**Neighborhood South Policy Seminar**

Panel: **“What is the fate of democracy and peace in the MENA region?”**

Date: November 30, 2020

Time: 16:00 Beirut Time

**Concept note**

Summary

In light of the global COVID-19 pandemic, MAJALAT continues the work on the EU-neighborhood dialogue despite the restrictions on people’s movement, using online communication tools. Accordingly, the Southern Neighborhood Policy Seminar is taking place online on November 30 and December 1 2020. The second public panel entitled “What is the fate of democracy and peace in the MENA region?” will offer a space for reflection on the recent wave of Arab normalization with Israel, the heated geopolitical conflicts, and the crackdown on freedoms and civic spaces.

Background & Context

**Normalization deals**

In recent months, the region has witnessed dramatic political shifts in terms of Arab states’ official position towards, and relations with, Israel. The first country to sign a peace deal was the United Arab Emirates, followed by Bahrain and Sudan. The normalization wave has arguably damaged the last viable source of leverage towards Israel in any peace negotiations. Palestinians struggling for freedom and statehood have been let down by their Arab neighbors, a disappointment that is not novel to them.

Before the normalization wave came “the deal of the century,” which was the Trump administration’s failed attempt at striking an Arab-Israeli peace treaty that was clearly biased towards Israeli and U.S. interests. This is not to forget that meanwhile, Israel has continued to demolish Palestinian hopes in the West Bank, and has only temporarily frozen its plans to start officially annexing large parts of the area. Benjamin Netanyahu has been an outright anti-Arab prime minister, and is Donald Trump’s close friend and ally.

What does the Arab approval of Israel despite the occupation and these expansionist policies mean for the future of a so-called “Arab-Israeli” conflict? More importantly, what does it mean for Palestinians and their power in negotiations? In all reason, one might predict that any peace negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis are less likely after these developments, especially as Israeli policies make a two-state solution increasingly unlikely.

**Geopolitical conflicts:**

On the geopolitical level, the region has seen a continuation of long military conflict, such as in Syria, Libya, and Yemen. International and regional forces have been invested in these conflicts, with continuing proxy warfare between gulf countries and Iran, rising tensions between France and Turkey, escalated by the controversy around Macron’s attitude towards Islam.

The network of enmities and interests in the region is highly complicated, and this distracts from social conflicts that exist within countries.

**People’s Movements & Democracy**

Indeed, the region has been also scene to uprisings and social movements in the last two years, from Sudan, to Algeria, to Lebanon and Iraq. Common among these movements was a popular rejection of cronyism, authoritarianism, weak public services and cycles of poverty and unemployment. This sentiment was common across class, identity, geography, and ideology.

On the other hand, there is a widely-held observation that is widely held among the region’s actiivists that the civic space has been shrinking, and states have been more heavy handed in their treatment of dissent. Lebanon became infamous for the disproportional violence against protesters, and the numerous arrests with political motives, some leading to unfair trial before the military tribunal. Egypt has maintained a securitized approach towards civil society, and has recently arrested colleagues from the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights after they published knowledge around unfair executions and other human rights violations. The colleagues are facing charges of terrorism, and could face long prison sentences.

Questions for the panel

* Is normalization a step towards piece or an obstacle to it? And how?
* What are the main implications of normalization on Palestinians and their neighbors, and on the fate of the two-state solution?
* What role should the EU have to promote peace and development in Palestine and the region?
* What is expected from civil society?
* What are the major conflicts in which international actors (EU, US) and regional actors (Iran, Turkey, Gulf, Israel) are involved? What is their influence on peace, justice and progress in the region?
* What changes do you expect with the change in the U.S. administration?
* Are global actors, and specifically the EU, supportive of people’s movements in the region?
* How can they be more responsive to people’s aspirations?
* How do you classify the priorities of the EU in the MENA region (Palestine, Iran, Syria, Libya)
* Does the EU’s “Soft Power” still work?
* How can this role could be more meaningful in supporting development and peace?
* How do you assess the civic/democratic space in the region today? Is it shrinking? And if so, for what reasons?
* Has the EU and other global actors played a positive role against repression of rights and freedoms?
* How can the EU be supportive of civic and political rights in the southern neighborhood?