

The Arab Transformations

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From Ring of Friends to Ring of Fire: Challenges to Stability and legitimacy in MENA States

Authors

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Summary:

- The EU aims to assure its security by bringing prosperity, stability and democracy to its neighbours.
- Southern Neighbours become less stable after the 2011 Uprisings, facing conflicts, refugees and internally displaced people, increasing economic strain.
- EU policy is failing because it fails to address underlying problems which drive instability, migration, and radicalisation
- Economic hardship, unemployment, corruption produce distrust of government and lack of cohesion.
- Sustainable development policies must overcome a narrow focus on security, building cohesion by providing decent jobs, improved basic services, social justice, and rule of law.

Keywords:

Terrorism, security, instability, Israel-Palestine conflict, European Neighborhood Policy



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1. Introduction

An 'arc of instability' surrounds the European Union's (EU) on its eastern and southern borders undermining the European Neighbourhood Policy which aimed to secure its own security by bring prosperity, stability and democracy to its neighbourhood. The policy has manifestly failed and the root causes of instability in the region have not been addressed. The Southern Neighbourhood has become more unstable and insecure following the 2011 Uprisings and there has been little progress in economic reform, inclusive development or democratisation and respect for human rights. The instability particularly in the Southern Neighbourhood has spilt over to Europe with the destabilising impact of the refugee crisis and Islamist terrorist attacks aimed at the mass killing of ordinary residents.

Terrorism and the refugee crisis are of great concern in Arab countries, Arab citizens are at significantly greater risk of terrorist attaches than European ones. The region forms a security complex from Morocco to Iran with weapons, people and violent ideologies moving freely fostering instability. The conflicts across the region are complex and interlocking. Civil-military relations are not primarily about defence or security but a power struggle making progressing the necessary reforms to improve the security situation difficult. Forty-eight per cent of terrorist attacks in 2014 took place in the region, it has sent more people in absolute and relative terms to fight for Islamic State than any other region and has the highest number of refugees and internally displaced persons in the world. The reverse flows of Islamist fighters back to their countries threatens security while prisons and refugee camps are fertile breeding ground for radicalisation. The strain on the economies of the countries hosting refugees, mainly Jordan and Lebanon, feeds into the conflict cycle with the negative impact providing for refugees has on employment opportunities and the delivery of services for the country's own citizens.

The Palestine-Israel conflict remains unresolved and a major barrier to peace and stability in the region. The Syrian civil war, the so called Islamic State invasion of Iraq, the decent into civil war and anarchy in Libya and the conflict between Morocco and Algeria over disputed territory in the Western Sahara are all destabilising. In the wake of the Arab uprisings there has been an increase in religious extremism, lack of progress towards more democratic government and respect for human rights (with the notable exception of Tunisia) and lack of economic progress.

2. EU Policy Response

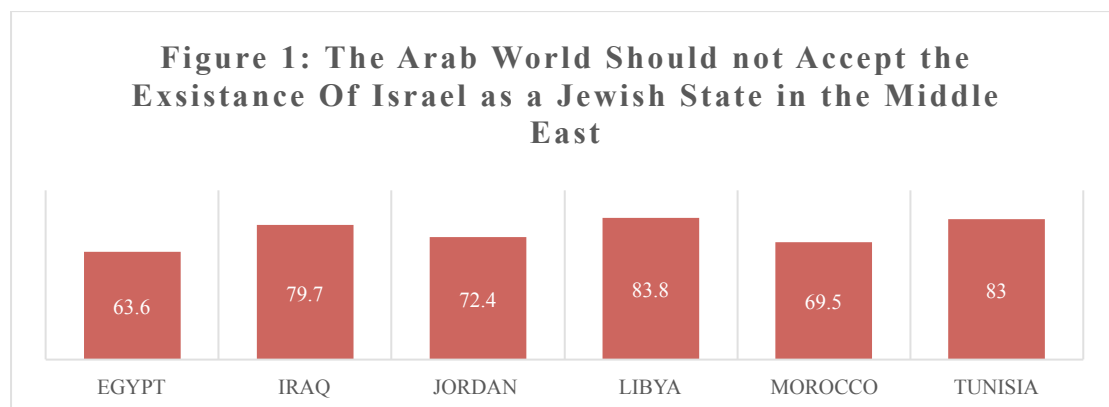
Post 2011 there has developed a 'Fortress Europe' mentality with controlling the flows of refugees, preventing the radicalisation of citizens and taking counter terrorist measures given priority by the EU and its member states. EU states are responsible for law enforcement and military matters and few are prepared to engage diplomatically and/or militarily with the majority preferring to build 'fences' in an attempt to prevent spillover.

The ENP has continued to fail to deliver, rather than driving the region to a more sustainable future it has continued to fuel the drivers of the uprisings and feed regional insecurity. The 2015 review recognised that the most urgent challenge was stabilization and tackling the root causes of instability including a lack of inclusive socio-economic development and corruption. However, the policy instruments remain unchanged and no reference is made to Israel –Palestinian conflict or to the potentially destabilising effect of armed intervention in the region by foreign powers, including EU member states.

Meanwhile the MENA countries have moved to a security agenda increasing their defense budgets, stifling economic development, discouraging foreign direct investment and endangering human rights. They lack faith in EU capacity building approach to Counter Terrorism which goes beyond a strictly military- and security-based interpretation of counter-terrorism of building state capacity to prevent and combat terrorism and includes respect for human rights and the rule of law. They also dislike the tripartite approach being reluctant to engage with independent civil society and efforts to empower and integrate marginalised groups. Some countries prefer a ‘military model’.

3. Citizens Perceptions of Causes of Instability in the Region

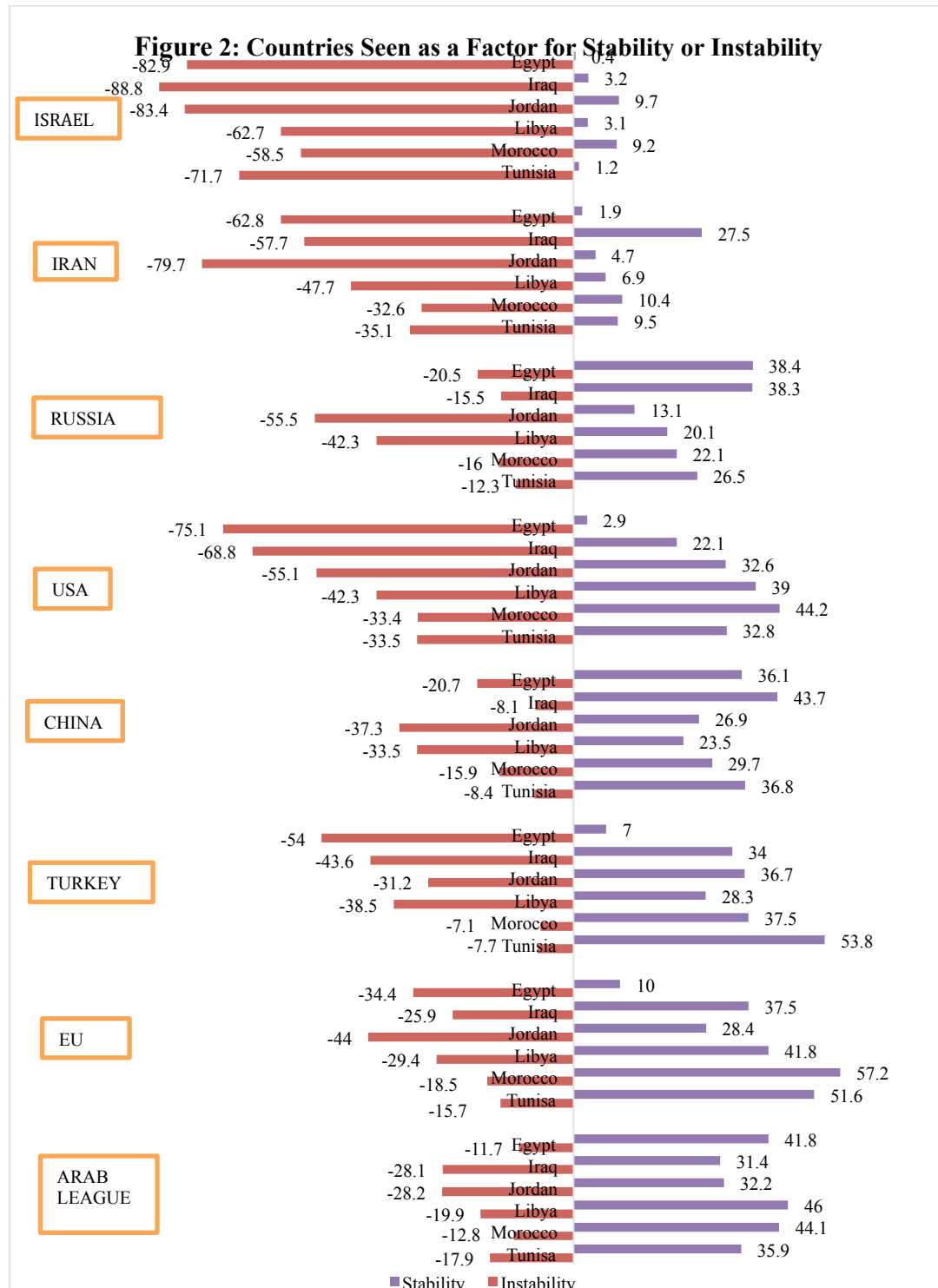
The findings from the Arab Transformations project carried out in six Arab countries in 2014 shows that citizens see the Israel -Palestine conflict as a major source of instability in the region (Figure 2). While few saw it as one of the two main challenges facing their country or as a priority for EU intervention they nevertheless thought it had a destabilising influence. Indeed, a clear majoring in each country thought that the Arab World should not accept the existence of Israel as a Jewish State in the Middle East (Figure1). The conflict is used by the so called Islamic State to attract recruits who have it high on their list of grievances against the Western world.



Source: ArabTrans 2014

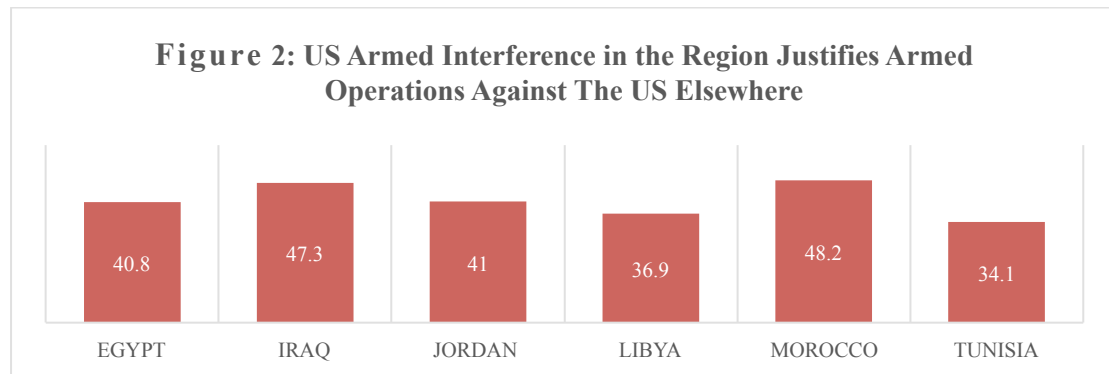
International and regional powers are generally seen to have a more destabilising influence than stabilising one. Israel is seen being the most destabilising force especially by those countries laying closet to it

geographically, Egypt, Iraq and Jordan (Figure 2). There is less agreement concerning the destabilising/stabilising influence of other regional and international powers. Iran and the US are seen to have a destabilising influence by a higher proportion of respondents than think they have a stabilising influence. Opinion on the EU is more evenly divided and there is no evidence that Russia, china and the Arab League are seen as having a stronger stabilising influence. It should also be noted that opinion varies quite strikingly by country – there is no cross regional public opinion consensus.



Source: ArabTrans 2014. Note: Only includes respondents who expressed an opinion so totals do not add up to 100

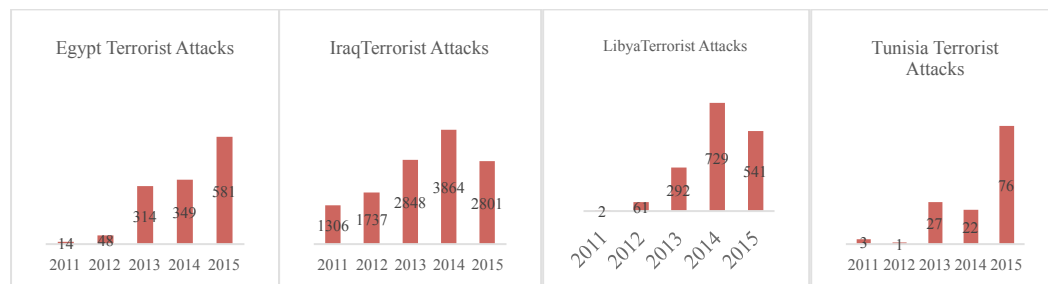
There is some evidence that states that intervene militarily in the region can have a destabilising impact beyond the region as evidenced by recent Islamist attacks in European countries. While these are generally portrayed as the work of a small minority of extremists there is some evidence from the Arab Barometer (Figure 2) that armed intervention by an international power in the region may be seen as justification for armed operations against that power by a noticeable minority of citizens.



Source: Arab Barometer III

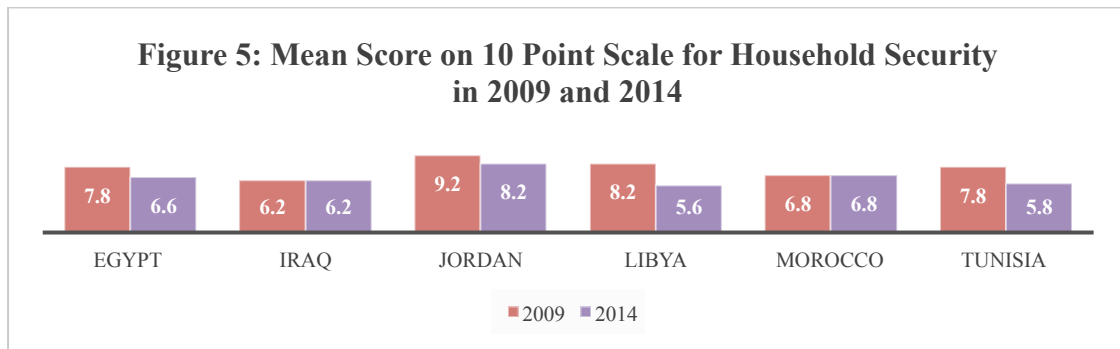
4. The Changing Internal Security Situation

MENA Citizens think that the security situation in their countries has got worse in recent years and are concerned about the security situation generally. They are quite justified in their concern, the Global Terrorism Data Base shows that there has been a significant increase in terrorist incidents in all the countries except Morocco and Jordan since 2011. Not surprisingly Iraq has had by far the most attacks, followed by Libya. At the time the Arab Transformations survey was being carried out in Iraq in June 2014 the so called Islamic state was invading the Central Region and Libya had descended into anarchy and civil war. The so called Islamic state has also gained a foothold in Tunisia and Egypt and Jordan is housing large numbers of refugees from Syria. According to the 2016 Census 31 per cent of Jordan's total population are refugees of whom 46 per cent are Syrian refugees.



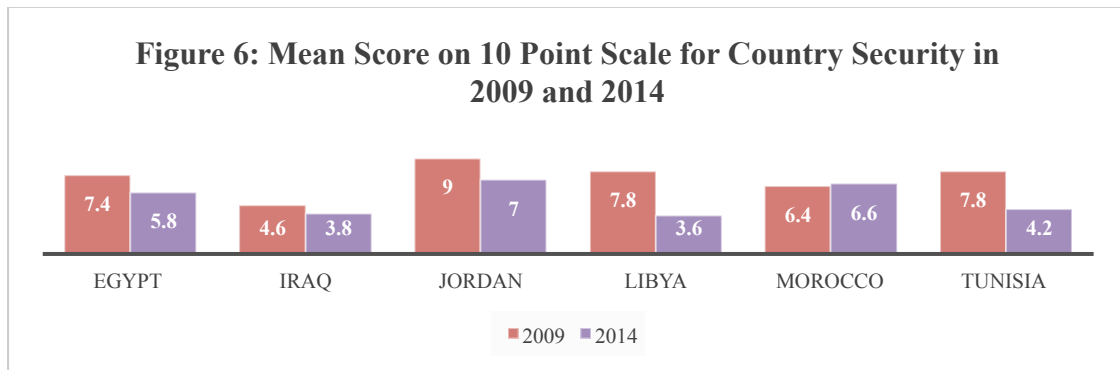
The respondents to the Arab Transformations survey were concerned, perhaps not surprisingly about the security of their households and in four countries thought the situation had deteriorated since 2009. In Morocco and

Iraq there was little change (Figure 5) but the means were relatively low in both years.



Source: Arab Trans Data 2014

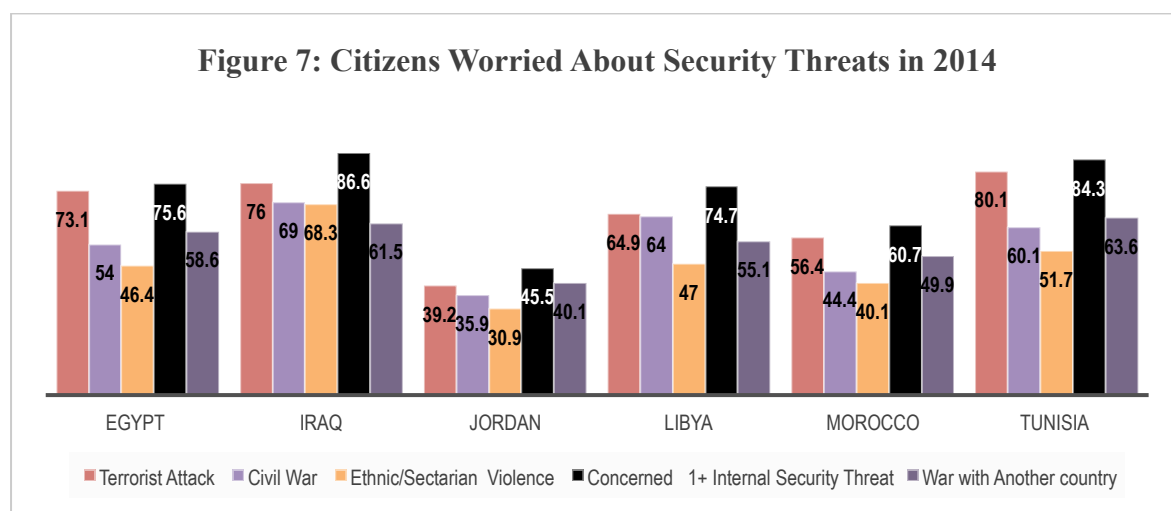
Citizens were, however, even more concerned about the security of their countries and there was an increase in concern in all the countries except for Morocco (Figure 6). The increase in concern is especially noticeable, not surprisingly in Libya, but also in Tunisia.



Source: Arab Trans Data 2014

When it came to internal stability and security citizens and the threat of a war with another country citizens show a noticeable level of concern – varying from a high of 93 per cent in Iraq and Egypt to 78 per cent in Jordan and Morocco. In Libya (62%) and Iraq (60%) citizens nominated internal security as the main the challenge facing their countries. It was also nominated as one of the two main challenges by just over half of citizens in Egypt and 42 per cent in Tunisia but only by around 10 per cent in Jordan and Morocco with citizens in these countries nominating the economic situation more frequently. Concern about at least one internal security threat ranged from 87 per cent in Iraq to 46 per cent in Jordan (Figure 7). Iraq and Tunisia show the highest levels of concern, followed closely by Egypt and Libya, then Morocco and Jordan, which are is least concerned. It should be noted, however, that Egypt and Tunisia, and Morocco, are more concerned about terrorism than other threats; indeed, Tunisia has the greatest concern, followed by Iraq and Egypt, and exceeded Libya in this respect. It should also be noted that half of citizens in five of the six countries are worried about the possibility of a war with another country and even in Jordan 40 per cent are concerned. In Iraq, there is strong regional variation with those in the Central Region not

surprisingly being much more concerned, 77 per cent compared with 66 per cent in the South and 37 per cent in the North.



Source: ArabTrans 2014.

5. Broader and Enduring Challenges to Stability

While instability in the MENA region is shaped by interlocking conflicts and crisis any enduring solution will require addressing the broader and enduring challenges to stability. MENA citizens are above all concerned about their economic situation, social justice, and authoritarian regimes that do not deliver economic and social wellbeing than. The Arab Transforms data shows that citizens' main concerns are economic security, decent public services, responsive government and getting rid of corruption, they are much less concerned about democratisation and human rights. Citizens think that the economic situation and corruption were the main drivers of the Arab Uprisings, remain major challenges in 2014 and are generally dissatisfied with their economic situation, the poor provision of educational and health services and the responsiveness of governments to meeting citizens demands. To the extent, they want the EU involved in their country they want economic support, they certainly do not want the EU interfering in policy making. The discontent that drove demands for regime change in 2011 have not been addressed and the potential for conflict remains.

6. Policy Recommendations

The EU lacks the resources to make a significant impact alone and should work in a strategic partnership with its own member states and allies to work towards stabilising the region. It can play an important role in an alliance as a normative power.

There is a need to avoid a too narrow focus on security which does not adequately address the key concerns of citizens. Sustainable development depends on inclusive economic development. When life is worth living, extremism does not seem so attractive. Speeding up bilateral trade agreements and ones that actually benefits MENA countries is one concrete

policy action the EU can take. This has the added bonus that it is likely to convince ENP partners to speed up counter terrorism cooperation with EU.

In Iraq there is a specific need to support post-conflict reconstruction and specifically to support initiatives to mitigate ideological cleavages and build social inclusion and cohesion

The Israeli-Palestinian Question breeds terrorism and creates a threat to the West as well as the in the Middle East. While a two-state solution is an unrealistic goal at this juncture this does not mean abandoning working towards a final agreement. The findings from the Arab Transformations survey support the argument that there is a need for an Arab-Israeli agreement not just an Israeli-Palestinian one. The involvement of Arab States (Egypt, Jordan, Gulf Cooperation Council) will enable both Israel and the Palestinians to compromise. In the short-term stability needs to be obtained in the Gaza. Strengthening the pro-peace Palestinian leadership and encouraging the Palestinian authority to gradually take control of Gaza with development assistance being used in a way that increases on-the-ground legitimacy of the Palestinian Authority is one strategy for contributing to this.

Support countries hosting large numbers of refugees both to reduce migrant flows to Europe and to mitigate the potential of refugee camps becoming hotbeds of extremism. However, this needs to be balanced with economic assistance to host communities for employment and education and health services to prevent the alienation of the host community.

More specifically there is a need to continue to progress joint security issues and security sector reform including building popular support for the EU by supporting anti-corruption initiatives including against police corruption. Technical assistance can be provided to improve security by eliminating the power struggle between civilian governments and the armed forces, building trust and improving efficiency as well as reforming the technical aspects of civil-military relations.



ArabTrans

The Arab Transformations Project is an international research project operating within the European Commission's FP7 framework. The project looks comparatively at attitudes and behaviours in the context of the social, political and economic transformations taking place across Middle East and North Africa since February 2011. The countries covered are Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq. Ethical approval for the Project was given through the Ethical Review Procedures of the University of Aberdeen. Further details of the project can be found on the project web site at www.arabtrans.eu.

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