

## INCREASING DIVERSITY IN THE EURO-MEDITERRANEAN REGION?

### Report of the EuroMeSCo Annual Conference 2014

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#### Summary

Contrary to what was previously thought, the Arab revolutions have not led to the democratisation of the entire Southern Mediterranean region. In fact, the region is today more heterogeneous than before, with some countries heading towards democracy and others plunged into severe internal crisis. Old and new internal and external actors are also willing to gain influence and power amidst diverging conflicts of interests.

The aim of the EuroMeSCo Annual Conference 2014 was to analyse the increasing diversity and complexity of the region from different angles. The opening session focused on regional conflicts and the role of external actors. The first plenary session explored the old and new internal and external actors and reflected on how the EU could maintain its influence in the new geopolitical order. The last plenary session analysed the challenges and opportunities posed by regional fragmentation to Euro-Mediterranean politics and produced a series of proposals to improve EU policies, in order to increase their visibility and effectiveness.

Three parallel working sessions focused on specific factors behind the political transformations in the region. The first session explored the state of political transformations following the examples of Jordan, Morocco and Egypt. The second



session focused on the patterns of national instability and on the need to adapt the EU's approach to these new scenarios. The last session analysed the factors behind the minor reforms and the long-term prospects for maintaining the status quo, through the cases of Egypt and the Gulf countries.

**Opening Session: The ever more complex Mediterranean: national conflicts and democratic transitions**

The war in Syria must no longer be examined as a domestic conflict but as a great regional and international concern, with a spill-over effect on its closest neighbours.

In the first part of the session, the panellists focused on the situation in Syria and the perspectives for a way out of the crisis. Currently, the situation in the country is particularly difficult, as most of its population depends on the international humanitarian aid and the al-Assad regime continues to repress opponents. The Syrian opposition does not operate as a single actor, as it is split into several groups, mostly organised in militias, but without a clear military-structured strategy. The situation of chaos is reflected not only in the lack of unified political vision, but also in clashes and confrontation as a consequence of rivalries in the region. The panellists underlined that the war in Syria must no longer be examined as a domestic conflict but as a great regional and international concern, with a spill-over effect on its closest neighbours. Jordan faces poverty, especially of the Sunni tribes living in parts of its territory, and Lebanon suffers from sectarian tensions and has to deal with a continuous flow of Syrian refugees, at a time when Palestinian refugee camps are still an unhandled issue.

The discussants then turned to the topic of the Islamic State, whose irruption on the regional scene dates back to 2004 and which started to gain strength thanks to the financial support from the Gulf States. Currently, its main sources of income come from the seizure of oil fields and from Islamic tax collection. Nevertheless, the Islamic State is only a part of the problems, due to which the Syrian domestic situation has plunged into chaos. Another serious issue is the situation of minorities who have been severely persecuted by the regime. However, their situation remains unnoticed by the international media because they are seen as groups with limited interest for international powers.

The coalition against the Islamic State lacks coordination and a comprehensive proposal on how to redress economic, social and political hardships.

The fight against the Islamic State led by regional states such as Jordan, Lebanon or the Gulf States and the western coalition lacks coordination and a comprehensive approach. The offensive, mainly consisting of airstrikes, is counterproductive, as it is causing the growth of sympathy for the Islamic State and raising its popularity. On the other hand, even if the coalition produced positive results, there is no concrete, political plan for Syria. In addition, no concrete actions are proposed to redress economic, social and political hardships, which are actually acting as pushing factors to join the extremists. Most of the people suffering from extremely poor living conditions decide to join ISIS to show their disdain and disapproval of the inaction of external actors.

The issue of western citizens joining the Jihad was also tackled. The panellists stated that they must not be considered as a product of the Syrian conflict, but rather as people, who already had a vision of the Jihad they wanted to fight for and whose wish has been accomplished by joining the extremists in the current scenario.

The violent irruption of the Islamic state has been a watershed in the Arab people's aspirations and confidence. Nevertheless, the experts noted that Arab uprisings have led to the expansion of the public space mainly because of the shifts that have taken place due to the five actors: the military, also called the deep state, which in some countries managed to gain power and dominate the political sphere; the Mosque, or deep society; the masses, mainly the youth; the media, an influential soft power that has a great impact on public opinion; and money.



International actors should no longer favour stability at the expense of good governance.

Finally, the panellists focused on the role of external actors in resolving the regional conflicts. The politics of exclusion and the foreign support provided have sometimes contributed to the rise of violence at the expense of pluralism and inclusiveness. In Iraq, the US and European support for the Iraqi army has not solved sectarian clashes but increased the feeling of marginalisation and revenge among the Sunni community. The US and international community support for both the Morsi and al-Sisi regimes did not depend on undertaking good governance reforms, despite the violations of freedom of expression. This resulted in Egypt undergoing a process of two-step radicalisation, whereby government policies against the Muslim Brotherhood are producing a feeling of revenge, often translated into violence.

Therefore, the experts underlined that international actors should no longer favour stability at the expense of good governance. As far as the EU is concerned, four years after the Arab uprisings the expectations that it could become a significant player are rather low. The panellists agreed that the EU could become more involved in redressing inequalities and resolving grievances among local populations. The international actors should also rethink their approach towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Lessons learnt from the last three wars in Gaza show that, without a unique vision from the international community, it will be impossible to achieve conflict resolution. Instead of focusing solely on the reconstruction of the territory, key external actors should give more attention to design a valid solution to the conflict and to empower Palestinian society.





Plenary Session: **Geopolitical transformations in the Mediterranean: transnational politics and external actors**

The session analysed the transforming geopolitical situation in the region from different angles: the inadequacy of some old concepts and mindsets to describe the continuously changing scenario, the emergence of the non-governmental and transnational actors and the role of the EU in the changing Mediterranean environment.

The Iranian-Saudi Arabia rivalry goes beyond the Shia-Sunni confrontation. The real conflict is about revolutionary and conservative ways of understanding the role of the state.

The term of “war” was cited as the example of a non-matching concept. Previously, the term described armed conflicts between states and conflicts where factions were involved, as in Lebanon. Nowadays, some conflicts are also part of a wider conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which are fighting to impose their influence and ideology in the closer and wider region. As in Syria, they engage in a proxy war. The experts specified that the Iranian-Saudi rivalry goes beyond the Shia-Sunni confrontation, and that the real conflict is about revolutionary and conservative ways of understanding the role of the state. Other examples of cold war exist between Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar or between the Muslim Brotherhood and some states of the region. The term of a classical war cannot be applied to the case of ISIS either, since ISIS has a universal claim and is acting across borders. Finally, the panellists underlined that the centrality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict tends to be undermined in the current security framework of the region.

The experts also acknowledged the existence of new cases of cooperation and alliances between countries, such as the Israeli-Saudi Arabian coordination on the Iranian nuclear issue. Another example is the fight against ISIS, which could engender Saudi Arabia-Iran



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cooperation, since both actors acknowledge their respective centrality as regional powers. This could lead to a non-interference scenario, where both Saudi Arabia and Iran would accept the other country playing an increasing role in the region.

In the review of the role of external powers in the Mediterranean, it was argued that during the Arab uprisings no external actor had a decisive role. The panellists admitted that although several external powers are still important in the region, they no longer have a decisive influence in the region. Thus, it seems that regional dynamics have become more significant than the influence that the traditional powers can have. At the same time, the panellists acknowledged the significant influence of the Gulf States, which managed to strengthen their position due to generous funding.

The experts observed that there is a difference between the influence of external forces and external actors. In Egypt, external actors such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE have had important influence on the army and private businesses. Nevertheless, the external forces, mainly media and some TV programmes of regional scope, a significant influence on delegitimizing Morsi and expressing dissent.

The external powers no longer have a decisive influence in the region. Regional dynamics have become more significant than the influence that the traditional powers can have.

The panellists also stressed the role of the masses in the early stages of the uprisings and the ongoing transitions. According to some discussants, the masses have difficulty in organising themselves as political parties and remain split into many different groups. Other panellists argued that what really counts is not the number of people who demonstrated in the streets, but their political legitimacy and the concrete political proposals put forward.

At the same time, it was observed that social movements and civil society are not a homogenous group calling for a unique political shift. Some experts noted that referring to all of them as new actors is inadequate, as it hides the fact that they already existed before the uprisings but have just shifted from being political consumers to political agents of change. These groups, as political consumers, already had informal structures of power, to which new political capacities were later

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added. However, it was argued that these stakeholders cannot overcome the old deep state actors, such as businessmen, army and media magnates, who continue to have larger financial resources.

Finally, the panellists focused on the role of the EU in the region. Experts underlined that the European Union should rethink its definition of the neighbourhood and extend it beyond the current borders. The EU should adapt its new neighbourhood policies, which are not conditioned by the division lines drawn by Europeans, but to the prevailing dynamics in the region. If the security situation were more stable, the EU could focus on revitalising its long-term multilateral and bilateral relations with the countries of five sub-regions of its broader neighbourhood: East, South, Gulf, Sahel, and the Horn. This implies that European initiatives in these regions could be the starting point for less institutionalised but more focussed multilateral meetings. In this respect, European comprehensive regional policies will not be credible if the impression that its engagement ends where hard security problems begin persists. Europe should be the first-line security provider in its own neighbourhood.

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The EU should also position itself as an influential actor in certain regions of the world, where both its interests and responsibilities are at stake. The organisation should also adopt a pragmatic approach, prioritising long-term strategic goals, adopting innovative and proactive policies, redefining risk analyses and establishing issue-based cooperation on an ad hoc basis, as a prelude to an eventual partnership. This would leverage the EU's real impact and enable the Union to regain the confidence of local citizens. To sum up, the experts stated that a reconceptualisation of relations is needed on the basis of a bottom-up review of the Neighbourhood policy towards the South, with less over-institutionalised frameworks and with more efforts to engage with the regional actors.

#### Working Session 1: Scenarios for democratic consolidation and reform

The first working session analysed the signs of stability and the ways to support democratisation in the Arab countries. From a theoretical perspective, the

panellists questioned the term of “democratic transitions” and preferred to talk about “political transformations”, arguing that in practice there have been few real democratic developments after the Arab uprisings, except in Tunisia.

Constitutional monarchies such as Jordan and Morocco have been perceived in the West as a possible model for gradual political transformations. Yet crucial reforms are still needed to guarantee a fully-fledged democratisation processes.

The kingdoms of Jordan and Morocco have been perceived in the West as stable in a continuously changing environment, and the constitutional monarchy as a possible model to guarantee gradual political transformations. However, some panellists argued that recent constitutional reforms in both countries have not led to fully-fledged democratisation processes.

The Jordan monarchy is particularly fragile, directly affected by the Syrian crisis and challenged by a new economic elite. It was perceived not to promote a true political inclusion of the Islamist opposition, allowing at the same time more radicalised Salafi groups to flourish in neglected regions. The Moroccan monarchy still benefits from strong social support. However, the experts highlighted that the 2011 constitutional reform has not yet led to achieving full democracy, since the state apparatus is still well protected. Nonetheless, the monarchy managed to partially include or co-opt the Islamists, and maintain the loyalty of businessmen and the economic elite. The political crises in the region have also significantly strengthened the position of the Alaouite dynasty, which acts as the main mediator on the Moroccan political scene.





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In the second part of the session, the panellists stressed the “mirage” of some constitutional norms and focused on the practice of power to evaluate the real political transformations. The best example of this contradiction is Egypt. Formally, the Egyptian supreme norm is the most democratic in the history of the country but, in reality, the return of a strong regime led by the military can also be observed. Despite the revolution, elections and constitutional reforms, the challenges for democratic reforms are substantial, since politics are guided by the imperative of stability. Some panellists argued that the idea that Egyptian society is not mature enough for democracy is a dangerous perception, as it justifies a step backwards and favours radicalism and terrorism.

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The Tunisian case was mentioned as the only example of a potential fully democratic transition, although the country is not immune to instability because of the lack of institutional culture and the uncertainty about the effectiveness of reforms. Finally, the feeling of abandonment among the youth and the perception of an intergenerational conflict across the Arab world were debated. Both in monarchies and in republics, where the revolutionary upheavals mostly led by the youth took place, the new patterns of government have not broken with “gerontocracy”. Nevertheless, discussants also nuanced this apparent intergenerational split, since the differences among the youth are also numerous due to political disputes in many countries of the region.

#### Working Session 2: Patterns of national fragmentation and confrontation

The panellists focused on the developments that have shaped the Southern Mediterranean region in the last decades, including past protests and movements in the 1960s and 1980s that could have set a precedent for mobilisation during the Arab uprisings. Currently, a completely new scenario urges a new relation between the states and their population. Citizens are today far more conscious of the kind of government they would like to have and have managed to find psychological referrals based on local identity and transnational expectations. This has been specifically the case for Muslim politics. After decades of reduction



of its role in the public space, Muslim politics have re-emerged as a guiding principle ideology to channel people's expectations, mistrust and frustration. Inaction, silence, misunderstanding and wrongly-oriented policies have raised domestic tensions that can lead to radicalism.

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consequence of the domestic fragmentation and tensions at the intra-state level. Having a political order based on power and legitimacy is one of the bedrocks of stability. However, Arab states have long been suffering from lack of infrastructure of power and an absolutist way of ruling. Arab states are considered as failed or failing states and an authoritarian enforcement of law is starting to prevail only in some countries. One of the symptoms of the national instability is that power is kept in dysfunctional circles that are co-opting political opposition as well as its claims and proposals. Moreover, these countries often resort to the systematic use of institutionalised violence in order to demonstrate their strength.

On the one hand, corrosive and repressive states with institutionalised censorship have used patrimonial and clientelism links to install heavy networks, which are actually blocking economic development. Whether we focus on the existing diversity in the region or inside boundaries, we are confronting a clear trend where multiple stakeholders are trying to impose their influence using eroded old structures.

On the other hand, it was said that more attention should be paid to authoritarian resilience, as in the case of Syria, and to how securitisation matters are used to contest political dissent. Positive examples of managing resilience can be found

in Morocco and Jordan, where the opposition has been progressively incorporated into the political landscape. It was observed that newly-emerged political actors should be given a role in national dialogue to help build democracy.

The international shifts in the balance of power in the region can lead to more fragmentation in a context where regional powers exacerbate tensions.

Another important point debated during the session was how international shifts in the balance of power influence the region, as they can lead to more fragmentation in a context where regional powers exacerbate tensions. The most blatant example is the political-ideological confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which should not be mistaken for sectarian tribal wars. It was noted that the transnational element cannot be left out of the picture because the founding of the new states often goes in pace with transnational ideologies. This is another key point the external actors should examine when conceiving strategies to fight extremism or sectarianism in the region.

With reference to external actors, the panellists argued that they should encourage a shift of mindset in the conception of the Arab uprisings and of the politics addressed to the region. Democratisation cannot be taken as a given or a natural consequence of the revolutions. The factor that contributes to national fragmentation is a kind of new competition between the deep state and deep civil society. Therefore, in order to position itself as an actor with real and effective impact in the region, the EU should focus more on politics instead of policies only. The EU's first response to the Arab uprisings has been implemented through policies focusing on financial assistance, market opening, mobility and some other technical measures. This package of measures shows a will of pragmatism but it remains to be seen whether or not it is comprehensive enough to adapt to the political dynamics in the region. Finally, the panellists agreed that the EU foreign policy should not be based on providing false incentives, but rather on operationalising tools to solve problems through more concrete content. They also highlighted the need for coordinated action among the members of the EU when it comes to implementing political action, in order to enhance their coherence.

Coordinated action among the members of the EU when it comes to implementing political action is crucial to enhance coherence.

### Working Session 3: Eluding transformation: patterns of political continuity

The new Egyptian authorities aim to have the ownership of the narrative, as it helps to shape the understanding of the historical events and, as a result, to maintain political power.

The third working session aimed to analyse the factors behind minor reforms in Arab countries and the long-term prospects for maintaining the status quo. Debates among the participants focused mainly on the developments in Egypt and in the Gulf countries.

The possible change in the Egyptian political landscape was analysed following the example of the textbooks issued before and after the 2011 revolution. Following Winston Churchill's assertion that "History is written by the victors", the Egyptian experience shows how the new authorities aim to have the ownership of the narrative, as it helps to shape understanding of historical events and, as a result, to maintain political power. The analysis of the Egyptian textbooks shows that only some cosmetic changes occurred, such as removal of Hosni Mubarak's pictures and some new content on the 2011 revolution.

The description of the revolution is rather simplistic, with a strong emphasis put on the role of the army. The primary reasons for the revolution are considered to be external ones, such as the loss of Egypt's leadership in the Arab world, which led to the interference of the external actors, the loss of confidence in the West, its support for Israel, the Palestinian question and the deterioration of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The internal reasons for the revolution are considered to be the economic

liberalisation and privatisation processes.

The lack of significant changes and the way the revolution is depicted in the textbooks led the panellists to conclude that in reality there have been no major institutional transformations in the Egyptian political system. The army continues to be the key actor and the feeling of Egyptian nationalism is promoted. However, the panellists observed that institutional continuity



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is not necessarily reflected in social stability. Whereas the institutions remain more or less the same, society is undergoing profound changes.

In the second part of the session, the panellists debated the factors behind the political continuity in the Gulf monarchies. It was observed that the Gulf countries managed to avoid the major protests and to maintain the stability because of a generous welfare state, which they maintain thanks to the oil and gas revenues. According to the Gulf monarchies, the major reasons behind the outbreak of the Arab uprisings were economic, so they responded by increasing salaries and subsidies, creating new public jobs, and financing new projects in housing and infrastructures. This increased public spending helped to tame political dissent and discontent. Financial support was also used to preserve the status quo in other monarchies, such as Bahrain, Oman, Jordan and Morocco.

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Subsequently, the discussants analysed the developments that may endanger the stability of the Gulf monarchies. Three major factors were highlighted: first, their high dependence on oil and gas production, which makes these countries excessively exposed to oil price fluctuations. As a volatile factor, only high oil prices enable Gulf countries to sustain their distributive system and maintain social control. The second factor are demographic pressures, witnessed above all in Saudi Arabia, with young people, who enter the labour market every year preferring to be employed in the public sector, where the salaries are higher. This system is, however, becoming more difficult to sustain due to growing fiscal pressures. Thirdly, a growing population is leading to the increase of domestic energy consumption, thus reducing the energy exports and lowering the state's incomes.

Panellists observed that if demographic and energy consumption trends remain unchanged, it will be more and more difficult for the monarchies, particularly Saudi Arabia, to sustain the *rentier* state model and to ensure the social and political stability in the long term. Participants also noted that there is already some evidence of a gradual change in the Gulf societies, witnessed by the growing use of social media to circulate non-mainstream opinion.



Although some countries in the region have plunged into conflict, others have managed to maintain political stability and could become a pivot for the Euro-Mediterranean relations.

Finally, the discussants focused on the role of external actors in supporting change in the region. As far as the EU is concerned, it was observed that it continues to focus on less controversial aspects, mainly economic and social policies. The panellists highlighted that a more profound involvement is needed at the political level and with local populations and that international cooperation is necessary to enhance real political change.

**Plenary Session: Euro-Mediterranean politics and the challenge of regional diversity and fragmentation**

The last Plenary Session started with the premise that the Middle East and North Africa region is becoming more diverse and fragmented than ever. These developments imply major challenges to which the EU should respond adequately by resetting its current policies towards the region and by tailoring

a new approach and structures, as the current initiatives lack visibility, impact and recognition in partner countries.

According to the panellists, although some countries in the region, such as Libya and Syria, have plunged into conflict, others, such as Algeria, Jordan, Tunisia or Morocco, have managed to maintain the political stability and could become a pivot for Euro-Mediterranean relations. Therefore, the EU should perceive these differences and design a differentiated *modus operandi* with its southern neighbours. The EU could apply similar levels of political engagement and financial assistance to all neighbouring countries, regardless of their membership perspective and their



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geographical position. But the countries willing to progress in their relations with the EU through convergence of standards and the adoption of the *acquis communautaire* should be included in some EU common policies, such as agriculture, trade, climate and energy.

Additionally, the financial support should be redesigned. A primary role should be given to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, which has the capacity to raise funds on favourable financial conditions and its focus could be on sustainable infrastructure, water, energy, transport and new technologies. The new generation of agreements between the EU and the Southern Mediterranean countries should be based on a credible partnership and a win-win approach, including the advanced status agreements. Currently, this status lacks a concrete description of commitments of both parties, which means that the expectations vis-a-vis status depend on its interpretation and continue to be guided by a European approach.

The experts underlined that European politics should reflect the positive impact that an improved Euro-Mediterranean cooperation may have on both parts. One example raised by panellists was joint cooperation on common challenges such as the financial crisis, migration, unemployment and political challenges, for example, lack of accountability of governance systems. Although different in scale, these problems should be perceived as global, rather than affecting only Southern Mediterranean countries and should be addressed jointly.

Fragmentation should not be perceived only as a threat but also as an opportunity to address common challenges differently.

The discussants observed that fragmentation should not be perceived only as a threat but also as an opportunity to address common challenges differently. Firstly, panellists argued that top down initiatives formed in intergovernmental circles should be abandoned. Active participation of local civil society should be enhanced through devolution of power at a lower level, to city councils, regional governments or trade unions. Secondly, the entrepreneurship initiatives and the cooperation between the Southern Mediterranean and Europe should be supported. Thirdly, economics should be favoured over politics, as economically empowered, autonomous and independent actors are drivers of political change.

The Syrian citizens should no longer be perceived only as recipients of external help, but rather as political and economic actors, with the right to design their own future.

Moreover, the EU should engage more closely to solve the Syrian refugee humanitarian crisis. Syrian citizens should no longer be perceived only as recipients of external help, but rather as political and economic actors, with the right to design their own future. Thus, the EU should enable more Syrian citizens to enter Europe and to have access to education. Moreover, new ways of resolving conflicts should be found, for example by promoting trade networks and business links. Finally, cultural cooperation and its visibility should be enhanced, not focusing only on the dimensions of Islam and sectarianism but also including more positive examples of cultural diversity, such as cooperation of young people from both shores of the Mediterranean.

Regional cooperation should be promoted, as otherwise the diversity can turn into long-lasting fragmentation.

Although the growing diversity calls for policy responses tailored to the specificities of each nation state, the deeper, regional cooperation should be also promoted, as otherwise the diversity can turn into long-lasting fragmentation. Some panellists argued that the integration of the Maghreb is of strategic importance, since a strong and united Maghreb with deep relations with the EU could serve as a core to revive the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. The experts observed that structural factors at the regional level are very important in explaining the political reform across the region, since one of the most powerful predictors of regime type are regional dynamics. In the Middle East and North Africa region (theoretically better suited to

expect the regional domino effect due to the flow of communications across borders, linguistic proximity, cultural convergence, and intense social links) pro-democracy learning and its spill-over effects have developed in favour of democratic change but also of consolidating anti-democratic dynamics.

The experts underlined that there is a need for a more detailed and nuanced understanding of the ways in which the



Diversity and fragmentation must be understood not only in terms of more acute state based rivalries, but also in terms of rather different, disconnected ways to tackle thematic challenges in the region.

diversity is happening. Since 2011, the standard description of the region is that diversity has been organised around four different groups of states: states that have undergone a change of regime, states that have implemented modest degrees of political reform, states that have resisted any meaningful degree of political opening and countries that have experienced open violent conflict. However, according to the panellists, currently the diversity is organised around a much narrower range of parameters. Thus, besides an outlier state, Tunisia, there are two juxtaposed groups of states. The first includes states with strong institutions, where governments have resisted far-reaching political change, while the second one embraces countries where institutions have largely imploded and where a significant degree of conflict has ensued.

Finally, the panellists underlined that diversity in the region should be discussed not only in geographical terms, but also at a thematic level. For instance, there is a lack of synthesis between the security narrative at the regional and state level, hence provoking a serious degree of fragmentation of the regional security paradigm. Therefore, the diversity and fragmentation must be understood not only in terms of more acute state-based rivalries, but also in terms of rather different, disconnected ways to tackle thematic challenges in the region.



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