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TITOLO/TITLE:

Disaggregating the conflict responses of authoritarian and democratic states in the wider MENA region

PROPONENTE/I – PROPONENT/s:

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ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):

Conflict zones across the Middle East and North Africa and all along its periphery (Afghanistan, Ethiopia, the Sahel) have engendered a wide range of responses from regional and external actors. Different normative paradigms have been used to explain the actions of these state and non-state actors. Authoritarian states, for example, favor military and paramilitary figures and support their leadership roles in conflict scenarios (Volpi 2013; Hill 2019). Democratic states, on the other hand, act in ways that support technocrats and democrats (Saidin 2018; Valbjørn 2019). This understanding of how states operate (and utilize non-state actors in the process) presents a partial picture, one that often has little correspondence to reality. This panel, therefore, offers an in-depth study of Middle East and extra-regional state actors and their responses to conflict scenarios in the wider MENA region. We then define and analyze patterns of attempts by external states to affect political and military outcomes in Libya. While the panel is not limited to the Libyan case study, we consider the conflict in Libya as an important laboratory of these dynamics and the starting point for a wider discussion. Additional cases may be Tunisia, and Morocco (in the MENA region), Ethiopia, Sudan, and Somalia (in the Horn of Africa), and Niger and Mali (Sahel). In doing so, the panel will be able to disaggregate and analyze the actions of more democratic (or less authoritarian) and more authoritarian (or less democratic) states using relevant theoretical perspectives, while noting that an ideal type is not present in either case.

What implications do the extra-regional actors' actions have on local, regional, and global dynamics in the coming years? How do Middle Eastern countries interact with local non-state actors? And how with other extra-regional actors? These are just some of the questions the panelists will try to answer.

Contributions may address one or more key issues that are relevant to this topic, such as:

- the theoretical issues underlying the debate on the increasing interactions between Middle East states and African states from various IR (disciplinary?) angles.
- the practices and the main actors that have been involved in conflict scenarios in the wider MENA region, including the Horn of Africa and the Sahel, over the last few years;
- the political strategies and the output of the politics of the Middle East states in relation to local actors and other extra-regional ones.

The papers and the working language of the panel is English.

References

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- Valbjørn, Morten. "What's so sectarian about sectarian politics? Identity politics and authoritarianism in a New Middle East." *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 19, no. 1 (2019): 127-149.
- Volpi, Frédéric. "Explaining (and re-explaining) political change in the Middle East during the Arab Spring: trajectories of democratization and of authoritarianism in the Maghreb." *Democratization* 20, no. 6 (2013): 969-990.

PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA/DEI/DELLE PROPONENTE/I – SHORT BIO OF PROPONENTS

Brendon J. Cannon is Assistant Professor of International Security at the Institute of International & Civil Security (IICS), Khalifa University, Abu Dhabi, UAE. He earned a Ph.D. in Political Science with an emphasis on International Relations at the University of Utah, USA (2009), and held previous academic positions in Nairobi, Kenya and Hargeisa, Somaliland. His research focuses on the nexus of international relations, security studies, geopolitics and the strategic interplay between external states and the Horn of Africa. He is the author of multiple articles appearing in *African Security*, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, *Defence Studies*, and *Third World Quarterly*.

Federico Donelli is a postdoc research fellow in International Relations at the University of Genoa, Department of Political Sciences. His research fields have covered international politics and security studies of the MENA region, focusing on the foreign policy of the different players. Currently he is working on the process of militarization in the Horn of Africa and the growing engagement of the Middle Eastern states in the region. He is the author of multiple articles appearing in *International Affairs*, *Third World Quarterly*, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, and *The International Spectator*. His latest book *Turkey in Africa. Turkey's strategic involvement in sub-Saharan Africa* has been published by I.B. Tauris in 2021.

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Discussant

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Papers

1. The Red Sea: A Permanent Arena of Interests for Israel – Giuseppe Dentice (CeSI & Catholic University of Milan)
2. Salvaging the Horn of Africa: Iran's Military Assistance to Ethiopia in Tigray – Eric Lob (Florida International University)
3. Fighting or compromising? The ambivalent approach of Egypt to the Libyan chaos – Alessia Melcangi (Sapienza University of Rome)
4. Chaotic aid in crisis contexts: Qatar and the UAE in Syria - Altea Pericoli (Catholic University of Milan)
5. Contextualizing the engagement strategies of democratic and less-than-democratic states in conflicts in Libya, Sudan, and Ethiopia – Brendon Cannon (Khalifa University) & Federico Donelli (University of Genoa)

1. The Red Sea: A Permanent Arena of Interests for Israel
Giuseppe Dentice (CeSI & Catholic University of Milan)

Over the last years, the Red Sea has acquired a new geostrategic importance for some littoral countries. In fact, since the Iran nuclear deal (July 2015) and especially after the Gulf crisis between the so called Arab Quartet (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt and Bahrain) and Qatar (June 2017), the Red Sea region has become an essential pillar of the foreign policy of several countries. Among the middle powers that are once again competing for influence, Israel has emerged as new actor capable of shifting all the strategies in and outside the region. Some analysts and scholars (such as Rubin and Eiran) describe this phenomenon as a "turn to the sea" in which the maritime dimension regain a relevant role in the Israeli regional approach of the foreign policy. The strategic reengagement in the Red Sea area fits into a fluid geopolitical scenario where Israeli aimed to protect and expand its trade and security routes that connect the MENA countries' interests in East Africa and the Red Sea, creating a new potential bloc with other coastal states (Gulf countries in particular). As Israel shares with those

countries a common vision and aspirations in the military and security fields to fight terrorism, illegal trafficking and piracy between the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea, the creation of this bloc would be also beneficial to manage several crises (such as in Yemen, the Ethiopia's Tigray and the Nile dam issue) or tensions (in the Persian Gulf) in that quadrant. This growing cooperation between Israel and Arab countries could represent an extremely important factor of change in the Israeli attempt to define a new and coherent focus from the Red Sea area to the Western Indian Ocean (Guzansky and Neubauer). Eventually, the developments on the Yemeni Western coast could play a crucial role in how this engagement will shape security options and medium to long term security governance in the Red Sea. What are the consequences of the politics of geostrategic interest to the region? Are economic and military interests increasingly binding Israel and Gulf states together in this area? This proposal examines the Israeli drivers and its geostrategic interests in the Red Sea, as well as what output this strategy can product in the conflict scenarios that are likely to characterize the future of the wider MENA region.

2. Salvaging the Horn of Africa: Iran's Military Assistance to Ethiopia in Tigray

Eric Lob (Florida International University)

Despite alarmist claims regarding Iran's expansionist and hegemonic ambitions in Africa, the Islamic Republic of Iran during the presidency of Hassan Rouhani (2013-2021) disengaged from the continent, as evidenced by the dramatic decline in diplomatic and trade activity. In response to Iranian disengagement and GCC pressure and assistance, countries in the Horn of Africa and elsewhere on the continent including Djibouti, Eritrea, Somalia, and Sudan ended or downgraded their relations with the Islamic Republic in 2016. Since the end of Rouhani's presidency and the beginning of Ebrahim Raisi's presidency (2021-present), Iran has attempted to maintain a foothold or presence in the Horn of Africa by providing military assistance to Ethiopia during the Tigray War. Based on Persian and English sources, this paper will examine Tehran's calculus for offering military assistance to Ethiopia, an authoritarian state in Africa, and how this assistance compares with that extended to its neighbors, whether they are the authoritarian state of Syria or non-/quasi-state actors elsewhere in the Middle East. The paper will also explore Addis Ababa's reasons for requesting and/or accepting this assistance and its approaches to balancing it with that from Iran's regional rivals, including Israel, Turkey, and the UAE.

3. Fighting or compromising? The ambivalent approach of Egypt to the Libyan chaos

Alessia Melcangi (Sapienza University of Rome)

The Libyan crisis represents a significant challenge to Egypt's domestic stability and political legitimacy from an economic, geopolitical and security perspective. In this context Egypt has showed a certain degree of conflict response's adaptability. In fact, during the years, Egypt's strategy on Libya has changed from a very active spoiler role to a more moderate and diplomatic one. In 2014, with the failure of the post al-Qaddafi political process, Egypt bet on the military support to the eastern-based Libyan National Army's chief, General Khalifa Haftar, who tried to seize the power manu military. Clearly, Egypt saw this scenario through the lens of securitization, imposed by its security apparatus. However, Cairo changed this stance after the 2020 cease-fire in order to appear as the most compromise-seeking actor among the Libyan general's backers and to re-consolidate its role as geopolitical pivot of the area. Thus, the securitarian approach remains the same while, in a moment of maximum pressure, the Egyptian tactic evolved from the military security field to a diplomatic security one. How long can Egypt support this strategy, considering the developments on the ground in Libya, the relevant Egyptian interests in the country as well as the domestic economic and social crisis? And which are the degrees of flexibility of this authoritarian military regime vis-à-vis the current regional and international challenges?

4. Chaotic aid in crisis contexts: Qatar and the UAE in Syria

Altea Pericoli (Catholic University of Milan)

The nature of humanitarian crises is changing, with man-made shocks in urban areas against civilian populations, armed conflicts, and natural disasters, which particularly affect rural areas and vulnerable communities. Crises are frequently protracted, and humanitarian and development actors operate in the same contexts to respond to the needs and challenges. Observing the current scenario, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region results in one of the most affected areas where post-conflict and peacebuilding interventions are required and where international and regional actors (bilateral and multilateral organisations) intervene following different approaches and strategies. Considering the limited potential of humanitarian intervention to resolve political

crises, this study supports the idea that humanitarian and development interventions, implemented with a “chaotic” and disorganized approach by external actors, might contribute to enhancing the level of crisis, especially in fragmented and fragile contexts. In this regard, the analysis will focus on a specific case study. Observing the humanitarian and development interventions of Qatar and the UAE in Syria, the aim is to underline two main aspects. First of all, policies of aid implemented by these Gulf States reflect their sectarian approach to the conflict and the fragmentation of the opposition, responding to political interests instead of humanitarian and beneficiaries' needs. Consequently, their political interests in this country have driven them to finance reconstruction and distribute aid in a “chaotic” way, without a comprehensive plan that includes all parts of the Syrian population. In this complicated scenario, Qatar and the UEA, through their assistance, follow the two parallel lines of the rebuilding action. On one side, Qatar operates as an important humanitarian actor following its regional interests and, at the same time, financing interventions and programs in the UN and international framework. The analysis of projects financed shows significant evidence from the geographical allocation of aid and types of projects financed: Qatari policy of aid does not follow the regime approach to reconstruction which results, in some cases, a tool for consolidating sovereignty and the regime’s control in the country. On the other side, the UAE’s strategy of aid in Syria maintains a double approach: Emirates support multilateral channels through an international framework with the UN agencies, such as the Syrian Humanitarian Response Plan and the

Syria Recovery Trust Fund but, at the same time, they finance the Syrian Government in particular for emergency support in southern Syria starting from 2018. Against this background, aid implemented on parallel lines represents a decentralised response to post- conflict reconstruction in a system that aims to re-establish a centralised power. The research aims to demonstrate that this “chaotic” approach to conflict responses and non-inclusive reconstruction, in the long term, will contribute to exacerbating crisis, undermining the social cohesion among different actors.

5. Contextualizing the engagement strategies of democratic and less-than-democratic states in conflicts in Libya, Sudan, and Ethiopia

Brendon Cannon (Khalifa University) & Federico Donelli (University of Genoa)

Different normative paradigms have been employed to explain the actions of states in conflicts in which they are only indirect participants. Authoritarian states, for example, are theorized to favor military and paramilitary figures and support their leadership roles in conflict scenarios (Hill 2019). Democratic states, on the other hand, act in ways that support technocrats and democrats (Valbjørn 2019). Nevertheless, the reality on the ground does not always reflect this logic. Multiple extra-regional states, for example, have attempted to affect outcomes in their favor in the internal conflicts that have raged in Sudan, Libya, and Ethiopia. Though each state has adopted diverse methods and means as suited to their unique capabilities, it is possible to discern traits that distinguish the approach taken by democracies such as France, the UK and the US from those taken by less-than-democratic or authoritarian states such as Russia, China, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. This theory-driven research aims to answer the questions surrounding the how and under what conditions that different regime types operate in internal conflict settings to affect outcomes.