CYBER DIPLOMACY THEORY AND PRACTICE IN THE MENA REGION – CASE STUDY ON ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

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Abstract: Cyber Diplomacy is an emerging practice and field of study related to coordination and collective action on the issues arising from digitalization in society, such as cyber crime or cyber warfare. It is not just the province of major powers, but of all countries trying to cope with the challenges of digitalization, to maximize benefits and to advance their interests in the international arena. This paper focuses on the MENA region, a heterogeneous collection of countries that represent a particularly active nexus of geopolitics and Great Power competition. The article underscores the importance of digitalization to the region, describes a model for understanding the region's Cyber Diplomacy practices and presents a case study on Artificial Intelligence. It represents a contribution to the scholarship on the region's economic and security dynamics, as well as the field of Cyber Diplomacy studies in itself.
Keywords: MENA region, Great Power competition, Digitalization, Security, Economic development plans, Integration initiatives.

INTRODUCTION

The Middle East – North Africa (MENA) region covers 15 million square kilometers and contains 6% of the world's population, equivalent to the EU. It hosts not only vast resource wealth such as in fossil fuels, and commands a strategic position atop or adjacent to important trade routes. The MENA region is, by any definition, incredibly diverse, with states of different sizes, level of development, level of stability, geopolitical orientation and interests. The grouping is therefore challenging to work with but ultimately useful as a designator for a vast and interconnected geopolitical region whose trials and crises generate significant effect worldwide and where Great Powers engage in constant competition and often destabilizing intervention in pursuit of their interests. This paper is an important entry into the analysis of the region's potential and practice of Cyber Diplomacy, articulating why the countries in the region are developing sophisticated approaches and agendas to Cyber Diplomacy, what their priorities are and using Artificial Intelligence as a relevant case study for emerging digital technology and its Cyber Diplomacy dimensions in the region as shown by four states. The digitalization of the MENA region and its consequences are an important area of study, since it can lead to systemic change with either positive or negative results and externalities (as the social media-enabled Arab Spring proved). MENA region studies will benefit from such approaches, especially from the perspective of Cyber Diplomacy, on which regional scholarship is lacking.

CYBER DIPLOMACY AND THE MENA REGION

Georgescu et al. (2019) defined Cyber Diplomacy as an emerging practice and area of study concerned with the transborder interaction of various stakeholders, especially

states, in order to address the consequences of comprehensive digitalization in a context of competition, cooperation and systemic change. This is a maximalist view that is well suited to the MENA region, which engages in subtle exchanges, partnerships and forms of competition and cooperation beyond the formal models that traditional diplomacy entails. In this perspective, Cyber Diplomacy is not just a branch of traditional diplomacy, similar to Public Diplomacy or Military Diplomacy, but an overlapping domain that has as its practitioners also companies, experts, civil society groups and others, especially in the context of the rich ecosystem of the digital domain. In the MENA region, we can also add the interactions between various groups of people, whether clans or royal lineages, informal networks, complex quasi-state enterprises and more, with varying levels of interaction and direction taking from formal authorities.

Cyber Diplomacy concerns itself with the need for actors to cooperate, exchange views, coordinate collective action, compete with and confront eachother in a transborder setting with regards to the consequences of the obiquitous digitalization that we are undergoing in social, economic, security and political life. This digitalization suffers fits and starts, it advances faster in some domains and in some countries than in others, and it affects people/entities differently, but its transformation influence is undeniable in the long run. The MENA countries are no exception, as they struggle to gain the benefits of digitalization while moderating the negative consequences. The challenges that Cyber Diplomacy addresses include cyber crime, cyber warfare, hybrid war, the regulation of emerging technology and consumer welfare, strategic crossborder projects, technical standards and more. All of these also apply to the MENA region, in various ways.

MENA countries are engaged in all facets of Cyber Diplomacy, with the entire roster of actors identified by Georgescu et al (2019), depending on state priorities, institutional capacity and resources – they engage with other countries, with international organizations, with groups of countries, but also with companies and civil society groups. They also selectively engage with a wide array of strategic coordination and integration initiatives, both Western and non-Western, the latter including the Belt and Road Initiative with its Digital Silk Road and Belt and Road Spatial Information Corridor (Jason, 2023), with the BRICS+ Group, with the G7 and G20, the EU Global Gateway and others that will appear in time (Caba-Maria et al., 2020).

The Arab Spring and its facilitation by social media communication and organization, as well as its challenges to traditional and institutional sources of information and of authority, was a wake-up call to the region that digitalization is happening whether its leaders want to or not, and the systemic changes it promotes can lead to unanticipated consequences. Regional leaders crave stability and predictability to pursue developmentalist agendas, but digitalization offers the prospect not just of empowering legitimate or illegitimate dissent, and enabling organic patterns of protest and civil disobedience, but also a tool for potential adversaries to exploit pre-existing and serious cleavages in society to destabilize them. This can lead into elements of „digital authoritarianism" as the West terms it, with non-democratic regimes utilizing digital technology and partnerships abroad, including with Western entities such as companies and „cyber mercenaries" (Pitman et al., 2022), to identify and restrict

dissent. For the regimes in question, this is a matter of survival and of national interest, and the often adversarial and tense exchanges with moralistic Western actors who might seek to impose sanctions or constrain their behavior constitute a different, but not less relevant, form of Cyber Diplomacy.

The MENA region countries also use Cyber Diplomacy for the affirmation and pursuit of other national interests as fulli fledged regional and global actors, trying to add their voice to global efforts to regulate potentially dangerous technologies and activities. The region's leaders crave agency and to not become passive elements in the competition strategies of outside powers. The novelty of comprehensive digitalization and transformation through emerging digital technology offers them an opportunity to compete and cooperate on a more level playing field because it is new and contains significant uncertainty, giving ambitious actors higher agency and the prospect of using digitalization as an equalizer with partners and enemies who are bigger, more developed, wealthier, stronger militarily or more high performing. Engaging in Cyber Diplomacy is therefore practical, tactical and strategic.

Lastly, the MENA region suffers from significant internal challenges which digitalization can help address. This includes, on a case by case basis, low levels of formal employment, high levels of social alienation, low state capacity for the provision of public services, negative outcomes in health, education, social development or economic development, low levels of economic complexity and of productivity, low performance and transparency from public institutions and more. We should be wary of treating digitalization as a „silver bullet" that can fix every problem, especially when the roots of the problem are systemic, cultural or political, but it is a fact that many difficulties can be surmounted through digital technologies and transformations, especially when we add AI, blockchain and other technologies. However, this requires safe, sustainable, accessible and affordable digital technologies, technical assistance with implementation, partnerships for cybersecurity and for comprehensive governance frameworks for cyber risks, cyber crime, fiscal aspects and more, as well as the means to develop and pursue national digitalization agendas that can affect global regulation and administration efforts. All of these issues partly or fully requires Cyber Diplomacy to pursue. The more developed MENA states can rightfully express ambitions to become sources of digital innovation, research centers, high level infrastructure nodes for global digital business, and competent cyber warriors, especially in a hybrid threat context. Cyber Diplomacy is required for these aspects as well, especially when it comes to intelligence sharing, military cyber operations, and the combating of hybrid threats (one strong cooperation is that between the US and the UAE and between the US and Bahrain on cyber and military/intelligence issues).

THE CASE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

The MENA countries are interested in cooperation on AI, including through Cyber Diplomacy. Artificial Intelligence is probably the most important emerging digital technology for the region, due to its significant breadth of applications which are of interest to the MENA countries (Al Kamilii, 2017).

Table 1 presents the main use cases of AI technology, resulting from Caba-Maria et al. (2023) and from an analysis of the regional Arab-language press. What is significant is that, regardless of rhetoric, the countries in the region are divided between those who have specific AI applications in mind, in security, military operations, social issues management, health or key industries, and the ones that have the ambition to foster AI in general as an all-purpose driver of the economy, hoping to become also sources of innovation and added value on AI rather than simple users (Al Hurra, 2023). The latter countries include the capital-rich oil states which are trying to diversify away from hydrocarbon export dependency through top-down efforts at economic diversification with simultaneous efforts in numerous domains, with the new technologies included - "As part of the Arab oil-producing countries' preparation for the post-oil era, they have been diversifying their economies for some time, and are betting heavily on artificial intelligence" (Mustafa al Attar apud Badr, 2023).

Table 1. AI applications of interest to the MENA region countries

AI application domains	Explanations and examples
Military	The role of AI in the analysis of large amounts of information to extract usable intelligence, in friend-foe recognition, in weapon systems targeting and, possibly at a later date, in authorizing and launching attacks through autonomous systems. The MENA countries prioritize their militaries as instruments not only of state power in a system in which military conflict has been the historic norm, but also as powerful actors in politics and society. According to each country's available resources, defense industries have been fostered and important contract with preferred strategic partners have been signed. Military products with AI integration will likely follow the same pattern of mixed political-military motivated acquisitions.
Societal stability and control	While this is a contested practice by Western democratic activists and by human rights campaigners, there is no doubt that a major attraction of MENA countries towards AI stems from its potential uses in shaping public opinion, real-time censorship or content modification, the identification of dissidents or of dissident messaging and the identification of suspicious patterns of political speech and organization. The MENA countries are already developing key partnerships either with Western companies, called "cyber mercenaries", or directly with non-Western governments amenable towards providing such solutions, including China.
Non-military security – organized crime and terrorism	Another important domain of application of AI is in the fight against organized crime and terrorism (which, in regional parlance, includes also separatist and rebel forces). AI can be used to identify financing schemes, help anti-money laundering processes, sift through large volumes of surveillance data and run real-time comprehensive physical and electronic surveillance systems.
Economic development	MENA countries see AI as a possible multiplier of smart economic investments that can leapfrog phases of development in order to promote the rapid catch-up growth with more developed countries that they need to absorb their high youth unemployment and create more prosperity. As opposed to the West, where AI stokes fears of mass unemployment, AI will be used in many MENA countries as a catalyst for economic development necessary to increase the formal employment sector and produce not just growth, but also job creation. AI is to be used to improve educational outcomes, on the job training and labor reconversion, as well as general productivity in environments with less skilled human capital.
Public services and social protection	AI is also to be used to increase state capacity in delivering essential service to the public, from healthcare to social assistance, in a targeted way that compensates for institutional weakness, corruption and limited resources.

In a synthetic manner, table 2 presents the main issues related to AI in which the MENA countries are employing Cyber Diplomacy.

Table 2. Cyber Diplomacy on AI in the MENA region

Cyber Diplomacy on AI	Explanations and examples
Accessing strategic applications on AI through state-led partnerships	The MENA countries identify specific applications for AI that they want to pursue for strategic reasons and develop comprehensive partnerships on a bilateral or multilateral basis to access the technologies through transfers, service and product purchase agreements and specialized training. One example is China's Digital Silk Road as part of the Belt and Road Initiative, in which a country like the United Arab Emirates can access significant Chinese capabilities on AI or products based on AI to for security and stability (Chack, 2023). This has been highlighted in the West as an example of proliferation of tools for "digital authoritarianism", and was concretely addressed in the "Seminar on Cyberspace Management for Officials of Countries along the Belt and Road Initiative" which took place in the UAE (Pitman et al., 2022).
Cyber Diplomacy on AI regulation	MENA countries also have an interest in having their voices heard on the regulation of Artificial Intelligence, mainly through global organizations such as the UN and specialized bodies such as the ITU, but also through regional cooperation and discussions formats such as the Gulf Cooperation Council. The entry of regional actors like Saudi Arabia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates into the BRICS Group or of the first two into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization can open new avenues for MENA countries to express their preferences and cooperate with likeminded partners. Global regulation and regulations by critical partners such as the US, the EU or China opens and closes avenues of AI exploitation and ultimately impacts the local regulations, as well as access to AI technology.
Cyber Diplomacy as part of global competition on AI	Many of the MENA countries are pursuing balancing approaches, trying to maintain strong relationships with increasingly antagonistic actors such as the US and China (Chack, 2023). These balancing approaches are found also in the area of AI cooperation and regulation. MENA countries individually decide and pursue interest-based approaches towards the global competition on AI that risks creating mutually exclusive blocs on AI defined by different standards, different companies, different regulations and applications and mutually exclusive commercial and research-development-innovation relationships. One example is that of Bahrain, which is not only one of the few non-NATO, non-ANZAC countries in the US-led Partnership on AI in Defense, but is also the co-chair of the working group on AI regulations in this initiative (Freedberg, 2023).
Cyber Diplomacy for comprehensive AI adoption in economic transformation	The most well-endowed MENA countries are pursuing comprehensive visions of AI-led transformations of their economies away from oil and towards manufacturing, services and research-development-innovations intensive economies. The type of Cyber Diplomacy they pursue involves convincing global companies to invest in creating regional offices in their companies, creating research campuses in the respective countries funded by or in partnership with centers funded by the state, developing data centers and other specialized infrastructure and making available the latest in AI technology for use within the country. There is an important economic diplomacy component to this, especially given the geopolitical clashes in the region.

There is a question as to how the Cyber Diplomacy efforts of MENA countries on AI will develop in the next period. Firstly, leaving aside the most well-endowed MENA countries, we will see increased engagement on AI issues from less developed MENA countries as they enhance state capacity to engage with foreign partners on AI issues, because their capacity to benefit from this type of diplomacy will also increase. We will also witness the breakout in the space of mainstream media of the competition between the China and its partners and the US-EU bloc, which already exists, on AI issues. Both groups will engage with MENA countries to adopt their preferred regulations or regulatory approaches and philosophies on AI. The Western bloc, in particular, will insist on exclusive relationships and condition continued military and intelligence cooperation on the exclusion of Chinese AI products and physical infrastructure from MENA systems. The issue of liberal-democratic values and a conflict with "digital authoritarianism" will become more salient, as countries become willing to sacrifice their economic interest in order to promote their preferred values, encourage compliance and

deter defection (Pitman et al., 2022). The Cyber Diplomacy apparatus of MENA countries will become more and more sophisticated, through several factors:

- Greater awareness of the importance of this issue in a wide variety of domains;
- Greater levels of training for diplomats;
- The steady development of national tech sectors (private and public) and the practice of exchanges with states authorities, giving also access to national expertise on AI that can be leverage in Cyber Diplomatic efforts (including expert participation in key working groups, technical groups, standard setters etc.);
- The validation of examples set by more advanced Cyber Diplomacy actors who may enact specific legislations and strategies on Cyber Diplomacy, may create dedicated departments for Cyber Diplomacy or Emerging Technologies in their Ministries of Foreign Affairs, and actively promote specific education of their diplomats.

In the MENA region, Caba-Maria et al. (2023) have studied the way in which AI issues have been conceptualized in state efforts. A summary of those findings has been assembled in table 3.

Table 3. Analysis of the AI sector in four MENA countries, based on plans, strategies and uses of AI (source: compilation of data from Caba-Maria et al., 2023)

Country	Plans	Strategy	Uses
Saudi Arabia	Plans to achieve "developing big data platforms and analysis tools, in cooperation with the private sector, to integrate artificial intelligence technologies in key areas, including government" (PWC, 2022). El Din (2023) list planned AI involvement in transport, energy, healthcare, finance, education, government and communications. Badr (2023) notes estimates of 135.2 bln dollars of contributions to GDP by 2030. Saudi Arabia will be a top 15 country for AI and top 10 for data on the back also of support for data center development in transborder economic context.	Saudi Vision 2030 since 2016 involves comprehensive AI implementation, with institutional developments such as National Strategy for Data and Artificial Intelligence and the Saudi Data and AI Authority, the National Center for Artificial Intelligence, the National Data Management Office, and the National Information Office (El Gohary et al, 2023). Saudi Arabia wants to be globally competitive on AI and data and has 6 pillars of AI, among which becoming a global hub for data, AI and research, providing infrastructure for AI and talent.	Comprehensive AI implementation across the board - "updating academic curricula to include the study of artificial intelligence technologies and their role in all sectors, as well as the field of health care, by integrating artificial intelligence into medical research, the pharmaceutical industry, and energy." (Badr, 2023) Various projects are already underway in King Abdullah University of Science and Technology.
United Arab Emirates	Development of eight key goals, including the 2071 Centennial goals. Ex: AI in services and data analysis by 2031; first government to comprehensively apply AI in vital sectors; cutting edge AI tools; energy optimization and resource utilization. Quality criteria in the AI strategy focus on secure infrastructure for data use and for managing privacy.	UAE AI Strategy since 2017, aiming for global leadership by 2030. It has 45 objectives, including AI use in water networks, energy networks and transport networks. Strategic objectives include: AI-friendly legislation, ethical and responsible AI adoption (Responsible AI Initiative), AI in training and education, PPP in AI mainstreaming, and 100% increase in AI contribution to GDP by 2031 (Al Saadi, 2024).	The UAE named the first Minister for Artificial Intelligence in 2017, Omar al Olama. Various in-use applications: in healthcare (the Emirates Healthcare Foundation is the first regional institution to use an AI-controlled robot for drawing blood); various security services, including identification through cameras; automation of government services; AI in sustainability an quality of life (Al Saadi, 2024). A PWC report estimates that AI will contribute 14% of GDP by 2030 or 96 bln dollars (PWC, 2022).

Egypt	AI in governmental operations; AI for UN Development Goals; PPP on AI innovation and applications with the private sector and research institutes; Egypt as a regional center for education and talent on AI; use of AI in lifelong learning and workforce reconversion to ensure workforce sustainability and productivity. Egypt is 2nd in Africa in governmental readiness to apply AI after Mauritius (Tortoise Media, 2023).	Egypt has had an AI Strategy since 2021, focusing on advancing UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) in Egypt (a major policy goal for the government) and on enhancing Egypt's potential on AI to ensure leadership among African and Arab countries on AI issues.	The AI Strategy emphasizes preparation of the people for the AI era and wide deployment of AI in a variety of social and economics domains. Egypt also has a strong start-up sector with video company Avidbeam named one of top 20 startups on AI in the world by CIO Review (CIO, 2019). PWC (2022) estimates that AI will contribute 42.7 billion dollars to the Egyptian economy by 2030.
Qatar	Al Saadi (2024) notes that Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Oman will generate 46 bln dollars or 8.2% of GDP by 2030 through AI, with Qatar as lion's share. The market for AI products in Qatar is growing by 17.4% yearly and is expected to reach 56 million dollars by 2026.	National Artificial Intelligence Strategy developed by Qatar Computing Research Institute in 2019 related to National Vision 2030, Cybersecurity Strategy 2014. It has six pillars: talent competition; AI-enhanced jobs; development of knowledge economy; education and attraction of talent; development of data and computing infrastructure; development of ethics framework and AI governance tools (El Gohary et al., 2023).	Efforts by the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology to implemented National Artificial Intelligence Strategy to have comprehensive AI adoption in all fields while generating innovation and a competitive AI sector internally in Qatar, as part of wider effort at economic diversification, but also to support state efforts in digitalization and security.

CONCLUSION

Cyber Diplomacy is an emerging practice and field of study that deals with the interactions between different stakeholders, especially states, in a transborder setting, in order to deal with the positive and negative consequences of rapid, large scale digitalization on our societies, including cyber crime, cyber warfare, regulations for products, markets and technologies, technical standards and more. The Middle East – North Africa region is no stranger to these developments, even though the heterogeneity of the region csautions us against trying to develop a unified, „one size fits all" narrative. Digitalization is proceeding apace, with the most developed MENA nations trying to position themselves at the frontier of digitalization, emerging technologies and innovation to reap benefits in economics, security and geopolitical influence, while other MENA states are finding their own pace in digitalization, as well as applications in key social, economic and security areas that address salient interests (whether or not they are regarded by Western observers as legitimate in the context of the so-called digital authoritarianism). Cyber Diplomacy is emerging as an important tool for these countries to advance their interests regionally and globally, to articulate, express and pursue preferences and interests in global regulatory processes as well as cooperation on technological, security and military issues. This paper argues that the MENA region is steadily adopting Cyber Diplomacy models pioneered in other countries, with regional leaders engaging in all forms of Cyber Diplomacy to advance their interests. The issue of AI in the MENA region, with an analysis of the field of AI governance leading into Cyber Diplomacy covering four main states, constitutes an effective case study of the premise of Cyber Diplomacy in the MENA region. Moving forward, the regional actors have to calibrate their Cyber Diplomatic and agenda setting efforts to serve their efforts at balancing between West and East (or South) in the backdrop of geopolitical competition in a bipolar (if not multipolar world). The AI case

study highlighted the diversity of interests on AI and how countries mix and match forms of cooperation while trying to avoid getting locked into a particular bloc's technological ecosystem or regulatory superstructure (Aysan et al., 2023). Such balancing may not be possible in the long-term when it comes to the cutting edge of emerging digital technologies or to the political aspects of Cyber Diplomacy, especially as it related to the emerging trend of „alliance of liberal democracies" against an authoritarian and revisionist counter-model. For the MENA region, access to technologies and to markets, having a real say in their preferences being integrated in global agendas and norm development and getting to use digitalization and emerging technologies to address key national interests related to social stability and economic development remain the imperatives of their Cyber Diplomatic efforts. While not the purpose of this paper, we note that there are opportunities for engagement on the part of Romania and other countries with this region on the basis of overlapping interests and non-rivalrous geopolitical priorities that can lead to investment, coordination on agenda setting and some added measure of autonomy and agency in a game increasingy dominated by technological and geopolitical giants.

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