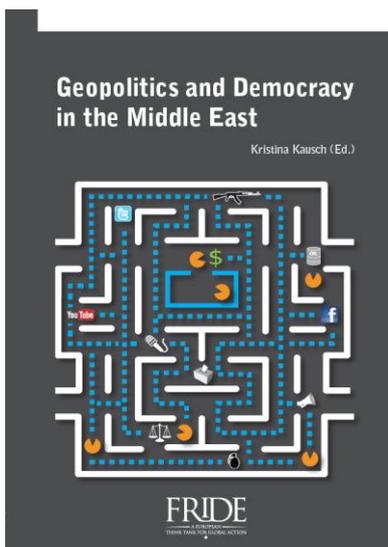


PRESS RELEASE

FRIDE releases new book

Geopolitics and Democracy in the Middle East

- *In 4 years, the MENA region has gone from great hopes of democratisation to a spiral of fragmentation, insecurity and fragility.*
- *Major players' focus on their geopolitical interests have been detrimental to the region's democratisation and political reform prospects*
- *Policy-makers seeking to stabilise the Middle East need to rethink their strategies to make support for democracy part of both short- and long-term policies.*



Madrid-Brussels, 2 July 2015 - The Middle East and North Africa is undergoing a profound geopolitical reconfiguration. Since the 2011 Arab spring, the region has transitioned from great hopes for democratisation towards a spiral of violence, fragmentation and fragility. **“Violent conflict rages in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen, and Lebanon teeters on the brink of renewed hostilities. With the exception of Tunisia – where democratic transition has advanced – and countries engulfed in internecine conflict, authoritarian rule in the region has been preserved or restored”**, says Kristina Kausch, head of the FRIDE Middle East and North Africa programme and editor of the volume **“Geopolitics and democracy in the Middle East”** (FRIDE, July 2015).

Competition for power and influence in the Arab world increasingly supersedes calls for political reform. In particular, those states that claim to support the development of democracy face a number of seemingly irreconcilable dilemmas as they simultaneously try to further their geopolitical interests.

The book maps the geopolitical profiles and activities of six key regional powers (Egypt, Iran, Israel, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey) and seven influential external actors (China, the European Union, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States), and assesses how the pursuit of their interests is affecting the prospects for democracy across the Middle East.

The strategies of some states as they pursue security and economic goals have often remained constant, as in the cases of France, Germany, the UK and China. But others, like Turkey and Russia, have shifted some of their tactics following the uprisings with the aim of increasing

their geopolitical influence. **“The results of both long-standing strategies and new tactics have for the main part not been positive, because the focus on security and economic benefits at the expense of reform has contributed either to sustaining autocratic regimes or, ironically, to increasing instability across the Middle East”**, says Lina Khatib in the book’s concluding chapter.

The West increasingly needs to appease regional players on a rapidly expanding number of trans-national security dossiers, and ensuring partners’ collaboration often comes at the price of turning a blind eye to their domestic affairs. This becomes clear in the firm domestic authoritarian grip of key regional power regimes such as Algeria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, or Iran. **“In many respects, support to local democracy has become a ‘collateral damage’ to regional realignments, multilateral initiatives and *ad hoc* coalitions”**, says Kausch.

Transitions to democracy require a stable environment to exist before democratic processes can take off. In Iraq and Libya, a key mistake was that the interventions in happened without a long-term plan for stabilising the countries following regime change. Another was that the intervening foreign actors paid inadequate attention to the role of good governance in preventing social and political grievances.

While **“policy-makers need to think about the long-term implications of the lack of good governance, because this absence plants the seed of future instability that emerges from citizen grievances”**, democratic Western countries and non-democratic countries alike have ended up seeking **“to stabilise the authoritarian status quo in the Middle East for the sake of economic benefit”** and to maintain security interests. But this approach can easily backfire.

The Arab uprisings were the product of decades of oppression in the region. Therefore, even if autocracies appear to be stable, they harbour simmering instability beneath the surface that will eventually erupt. **“Policy-makers in the West and elsewhere must consider the long-term implications of their economic and security policies, because ignoring human rights and planting the seeds of grievances means that those policies are likely to eventually work against their geopolitical interests. Ultimately, although the balance between interests and values is tough to achieve, it is not impossible and should be the guiding light for policy-makers in the Middle East and outside”**, the book concludes.

The full version of the book is available [here](#)

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