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POLICY BRIEF

# NAVIGATING THE POLYCRISIS: MENA at a Crucial Crossroads



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*The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is at a critical juncture, facing an intricate polycrisis defined by interlinked challenges including energy insecurity, water scarcity, migration, conflict, and socio-political fragmentation. These crises are not isolated; their interconnectedness amplifies their impact, creating a destabilizing feedback loop that hinders sustainable development and peacebuilding efforts. This paper explores the concept of polycrisis through the lens of Edgar Morin's complexity theory, examining how multiple crises in MENA converge and intensify one another. Key themes include the region's energy dilemma amid global transitions, the strategic implications of acute water scarcity, climate-induced migration, and the persistent conflicts that fragment regional governance.*

*The analysis highlights the compounded effects of these challenges on the region's economic stability, environmental sustainability, and geopolitical dynamics. The role of non-state actors, external powers, and regional institutions is critically assessed, emphasizing the importance of integrated, cooperative approaches in addressing the polycrisis. The paper concludes by advocating for renewed regional collaboration, particularly through frameworks such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and by strategic adaptation to external geopolitical shifts. By acknowledging the interdependencies of MENA's crises, this study underscores the urgency of comprehensive, multilateral responses to secure the region's future, amid escalating global and regional pressures.*

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## Introduction

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is experiencing a profound polycrisis of interlinked challenges—energy insecurity, water scarcity, conflict, migration, and socio-political fragmentation—that combine to destabilize the region. These crises are not isolated but are mutually reinforcing, creating a volatile environment that complicates efforts to build sustainable development and regional peace. The region’s prospects are shaped by both historical legacies and contemporary global dynamics. The real challenge for MENA lies not just in addressing these individual crises, but in managing their interdependencies. The polycrisis in MENA thus requires a comprehensive approach that recognizes the interconnectedness of its issues, the evolving role of external powers, and the critical need for regional cooperation.

## What is the MENA Polycrisis?

A polycrisis refers to a situation in which multiple crises, often unrelated at first glance, converge and intensify each other. Edgar Morin, the French philosopher and sociologist, explored the concept of polycrisis through his broader framework of complexity, particularly in works such as “Terre-Patrie”. A polycrisis, as Morin described, arises from the interconnected nature of multiple crises—economic instability, environmental degradation, political conflicts, and social upheavals—which interact in ways that amplify their collective impact. These crises are not isolated but are part of a complex system, in which feedback loops and interdependencies create non-linear and unpredictable outcomes.

Morin’s concept of complexity emphasizes that reality cannot be understood through fragmented or reductionist thinking. Instead, complexity requires an holistic approach that integrates diverse disciplines, perspectives, and dimensions to address the systemic nature of problems. This makes the polycrisis more than the sum of its parts, as each individual crisis not only contributes to, but also transforms, the others, necessitating integrated, ethical, and adaptive responses to navigate the uncertainty and interdependence of the modern world. In MENA, these include long-standing political conflicts, the strategic significance of energy resources, rising water scarcity, the pressures of migration, and the impact of climate change. Each of these crises is complex in its own right, but their interconnected nature creates a compound effect that threatens the stability and development prospects of the region.

## The Energy Dilemma: Resource Wealth and Geopolitical Tensions

MENA has long been vital to global energy security. It is home to some of the world’s largest oil and natural gas reserves. Yet, the abundance of energy resources has paradoxically contributed to geopolitical instability and underdevelopment in many countries. The region’s energy wealth has often fueled internal and external conflicts, as regional powers vie for control of these vital resources. Meanwhile, the global energy transition away from fossil fuels presents a unique challenge for the region’s oil-dependent economies.

## Oil, Gas, and Geopolitical Competition

The competition over energy resources in MENA is as old as the region itself. From the discovery of oil in the early twentieth century to the rise of OPEC (Organization of the

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Petroleum Exporting Countries) in the 1960s, control over oil production and pricing has been a source of power for both local regimes and global powers. However, this resource wealth has also been a source of vulnerability. The Gulf Wars, the conflict in Syria, and the competition over energy pipelines have all been, at least in part, driven by the region's immense energy resources. In the case of the 2003 United States-led invasion of Iraq, for example, energy interests played a significant role in the geopolitics that led to the war, with U.S. strategic interests in ensuring access to Middle Eastern oil and natural gas playing a crucial role in shaping foreign policy.

Furthermore, the rise of shale oil and the global push for renewable energy have placed MENA's oil-rich countries in a precarious position. As the world transitions to cleaner energy sources, countries including Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar must balance their economic reliance on oil exports with the need for diversification and modernization. The Saudi Vision 2030, for instance, aims to reduce the kingdom's dependence on oil, but it faces significant obstacles in shifting its economy towards non-oil sectors, such as technology and tourism.

## Energy Transition and Sustainability

The energy transition, driven by the need to mitigate climate change, poses both an opportunity and a challenge for MENA. On one hand, the region has the potential to become a leader in renewable-energy production, with abundant solar and wind resources. Countries including Egypt, Morocco, and the UAE have already made significant investments in renewable energy, with large-scale solar projects such as the Benban solar park, one of the largest in the world, the Noor Ouarzazate Solar Complex, and the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Solar Park. These initiatives signal the potential for MENA to diversify its energy portfolio and reduce its carbon footprint.

However, this transition is not without its challenges. The shift away from fossil fuels threatens to undermine the region's economic model, which has been heavily reliant on oil and gas revenues. Additionally, countries including Algeria, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq face internal resistance to energy reforms, as their economies remain heavily dependent on oil exports. The risk of a 'stranded-asset' scenario, in which oil and gas reserves become increasingly worthless, looms large for these economies, especially as global investment shifts away from fossil fuels.

## Water Scarcity: A Growing Crisis

Water scarcity is perhaps the most urgent and strategic challenge facing MENA. The region is already one of the most water-scarce in the world, with over 60% of the region's population living in countries facing severe water stress. The World Bank's latest Climate Change Development Reports (CCDR) underscore the magnitude of the water crisis, highlighting that by 2030, MENA will face a per-capita water shortage of over 50% below the global average. The situation is further exacerbated by the impacts of climate change, including more frequent and intense droughts, as well as the depletion of aquifers.

## Transboundary Water Conflicts

Many of MENA's water resources are shared between multiple countries, creating opportunities for cooperation but also increasing the potential for conflict. The Nile Basin, which involves Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia, is governed by one of the most contentious water-sharing arrangements in the world. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD),

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built by Ethiopia on the Blue Nile, has become a flashpoint in relations between Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt. Egypt, which relies on the Nile for nearly 95% of its water supply, has voiced concerns that the dam will reduce its share of water, potentially exacerbating the country's water scarcity.

Similarly, the Tigris-Euphrates Basin, which spans Turkey, Syria, and Iraq, is a source of tension as upstream countries such as Turkey build dams, potentially limiting water flow downstream. These conflicts over shared water resources highlight the region's vulnerability to environmental pressures, and the potential for water scarcity to fuel political and diplomatic crises.

## Desalination and Technological Solutions

Given the region's natural water scarcity, many MENA countries have turned to desalination technology to meet their water needs. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait are among the world's largest producers of desalinated water, relying on it to provide fresh water to their populations. While desalination offers a temporary solution, it is not without its drawbacks. Desalinated water is expensive to produce, and the process generates large quantities of brine, which can harm marine ecosystems. Moreover, the energy-intensive nature of desalination further strains the region's energy resources, particularly in countries that rely heavily on fossil fuels.

## Migration: A Region on the Move

MENA has long been both a source and a destination for migration. The region's political, economic, and environmental challenges have propelled millions to seek refuge either within its borders or beyond. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), over 40% of the world's refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) are in MENA. Conflict, climate change, and economic difficulties are key drivers of this migration, transforming the region into one with one of the world's most dynamic population flows.

## Climate-Induced Migration

Environmental degradation is one of the most significant drivers of migration in MENA. The region's vulnerability to climate change exacerbates water scarcity, desertification, and rising sea levels, which displace rural communities. In countries such as Syria, prolonged droughts between 2006 and 2010 forced hundreds of thousands of farmers off their land. In Syria, these environmental factors were compounded by socio-political tensions, contributing to the outbreak of the civil war in 2011. As farmers fled to urban centers, the overcrowding and lack of resources created economic pressure that exacerbated existing political discontent, leading to the protests that ignited the Syrian conflict.

Additionally, rising sea levels threaten coastal areas in countries including Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco, further displacing vulnerable populations. The loss of fertile agricultural land to desertification, particularly in places such as southern Algeria and Tunisia, will drive migration both internally and to neighboring countries. This will have profound implications for social stability, as displaced populations put pressure on already strained infrastructure and services.

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## Youth Unemployment and the Brain Drain

MENA's youthful population—over 60% of the region's total is aged under 30—creates both a demographic dividend and a challenge. Despite the promise of a vibrant workforce, MENA struggles with some of the highest youth unemployment rates globally, often exceeding 25%. Economic opportunities are scarce, and educational systems do not always match market needs, leading to frustration and disillusionment among young people. This disillusionment often drives skilled individuals to seek opportunities abroad, leading to a significant 'brain drain' from the region. This migration undermines the region's economic potential, and also exacerbates social inequalities as the educated elite leave for better prospects elsewhere.

Countries including Lebanon, Syria, and Tunisia have seen their best and brightest move to Europe, North America, and the Gulf. This migration of skilled labor is particularly problematic in a region that already faces substantial gaps in human-capital development. The loss of these young professionals further undermines the region's long-term prospects for economic diversification and modernization.

## Conflict and Geopolitical Fragmentation

Conflict remains the defining feature of MENA's polycrisis. Wars in Syria, Yemen, Libya, and the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict have led to massive human suffering, deepened sectarian and political divides, and created regional instability. These protracted conflicts, coupled with the rise of non-state actors, have contributed to a persistent state of flux in the region, complicating efforts to address the more systemic issues that contribute to the polycrisis.

## Protracted Conflicts and Their Impact

The Syrian Civil War, which began in 2011, is perhaps the most emblematic example of the complex nature of MENA's crises. Initially sparked by domestic political grievances, the conflict quickly morphed into a multi-front war, involving regional and international powers, and non-state actors. The war has led to over half a million deaths and has displaced millions of people, both internally and across borders. The involvement of regional powers including Iran, Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, as well as the intervention of global powers including Russia and the U.S., has prolonged the conflict and made resolving it more difficult. The war's environmental impact has also been severe, with cities and infrastructure destroyed, water resources depleted, and agricultural production devastated.

In Yemen, where a conflict has raged since 2014, the humanitarian crisis is similarly catastrophic. The war has displaced over four million people and caused widespread famine in a country that was already one of the poorest in the region. The conflict, which pits Houthi rebels against the internationally recognized government supported by a Saudi-led coalition, has led to severe water shortages and food insecurity. The ongoing instability in Yemen underscores the interconnectedness of MENA's challenges: political fragmentation, regional power struggles, climate change, and humanitarian needs all contribute to the crisis.

Libya's civil war, which began after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, triggered by yet more ill-advised Western—mainly European—meddling, then outright military intervention under a humanitarian protection guise, has similarly destabilized the country, leading to the

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emergence of rival militias, chaotic external interventions, and a prolonged humanitarian crisis. The fragmentation of the state has made it difficult to address critical issues such as rebuilding of infrastructure, water access, and migration control. The international community has struggled to facilitate a lasting peace process in Libya, with political negotiations often stymied by entrenched interests and external influences.

## The Role of Non-State Actors

The rise of non-state actors such as ISIS and al-Qaeda has added a further layer of complexity to MENA's crises. These groups exploit political instability and weak governance structures to carve out territories, often using violence and terror to achieve their goals. In Syria and Iraq, ISIS's brutal campaign for a caliphate exacerbated sectarian tensions, leading to millions of deaths and the destruction of cities such as Mosul and Raqqa. The presence of such groups in regions already ravaged by conflict further complicates the peacebuilding process, as their influence often transcends national borders, destabilizing entire regions.

In addition to extremist groups, MENA has also seen the rise of militias and paramilitary forces, often funded or supported by external powers. These groups play significant roles in conflicts including those in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, where they challenge state authority and contribute to the breakdown of law and order. The proliferation of armed groups has undermined state sovereignty and fostered a culture of insecurity that makes it difficult to address the region's socio-economic issues.

## Regional Cooperation: The Path Forward?

The polycrisis in MENA requires a multi-pronged approach that recognizes the interdependence of the region's challenges and the need for comprehensive solutions. While the region's fragmented political landscape poses significant obstacles to cooperation, there have been efforts in recent years to build regional partnerships and address collective challenges.

## The Role of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), comprising Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman, has played a significant role in regional politics, particularly in relation to economic cooperation and security. While the GCC has often been divided over issues such as the blockade of Qatar, and differing approaches to Yemen, it remains an important player in the region. The Gulf states have invested heavily in renewable energy, technological development, and economic diversification, signaling a desire to reduce their reliance on oil and gas. While the GCC's internal rifts and its delicate regional dynamics in relation to Iran often complicate efforts to present a unified front on critical issues such as climate change, conflict resolution, and migration, it offers nevertheless a viable platform—the only real one in MENA today—for engagement in conflict resolution.

## The Arab League and Pan-Arab Cooperation

The Arab League, comprising 22 MENA countries, has historically struggled to achieve effective regional integration because of political divisions, differing national interests, and the impact of foreign intervention. While it remains a forum for dialogue and conflict mediation, its weak governance system has limited its ability to implement meaningful

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collective action because of the political fragmentation within the region and the influence of external powers. In recent years, however, there have been signs of renewed cooperation, particularly with efforts to address the Syrian conflict and facilitate peace talks in Yemen.

## External Powers and the MENA Geopolitical Landscape

The role of external powers in the MENA polycrisis cannot be overstated. The United States, Russia, China, and the European Union all have significant interests in the region, shaping geopolitical dynamics. The U.S. has historically been a dominant player in MENA, with security alliances and oil interests in the Gulf. However, in recent years, the U.S. has reduced its military presence in the Mediterranean region and has sought to shift its focus to the Indo-Pacific, creating a vacuum that Russia and China have sought to fill. Russia's involvement in Syria and its strategic partnerships with Iran and Turkey have brought it back as a key player in the region's conflicts, taking on the role once played by the USSR. Meanwhile, through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) China has deepened its economic ties with MENA countries, with investments in infrastructure and trade. The EU—while considerably weakened in recent years—has also maintained strong relationships with MENA, particularly in terms of trade, security, and migration.

While these external powers bring resources and influence, their involvement often exacerbates the region's crises. Foreign interventions can fuel proxy wars, prolong conflicts, and create dependencies that undermine local governance and stability. The shifting alliances and competition between external powers complicate efforts to find common ground on key issues, from climate change to conflict resolution.

## Conclusion: Where to go From Here?

The polycrisis in MENA presents a monumental challenge to the region, requiring urgent attention from both local governments and the international community. To navigate the interconnected crises of energy insecurity, water scarcity, conflict, migration, and environmental degradation, MENA countries must adopt a more-integrated approach to regional cooperation. This includes strengthening institutions that can address collective challenges, such as the Arab League, the GCC, and transnational environmental bodies. Moreover, MENA states must diversify their economies, prioritize climate resilience, and improve governance structures, in order to ensure long-term stability and prosperity.

External powers also have a responsibility to support MENA's development without exacerbating existing tensions. By fostering partnerships that focus on sustainable development, climate adaptation, and conflict resolution, the international community can help the region move beyond its current polycrisis toward a more stable and prosperous future.

The road ahead is fraught with challenges, but is not without hope. Through concerted efforts at regional cooperation, economic diversification, and political reform, MENA can begin to address the root causes of its polycrisis, and to create a more sustainable future for its people.



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