainty of the region's future development, characterized by serious climate-related risks, since the entire WANA region is highly vulnerable to the severe impacts of global warming and environmental degradation. This uncertainty exacerbates an already fragile political environment characterized by conflict and war, competition, weak institutional frameworks and with few multilateral efforts to reduce climate risks. In this context, environmental politics is not a top priority for either the government or the general public. Moreover, where environmental considerations are present, they are often merged with ulterior motives, such as gaining political influence, challenging contemporary orders or exploring new business opportunities. At the same time, all speakers emphasized the potential for positive change. Especially, a younger and well-educated generation is entering the scene with high expectations for environmental reforms and eco-friendly investment. Already, such cases as civil society activities in Lebanon or Tunisia illustrate the interplay between greater societal interest articulation and aggregation, and increasing awareness of sustainable access to and control over natural resources. Governments will increasingly have to conform to these expectations and satisfy these demands, otherwise social turmoil will grow. This assessment perfectly correlates with the third breakout session that dealt with social mobilization and contestation.

## **2.3 The Local Level: Reconfiguration or Collapse of Societies? The Protest Waves Since the 'Arab Spring'**

This breakout session discussed social movements and protest waves that have shaken the WANA region. It hosted Mark Furness from the German Development Institute, Jinan Al-Habbal from the London School of Economics and Political Science and Dlawer Ala'Aldeen, director of the Middle East Research Institute. With the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 'Arab Spring' ahead at the time of the conference, some parallels have been drawn between 2011 and current regional upheavals. The Arab Uprisings that spread from Tunisia in late 2010 to the entire region, challenging the incumbent regimes and advocating

for more (democratic) freedoms, led to very different outcomes in each country. In the majority of cases, however, this has not resulted in the desired political change. Quite the opposite, many countries have experienced stronger tendencies of autocratization in the aftermath of the protests. In some countries, such as Libya, Syria and Yemen, the initially peaceful protests even resulted in civil wars, leading to disastrous humanitarian consequences. The panelists emphasized that the recent waves of protests in the WANA region center on similar demands for political reforms and a renewal of the country's social contracts as in 2010 and 2011. In this session, two cases were discussed in more detail – the Lebanese Republic and the Republic of Iraq.

### ***Lebanon: Beyond the Protests***

The case of Lebanon was discussed as an interesting yet complex example because of the unique multi-confessional nature of the country and the lack of robust governance structures. The protest wave that emerged in Lebanon in 2011, inspired by the 'Arab Spring' and known as the 'Uprising of Dignity,' did not lead to the desired political reforms. Instead, the social and economic situation of many Lebanese people worsened in the years following 2011. Two examples of subsequent protests were the 2015 'You Stink' movement that criticized corruption scandals in the waste management sector, and the mass protests following the announcement of the planned taxation on calls on voice-over internet protocols, tobacco and gasoline in 2019. The social unrest reached its latest climax following the August 2020 blast in Beirut. While Lebanon has experienced several large-scale protests over the last decades, the societal demands have remained largely unmet, essentially centering on overcoming endemic clientelist structures among the political elite and abolishing the distribution of power along confessional lines in the state structures. The situation has further deteriorated due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, leading to a fatal deepening of the economic crisis, fiscal austerity, lack of services, growing living costs and decelerating economic recovery. Continued protests were predicted by one panelist, even with lockdown measures renewed. This led one participant to posit that the protesters in Lebanon have been able to overcome the ubiquitous sectarian and political boundaries of society. Yet, other participants remained skeptical about potential political change arising from the street by pinpointing to the corrupt political establishment that is deeply entrenched in the state.

### ***Iraq: Futile Efforts to Include the Protesters***

Since October 2019, Iraq has witnessed regular protests, unfolding from earlier local protests in different areas of the country, for example the Basra region in Southern Iraq. These demonstrations are inextricably linked with the current geopolitical shifts and power struggles of regional powers and extra-regional

superpowers. For a long time, Iraq has been shaken by conflicts that include external powers. The US occupation from 2003-2011, the fight against the Islamic State (IS) on Iraqi territory since 2014 and, last but not least, the current proxy conflict between Iran and the United States have left Iraq's government fragile. The state is highly fragmented, which, according to the panelists, has led to the incapability of the Iraqi state to fulfill core state functions such as the provision of public services and the security of its citizens. The demands of the various protest groups were highly differentiated but included the core call for a new political leadership and fresh elections. This was realized by the instatement of the interim government lead by Mustafa al-Kadhimi in April 2020. One panelist emphasized that apart from this, other structural obstacles remained, also due to the inability of the protesters to form shared demands. The panelists further argued that the perspectives for the state are dire. Despite the fact that the government has agreed to hold elections in 2021, there is little optimism for the actual realization of this event. Especially demands of the inner Iraqi regions, such as the ongoing attempts of the Kurdish region as well as the Basra region to gain more power and decentralize politics away from Baghdad, could lead to further weakening of the state's organization and effectiveness.

### ***The Vital Role of the Social Contract***

When revisiting the examples of Lebanon and Iraq, but also other fragile contexts in the region, it was noticed that deteriorating state-society relations are one result of a dissolving social contract. The social contract can be understood as "implicit and explicit rules for state-society relations on respective rights and duties" which "thereby make politics more predictable and increases the legitimacy of rule – including material legitimacy – by allowing society a voice in the allocation of state resources and regulatory power" (Loewe et al. 2019: 2). It connects the different actors of the state with society. The state is seen as the provider of the three 'P's' (protection, provision of basic services and participation in state affairs) and in return is attributed legitimacy and power. Against this background, the panelists emphasized that many governments have failed to fulfil their state core functions such as protection and the provision of basic services. In many states with high protest turnout in the WANA region, the monopoly of the provision of security and basic services has shifted in the last years away from governments towards non-state actors, such as militias or tribal groups. A further obstacle is the participation in state affairs. Protests like the 'Arab Spring' should be seen as a collective movement against the lack of interest articulation and aggregation that is prevalent in many autocratic contexts. This does not only apply to the national context but also to the international context.

### *The Delicate Role of External Actors in Social Contract Formation*

The panel discussion pointed not only to the vital role of the social contract for the national realm but also its implications and ramifications for the transnational relations of states. For instance, it was argued by all panelists that the failure of the state to fulfill its obligations in the context of the social contract, which can ultimately lead to regime instability, is considered a main reason for external interventions. While external interventions (be it by external actors, states or international organizations) are sometimes considered as destructive and malicious, the majority of panelists highlighted that external actors are also a crucial support element in the peacebuilding process as well as the formation and upholding of formal and informal social contracts.

Most crucial for the formation of the social contract is fostering society's ability to embrace a reformation process by opening spaces for dialogue, supporting the inclusion of all groups of society in the formation of political participation, and maintaining channels of exchange. A major obstacle to such inclusivity addressed by one participant during the discussion was the difficulty of newly formed civil groups or parties to take part in such formation processes. Often these groups do not receive a seat at the table during internationally organized talks. Consequently, it was argued that foreign interventions must embrace a holistic approach that involves all relevant segments of society.

The example of Iraq also shows the transnationalization of social contract dynamics. It has been said that non-state actors such as militias and private military forces are not part of the social contract. But at the same time, they are supported by other states and external forces as they gradually take over core functions of the government such as the provision of public goods.

## **3 Embracing Complexity: How the Global, the Regional and the Local are Interconnected**

The discussions at the first CARPO Research Forum have, unsurprisingly, pointed to a marked interconnectedness of current global, regional and local developments in the WANA region, which has concrete implications for future developments there. In a nutshell, three major developments can be foreseen: 1) The geopolitical conflict between China and the US might lead to growing tensions in the region. 2) Climate change and environmental deterioration might support cross-border tensions but 3) are also one among many determining factors towards a changing social contract in several fragile state contexts.

- 1) Currently, China's actions in the WANA region come mostly without any strings attached. Yet, the long-term implications of China developing into an extra-regional hegemon in the WANA should not be underestimated. China – whether intentionally or unintentionally – paves the way for a diffusion of autocratic practices and indirectly supports undemocratic regimes worldwide. The declining power of the US as long-standing preponderant system leader and main security provider in the region fuels this development, contributing to an emerging political vacuum in the WANA. These tendencies have to be monitored closely and should constitute a wake-up call for Western democracies to rethink their foreign policy activities in general as well as their relationship with China in particular. Moreover, regional powerhouses such as Saudi Arabia or Iran have genuinely made a 'pivot to Asia.' This development is particularly risky because it bears the potential for a so-called "third wave of autocratization" (Lührmann & Lindberg 2019: 1095–1113) being fostered in the region through Chinese influence. Especially in the COVID-19 context it can be observed that autocratic practices diffuse from China to the region and within, not following a one-way street but leading to mutual reinforcement of autocratic practices.
- 2) With environmental problems rising, the overall economic situation of the populations will worsen. So far, policymakers have missed the opportunity to offer sustainable strategies for their countries. Biophysical changes such as sea-level rise or desertification as well as human-caused environmental degradation such as high greenhouse gas emissions, waste management and pollution act as stressors on the sustainable delivery of water, as well as on food and energy supply chains. The economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates the already fragile and deteriorating ecosystem. It is expected that in the short term, WANA countries will shelve costly climate action, and quickly revitalize hydrocarbon-based economies. This might add new challenges for state-society relations in the medium and long term, due to continuing pollution and waste of resources. Yet, climate change and environmental degradation is not a domestic issue that can be successfully dealt with by nation states individually. As a transboundary threat, the climate hedge is foremost a regional challenge and a matter of collective security. It forms a key aspect of a future regional security architecture, but joint efforts are barely enforced and are overshadowed by political mistrust and hostility. The absence of regional collaboration will further accelerate the environmental vulnerability of the entire region and may lead to even more political and social turmoil both within and between states.

3) The current situation in many states in the WANA region is, as exemplified by the cases of Lebanon and Iraq, shaped by growing social contestation. Although the two countries presented in the panel only form a small part of the confluences of challenges in the region, they point towards overall trends: a) the increasing importance of non-state security actors, which are destabilizing governments and b) the decline in some states' ability to provide access to resources for their citizens. The growing number of Popular Mobilization Units and militias active in and across borders weaken and challenge state sovereignty and many states' monopolies on security provision. In addition, some militias in recent years stepped in when governments fell short of providing basic goods and services to their societies. As discussed, the inability of basic state provision is anticipated to grow further in the years to come, with climate change and environmental degradation acting as further stressors. The current crisis brought on by the global COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to further violability of the social movements that have developed in the past years, boosting tendencies of autocratization. Controlling the virus has led to drastic restrictions of societies' freedoms. The outcome of this is not yet clear, but examples such as the diffusion of COVID-19 tracing apps (using China as a role model) have shown that some measures might also be used for increased surveillance more generally. All of this is likely to contribute to a growing discontent with the ruling elites and the dissolution of many states' social contracts, and will very possibly steer further social upheavals.

All in all, the discussions at the first CARPO Research Forum have shown the interconnectedness of the local, regional and global in regional configurations. Thinking about how to react to the Chinese influence in WANA goes hand in hand with a close examination of the respective social contracts, as robust state-society relations are needed to adequately deal with this growing Chinese engagement. This social contract, in turn, is constitutive for the development of long-term and sustainable environmental policies that in the end would have to be implemented on the ground by societal actors and individuals. Last but not least, it is the people that constitute countries and regimes, and hence foreign policies. Therefore, the global, regional and local levels are closely interconnected when it comes to developing these policies.

## 4 Conclusion and Way Forward

The interplay of different levels and contexts as a major take-away of the Research Forum has outlined the necessity for more multilevel discussion and cross-thematic research on reconfigurations in the WANA region. Therefore, this Research Forum was only the first of its kind and shall be continued in 2021, guided by the overarching theme of reconfigurations or transformations in the WANA region. Discussing the social, (geo-)political, environmental and economic challenges not only but also in the light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic seems to be a baseline for a better understanding of regional developments as well as for shaping future paths of development.

In this regard, the virtual set-up of the Research Forum – made non-negotiable by the pandemic – can ultimately be turned into an advantage, by enabling an easily accessible format for participation that is as open for experienced practitioners and academic scholars as it is for students and early-career researchers. In a similar vein, it helps to overcome spatial boundaries and constitutes an ideal format for discussions not ‘about’ the WANA region but ‘with’ the WANA region, thereby following CARPO’s principle of doing research in partnership with the Orient. Finally, through a virtual format, different capacities and inequalities regarding funding, travel opportunities and visa requirements can be overcome, which is particularly important when including scholars from the Global South. Without downplaying the advantages of face-to-face meetings, the series of CARPO Research Forums will thus stick to its initial virtual format, regardless of the pandemic-related developments over the course of 2021.

## Literature

For further reading on topics addressed during the Research Forum, we have compiled the following reading list:

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## About CARPO

CARPO was founded in 2014 by Germany-based academics trained in the fields of Near and Middle Eastern Studies, Political Science and Social Anthropology. Its work is situated at the nexus of research, consultancy and exchange with a focus on implementing projects in close cooperation and partnership with stakeholders in the Orient. The researchers in CARPO's network believe that a prosperous and peaceful future for the region can best be achieved through inclusive policy making and economic investment that engages the creative and resourceful potential of all relevant actors. Therefore, CARPO opens enduring channels for interactive knowledge transfer between academics, citizens, entrepreneurs, and policy makers.

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