

## EDITORIAL

### **THE MIDDLE EAST. LOCAL DYNAMICS, REGIONAL ACTORS, GLOBAL CHALLENGES**

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This dossier gathers articles by five graduates from the Master in International Studies, based at ISCTE – University Institute of Lisbon. The students came from different disciplines and academic backgrounds, but in spite of their heterogeneous approaches and perspectives, they have found a common field, namely a critical analysis of some of the most contradictory and conflicted political and social dynamics occurring in the contemporary Middle East and affecting also neighbouring countries. All the authors have started their research due to personal interest and curiosity, with the aim of making the complexity of such diverse contexts in the region visible and intelligible.

In recent times, Middle Eastern Studies have increasingly taken up a relevant role in academia, particularly in a interdisciplinary framework. By deeply analysing the interactions of the region with the current globalised world, this area of study has attempted to break down traditional barriers among disciplines and to examine relations and linkages that are present across the region. More in detail, the field of Middle Eastern politics has developed specific interests and concerns both at the global and at the regional level. Within a context defined by the most internationally recognised events and junctures in the last twenty years, from the 9/11 attacks and the following Iraq invasion in 2003 to the Arab uprisings of 2011 and the most recent withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan in 2021, domestic, regional and global levels of analysis have been taken into account in the academic and political discourses.

The emergence of regional powers has also been crucial to understanding the most recent panorama, as new geo-political interests and strategies throughout the region have increased the role of growing regional actors, including Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey, as well as of rising international players, such as Russia and China. This has demonstrated how the political and economic influence of the Middle East has developed, as a major consequence of the centrality of the region in global politics.

In parallel, the study of this area of the world has been improved and transformed in the past decades. Historically dominated in particular by issues such as war and nation



states, Middle Eastern studies, and more specifically the field of Middle Eastern politics, have more recently been directed towards further and heterogenous research interests, including also wider perspectives concerning contentious actors and politics from below. This has allowed for the growth of several sub-fields that have recognised different angles and topics related to the region, from women's rights and gender equality to ongoing sectarian tensions, from the increase of diverse forms of Islamism to the revival of nationalist and authoritarian narratives, on the one hand, and the rise of social movements practices, on the other.

Within this interdisciplinary background, this special issue intends to highlight the importance of dealing with various lenses along with diverse theoretical and methodological tools, in the process of interpreting the complexity of each peculiar context within the region. According to the main goals of the Master in International Studies at ISCTE in terms of knowledge and skills, the five articles originate from the best dissertations in this area of study defended during the academic year 2019-20.

Mostly based on qualitative approaches, these papers are the product of extensive research on the most relevant topics focused on current tensions, conflicts, challenges, and turmoils, ongoing in several countries of the Middle East. Although these Master's students have worked on very specific issues, all of them have been able to contextualise each unstable and challenging reality present in the heterogeneity characterising the region. As a result, the common thread of this special issue is a critically analysis of the complex, controversial and challenging socio-political dynamics occurring in the contemporary Middle East and neighbouring areas, such as in particular the European border with Greece.

Starting with one of the most intractable concerns of our times, namely the Palestinian question, two authors have approached it in a complementary way by using different disciplinary and methodological perspectives. In the first article of the dossier, João Borralho deeply analyses the normalised relationship between Egypt and Israel in the Gaza Strip, with a specific focus on the meaning of governing under siege. In the second article, Mafalda Young stresses the importance of Palestinian graffiti as a powerful tool of resistance against the ongoing Israeli military occupation, and how it has historically and politically evolved since the first Intifada. By tackling another central framework related to the political and social dynamics of the region, the third and fourth articles highlight the relevance of working from a gendered perspective. In the third article Elisabete Domingues deals in detail with the role of women in the current Yemeni conflict resolution process, both through formal and informal tools. In the fourth article, Joana Fernandes examines the status of women's citizenship and rights in Saudi Arabia, while comparing their current achievements with the case of Sophia - the female-looking non-human being that was recognised as a Saudi citizen in 2017. Moving towards the borders with the European Union, the last article by Claire Felix aims to give voice to the unheard narratives of refugees coming mostly from Middle Eastern countries to Europe by passing through Greece, and to question current European asylum and migration policies.

In a wider and interdisciplinary sense, this special issue intends to contribute to the contemporary literature regarding the Middle East and its intertwined realities, along with the main ongoing challenges. All these contributions, founded on original theoretical and empirical studies, seek to underline the necessity of creating new spaces, new debates,



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and new opportunities for young researchers in order to become more visible and engaged in this area of study. Indeed, these five young authors can profoundly enrich and become actively part of the Portuguese academia working on these topics.

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