An Introduction to Local Governance

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Overview

Insecurity in the MENA region has increased dramatically since the 2011 uprisings. Participants of the 2017 Mediterranean Discourse on Regional Security recognised the necessity for innovative, “out of the box” thinking that questions orthodox approaches and proposes new, inclusive solutions to acute regional insecurity.

Part of this solution is recognising local governments across the MENA region as significant stakeholders in security partnerships. Former approaches to local empowerment have remained largely ineffective, rooted in top-down and European perspectives. How can we move towards a new understanding of insecurity in the MENA countries?

The following is intended to provide a useful overview and several critical guiding questions that aim to inspire participants in the preparation of their presentations, and further aim to spur constructive discussions.

This introduction builds upon the theoretical and empirical framework introduced by the literature review on Local Governance, now accessible via the conference LibGuide.

1. Shareholding: Who Are Security Stakeholders?
The Mediterranean Discourse on Regional Security is driven by a focus on newfound stakeholders, including youth and local governments. Different stakeholders identify different security threats and ascribe importance to some stakeholders over others.

For instance, some approaches to solving security threats empower some actors over others. Top-down approaches – enforced by non-local or non-national stakeholders – often exclude minorities and disenfranchised groups, particularly local governments and youth.

Put simply, security threats are often shared. However, they are experienced and dealt with differently by the various stakeholders involved. Sometimes, the solution to one perceived security threat for one group is the same source of insecurity for another.

Conference participants should consider the relevance of security stakeholders and move towards non-mainstream understandings that value and seek to explain bottom-up security threats and stakeholders. Determining the dynamics of security shareholding on a local, national and regional level will facilitate discussions about shared responses to common threats.

2. Local Governance: Contested Definitions

Governments, institutions and academics approach the concept of local governance in a variety of different ways.

The United Nations Development Programme’s guides to local governance in fragile settings identify local governance as a combination of institutions, systems and processes, as opposed to just an institution.

We should ask whether this approach disenfranchises non-state groups, especially if local governance is valued by its transparency, endogeneity and incrementality in the context of overall development. Should local governance be considered as more than simply local administration?

Other groups define local government as simply the localised system of power-sharing. Namely, recent scholarship on governance in rebel-held areas in militarised settings, such as Syria and Libya, identify the relevance of concepts like legitimacy, capacity and authority in defining local governance.

Does this approach take into account long-term development amidst its focus on short-term security guarantees? And does this approach take into the vital concept of shared responsibility?

Thus, conference participants are urged to consider carefully the definitions utilised, and to consider the implications of traditional approaches to the role local government.

3. Proactivity and Progress

As a result of the variety of approaches to local governance, the assessment of its effectiveness in security guarantees and partnerships is also contested.

It is vital to note the difference between Euro-centric and MENA-centric judgments of progress and proactivity. We must recognise recent history and must recognise the legacies of imposed
European perspectives of progress (the so-called “standard of civilisation”) relating to self-government.

Should conference participants seek to address the validity of European perspectives on MENA security? And how can we develop a framework for assessing the validity of approaches to security? More importantly: should we?

The aforementioned triad of capacity, authority and legitimacy is often mobilised to assess the success of local government in security partnerships. However, recent scholarship is lacking the tools to assess the success of the security partnerships themselves, down to their decision-making processes.

Conference participants may wish to consider commenting upon dominant decision-making mechanisms influencing the composition of regional security partnerships. Does the realisation of the concept of shared responsibility necessitate an overhaul of the current status quo?

Concluding Remarks and Further Guidance

The literature review on this topic contains a helpful summary of definitions, recent literature and selected policy recommendations.

Figuratively speaking, the above content is the tip of the iceberg. There are myriad more critical approaches to local governance and conference participants should seek to strive towards innovative, out-of-the-box thinking and perspectives on the role of local governance in comprehensive security partnerships.