

Challenges of National Security Policies in the Arab World: From Traditional Challenges to Modern Challenges

Dr. Farah Rouaguet¹

Abstract:

This study aims to address a set of challenges facing national security policies in the Arab world. The first section serves as an introduction to the topic by providing an overview of national security policies. The second and third sections, which form the core of the study, are dedicated to examining traditional and modern challenges to Arab national security policies, respectively. Finally, the study presents a set of findings and recommendations.

Keywords: National security policies; Arab national security; challenges of Arab national security policies.

INTRODUCTION

Security studies are among the most prominent scientific and intellectual fields in the modern era due to their significance at the individual, societal, and state levels. In this context, no state can afford to overlook the necessity of adopting national security policies. This is achieved through implementing various strategies and measures to safeguard both internal and external interests from any threats while ensuring the realization of national objectives and aspirations. Most importantly, it requires identifying risks and sources of threats to national security, which may stem from regional and international dangers.

Similarly, Arab national security faces significant challenges within a turbulent international and regional environment. These challenges have persisted over time and continue to evolve. Arab national security remains vulnerable to various forms of penetration and exposure, necessitating substantial efforts to address its weaknesses and rebuild the concept and foundations of Arab national

¹ Faculty of Political Science and international relations, University of Algiers 3, (Algeria).
Email: farah.rouaguet@gmail.com

security. This is particularly critical given the ongoing transformations and threats surrounding it.

In this context, the following research questions arise:

- To what extent can Arab national security policies contribute to addressing the challenges that threaten them?
- How can Arab national security, given its current state, overcome these various challenges?

1. An Overview of National Security Policies

National security policies have been a major concern for both scholars and policymakers, as ensuring survival, security, and continuity has remained a priority in both domestic and foreign policy. In the following discussion, we will explore national security policies by presenting a set of concepts that help clarify the general meaning of the subject.

1.1 Defining the Concept of National Security

The concept of security is one of the most complex and debated topics, with no universal agreement among researchers on its precise definition. This lack of consensus extends to aspects such as the definition itself, the subjects of security, the sources of threats, and the means, tools, and strategies for achieving security.

1.1.1 Definition of National Security

Security, in general, refers to practices aimed at eliminating fears and risks that threaten individual safety. It encompasses measures taken by certain individuals or authorities to ensure security and stability, ultimately benefiting society as a whole.

However, defining national security is highly contested, as it holds different meanings for different people. Traditionally, national security has been understood as protection against external aggression, and thus, it has often been viewed primarily in terms of military defense against military threats. However, this perspective has proven to be too narrow. National security encompasses more than just the preparation and deployment of armed forces.

Furthermore, such a perspective may lead one to believe that increasing military power is the best way to enhance security. While military strength is indeed a

crucial component of security, history is filled with examples where arms races have weakened security rather than strengthening it.

These arms races typically begin when one state increases its military capabilities for defensive purposes, believing it will feel more secure. This action, however, causes neighboring states to feel threatened, prompting them to enhance their own military capacities. This, in turn, makes the initial state feel even less secure, leading to a continuous escalation (Abdelrahman, 2022).

As a result, the need emerged for a broader definition of national security, incorporating economic, diplomatic, and social dimensions alongside the military aspect. Arnold Wolfers proposed such a definition, stating that (Wolfers, 1962, p. 150): "Objectively, security measures the absence of threats to acquired values; subjectively, it refers to the absence of fear that such values will be attacked."

This definition illustrates that although security is directly linked to values, it is not a value in itself but rather a condition that allows a state to preserve its values. Consequently, actions that enhance a nation's security while undermining its core values are ultimately ineffective. Furthermore, security cannot be objectively measured, making it a subjective assessment based not only on strength and weakness but also on the perceived capabilities and intentions of potential threats.

The lack of confidence regarding the true level of threats often leads to worst-case scenario planning due to the severe consequences of security failures. Even when security concepts are well-defined, absolute measurement remains a challenge because security is a relative condition. It is assessed in relation to existing and potential threats, and since achieving absolute security against all possible threats is unattainable, acceptable levels of insecurity must be determined.

Finally, it is essential to recognize that national security is not a static condition that exists in isolation; rather, it is shaped by both international and domestic environments, both of which are constantly evolving.

(Trager & Kronenberg, 1973, pp. 35-36) define national security as: "That part of government policy aimed at creating favorable conditions for protecting vital values."

From this, we can conclude that the concept of national security has undergone two significant phases due to global developments (Abdelrahman, 2022):

- **First Phase:** A narrow strategic perspective that primarily focused on repelling hostile military attacks, securing borders from external invasions, and maintaining national independence.
- **Second Phase:** A broader understanding, in which the state is responsible for ensuring the political, economic, social, and cultural security of its citizens, addressing multiple threats imposed by the extensive openness of the modern era.

1.1.2 Key Milestones in the Concept of National Security

Although the term national security gained widespread usage after World War II, its origins trace back to the 17th century, particularly following the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. This treaty laid the foundation for the modern nation-state (Nation-State). The Cold War era provided the framework and climate in which theoretical approaches and institutional structures were developed, leading to the adoption of the term National Security Strategy. During this period, key Cold War concepts such as containment, deterrence, balance of power, and peaceful coexistence emerged as central themes in security discourse, all aimed at ensuring stability and preventing the devastating wars that characterized the first half of the 20th century.

As a result, academic institutions dedicated to national security studies were established. These included research institutes, university-affiliated centers, scientific and media institutions, specialized journals, and government agencies linked to policymaking. The United States National Security Council (NSC) became the first and most prominent model of such institutions. The NSC embodied Walter Lippmann's definition of national security as "the ability of a state to ensure its security without having to sacrifice its legitimate interests to avoid war, and its ability to protect those interests should war become necessary."

The formal institutionalization of national security began with the enactment of the National Security Act of 1947 by the U.S. Congress. In contrast, other countries adopted a different terminology, referring to the field as strategic studies. These studies focused on proactive political planning for the future rather than merely formulating reactive policies to safeguard national

sovereignty. Like any concept, national security cannot be precisely defined outside the historical and geographical contexts in which it operates. It is subject to continuous revision and development in response to changing variables and influencing factors.

Thus, national security has evolved into a distinct branch of political science, with its own body of knowledge, scientific objectives (ensuring security), and research methodologies. Additionally, it serves as a bridge between multiple disciplines. National security is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that intersects with sociology, economics, international relations, governance systems, and other fields. It requires the integration of various research methodologies to achieve a more comprehensive understanding. Over time, interest in national security has expanded beyond the West to include the Global South, reflecting its growing importance in global affairs (Hafiz, 2020, pp. 01-02).

1.1.3 Motivations for National Security Concerns

A. The Shift in the Concept of National Interest Toward Ensuring Welfare

The notion of national interest has evolved to emphasize welfare, which includes securing resource supplies. Consequently, national security emerged as a concept encompassing both the well-being of a nation and the protection of its external resource sources, alongside safeguarding internal arrangements that promote higher welfare levels.

B. Rising Levels of Violence and Intensification of Conflicts

The increase in direct conflicts, which may escalate into wars, has led to fluctuating levels of concern for national security. Interest in security has followed waves corresponding to the escalation of regional and international conflicts.

C. Perceived Threats in the Global South

Developing nations face two major threats to their national security:

External Debt; The staggering amount of external debt—exceeding \$2 trillion—poses a significant threat to their political and economic security, limiting their ability to make independent strategic decisions. Additionally, the cost of servicing these debts places an immense financial burden on many small and medium-sized indebted nations.

D. Rising Internal Anxiety and Political Instability

Many smaller nations continue to struggle with major production and distribution challenges even after more than half a century of independence. The feeling of relative deprivation among citizens exacerbates frustration, potentially leading to acts of violence against political systems. Furthermore, the ideological vacuum left by the fall of communism and the collapse of the Soviet Union and the socialist bloc has driven a search for alternative ideologies—some taking extreme secular nationalist or radical religious forms.

E. Security Concerns in the Transition from Nation-States to Larger Political or Economic Entities

When states transition into broader federations or economic blocs (e.g., the European Union, NAFTA, or ASEAN), national security concerns arise. Key questions include the fate of national security within the newly established entity, the division of security responsibilities, the protection of citizens, and the extent to which they feel secure within the new framework.

F. National Security in the Context of State Disintegration

The fragmentation of major states, particularly federal entities, into independent nation-states raises pressing national security issues:

- Control over national security assets, particularly military forces and nuclear weapons.
- Protection of emerging republics or states, especially those with ethnic dimensions.
- Ensuring economic stability in newly independent states.
- The nature of the disintegration process—whether peaceful or violent.

Historical and contemporary cases, such as the breakup of the Soviet Union, the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and ongoing challenges in Yemen, Iraq, and Palestine, highlight the security threats posed by state fragmentation at both national and regional levels (Bnafi, 2020).

2.2 Attempting to Define the Concept of National Security Policy

National security policies at the national level reflect the government's understanding of the threats that may affect the security of the state and its citizens, as well as how it responds to these threats. Policies differ from rules or laws (Albrecht & Barnes, 2008, p. 09).

2.2.1 Definition of National Security Policy

National security policy is the art and science of developing, implementing, and coordinating national power tools—diplomatic, economic, military, and informational—to achieve objectives that contribute to national security. It is also referred to as the national strategy or grand strategy.

It serves as a link between fixed elements, such as geographical factors, and dynamic elements, including a set of opinions, ideas, beliefs, and values that underpin the actions of states.

Additionally, it is a calculated and studied relationship between goals, means, intentions, capabilities, and power, aiming to reconcile and align what the strategic actor desires with the available resources to meet those desires. Thus, it represents the nation's plan for the coordinated use of all state power tools and elements—beyond just military means—to achieve its objectives, defend its interests, and promote the national interest. Moreover, the term national security policy describes the rational and methodical planning process formulated by strong leaders, organizational cultures, and governmental bodies (Omroun, 2014, p. 25).

It defines a well-studied action plan that serves as a guiding beacon for the executive authority in decision-making. Developing security policies requires establishing a specific methodology for security issues, prioritizing security threats, and making critical decisions regarding the security sector.

At the national level, security policies—including national security policy and sector-specific security policies—address both internal and external security threats. Consequently, they are framed within an international or regional legislative framework in which the state itself is a participant (Albrecht & Barnes, 2008, p. 09).

2.2.2 Formulating National Security Policies

Formulating national security policies for any country is not an easy task. There are a set of fundamental principles and rules that must be followed to define and shape this policy. Additionally, a series of sequential stages must be adhered to in order to prevent any disruption in the content of the policy.

A. Entities Responsible for Formulating National Security Policies

In all countries worldwide, there are entities and stakeholders involved in designing and shaping their national security policies. These include (Albrecht & Barnes, 2008, pp. 09-10):

- The executive body within the government, including government ministries, initiates the process of developing new security policies or amending existing ones. The executive body appoints members who serve as security coordination entities and establishes committees for policy formulation.
- The parliament may approve, propose changes to, or reject security policies. In many democratic countries, parliament also has the final say on budget allocation and monitors and evaluates the implementation of security policies.
- Local governments, such as state or provincial governments, can play a role in implementing national security policies in cooperation with local security sector entities. They may become key actors in policy execution at the national level.
- Non-governmental security actors, including tribal leaders, village councils, and irregular armed forces, play a central role in providing security and justice in many post-conflict nations and some developing countries. Therefore, it is necessary to involve non-governmental security actors in the formulation and implementation of security policies.
- Civil society organizations can participate in the identification, formulation, implementation, and evaluation of security policies.

B. Stages of Formulating National Security Policies

The formulation and design of any national security policy require following a set of systematic steps within a unified political cycle consisting of four fundamental stages (Omroun, 2014, pp. 26-28):

- **Identifying Security Objectives:** This stage allows for an assessment of the country's security situation and the objectives that must be considered in the policy. These objectives include military, political, and economic goals, with a primary focus on military objectives aimed at maintaining national security and territorial integrity.
- **Threat Assessment:** The Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are the primary agencies responsible for identifying and

defining threats, risks, and challenges facing the country. This process occurs in close coordination with intelligence agencies and the Ministry of Interior, which provides insights into the internal security situation, thereby expanding the perception of potential threats.

- **Review and Revision:** In some countries, the executive authority often initiates the review of national security policies. In certain cases, the legislative authority or a specialized council may recommend reviewing national security policies. This review may take place annually, periodically, or on special occasions.
- **Consensus and Approval:** Reaching a consensus is achieved by incorporating contributions from various stakeholders in the security sector during the policy formulation process. This exchange occurs either internally, by circulating discussions among officials, or externally, by publishing policy documents for public review—or through both approaches simultaneously.

2. Challenges of Traditional National Security Policies

The main issue in the state of Arab national security lies in the misalignment between the realities of the Arab world and the requirements of Arab national security. There is an absence of a shared Arab will to unify capabilities in order to confront external and internal threats (Ahmed Amin, 2022).

Arab national security policies face unprecedented challenges, some of which are existential, while others target the supreme strategic interests of many Arab countries. These policies aim to provide stability for most nation-states or regional Arab groups, such as the Maghreb countries, the Levant, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, as well as the Nile Valley and the Horn of Africa nations.

All these groups are experiencing an unprecedented state of instability, with varying degrees of security and strategic challenges across different regions. Arab states in Africa face risks due to security disturbances caused by extremist terrorist groups, as well as internal conflicts, as seen in Libya, Somalia, and Sudan. Additionally, some of these countries struggle with significant economic difficulties. Meanwhile, the Levant, which includes Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and Iraq, lies on the fault lines of severe political and security crises, potentially leading to fundamental changes in the regional map and significant shifts in the balance of power.

The Arabian Peninsula, from which Arab identity originally emerged, now faces extraordinary threats. Never before has it been as targeted from external forces as it is today.

One of the key factors contributing to the imbalance in Arab national security policies today is the lack of cohesion among Arab states. This has allowed adversaries to infiltrate and destabilize several Arab nations, creating unprecedented chaos, particularly in Iraq and Syria, and to a lesser extent in Lebanon, Yemen, and Libya. These crises add to the ongoing fundamental challenge posed by Israel's continuous aggression against the Palestinian people and its neighboring countries, including Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, and Jordan.

The dialectics of history impose a constant struggle between nations and peoples, or at the very least, competition over interests. However, this does not preclude the possibility of achieving stability within this struggle.

There is no doubt that Israel constitutes the primary threat to Arab national security. Its influence over certain ruling circles in major capitals—especially in Washington and Moscow—reshapes the policies of these countries in ways that rarely align with Arab interests. Instead, they exacerbate Arab fragmentation and increase opportunities for foreign interference in Arab affairs. The cases of Iraq and Syria serve as clear examples, where major powers, in coordination with Israel, prolonged instability, sustained cycles of violence and destruction, and opened the door for further regional interventions (Zidan, 2021).

Some documents, released under the title Israel's Strategy in the 1980s, remained classified in Hebrew until an Arabic-American university graduates' association in the U.S. translated them into English.

The first document explicitly discusses plans to fragment Arab states from within, stating that internal Arab conflicts would expedite their realization. It asserts that Israel must utilize local proxies whose ultimate role would be to serve Israeli interests.

The second document outlines an American strategy, officially initiated during George W. Bush's administration in 2001, which tasked one of its leading strategic experts, Michael Ledeen, with drafting a ten-year plan to transform Arab states politically, economically, socially, and culturally—widely known as the "Regime Change Plan." A subsequent study by the U.S.-based Center for Research on Globalization in 2006 highlighted America's vision for the Middle

East, which aimed to create a continuous arc of instability, chaos, and violence stretching from Lebanon and Syria to Iraq and the Gulf states.

For those closely observing U.S. strategy in the Middle East—particularly since the Bush administration and later under Obama—it became evident that Washington was pursuing regime change policies. This was explicitly acknowledged by President Donald Trump, who declared, "We will stop the policy of regime change."

These plans were further confirmed in another document—a map published in the U.S. Armed Forces Journal in 2006—accompanied by an article discussing the redrawing of Middle Eastern borders to "solve regional problems" in a way that aligned with American and Israeli perspectives. The map emphasized the necessity of fostering ethnic tensions and civil wars as a means to facilitate border realignment (Al-Ghamri, 2022).

The threat to Arab national security in the Arabian Peninsula is no less significant than the threats facing the Levant. External actors have not only supported extremist groups against local governments but have also fostered a highly dangerous rebellion in Yemen, leading to the seizure of power in certain areas and the takeover of state institutions by Houthi insurgents backed by militias loyal to ousted president Ali Abdullah Saleh.

The attack on the Emirati civilian cargo ship near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait by Iranian-backed Yemeni rebel militias represents one of the gravest threats to Arab national security as a whole. This act endangers maritime safety in one of the most strategically significant straits in both the Arab world and globally. It is a clear indication of the lawlessness of rebel groups and a warning of future plots aimed at undermining Arab national security. This attack was accompanied by daily incursions by Iranian ships into Yemeni territorial waters, underscoring the blatant disregard of regional powers for Arab sovereignty. These actions necessitate vigilance and decisive measures to counter efforts aimed at altering the balance of power in key Arab regions (Zidan, 2021).

3. Challenges of Modern Arab National Security Policies

Newly emerging challenges that were not previously considered part of Arab national security policies have now been classified into four key dimensions: environmental security, biosecurity, intellectual security, and the security of social coexistence or integration.

Environmental security refers to controlling extreme climate phenomena and their effects on plant and animal life, human settlements, and urban development. It is a broad and composite concept closely linked to economic and social development priorities.

As for biosecurity, intractable infectious diseases have emerged as one of the most pressing threats to the national security of Arab countries and the international community at large. This issue falls within a broader framework that also considers the consequences of climate change on human health, resource scarcity, and war-induced diseases.

In the Arab world, the biosecurity challenge is rooted in the weak healthcare infrastructure in many countries—a longstanding and persistent developmental crisis. This weakness not only affects the medical and healthcare sectors but also leaves people ill-equipped to take adequate precautions against perceived threats to their lives.

At the same time, there is a deficiency in public health awareness and education programs, making health culture nearly absent—not only in rural areas but also in urban centers. Additionally, the conservative nature of many Arab societies has made discussions about certain serious diseases a source of social embarrassment or even taboo.

Regarding nuclear security, no Arab country currently possesses nuclear energy or nuclear weapons. However, in the coming decade, several Arab nations are expected to develop nuclear power capabilities, with nuclear reactors set to be operational soon. Ensuring the security of these reactors is a core aspect of national security—an issue that must be addressed in the present rather than deferred to the future. Any sabotage or disruption in these facilities would be an unimaginable catastrophe.

Within the framework of nuclear security, clear Arab strategies must be developed to safeguard radioactive materials from falling into the wrong hands. These materials are already widely present in various public and private institutions. If extremist groups were to gain access to such materials, the consequences could be catastrophic, potentially causing the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives.

The philosophy, concepts, and implications of nuclear security should be widely disseminated as part of a general Arab public awareness campaign. This is the first step in securing this critical dimension of national security.

Intellectual security has two main aspects: the first pertains to keeping pace with contemporary developments, while the second focuses on safeguarding culture as a constructive tool.

In the first aspect, bridging the scientific gap between Arab nations and many other countries remains a longstanding challenge. However, a more recent and growing concern is the "digital divide," which has become a major and escalating threat. If left unaddressed, this gap exposes Arab national security to vulnerabilities on multiple, if not all, fronts.

In the second aspect, the challenge lies in striking a balance between freedom of thought (or belief) and the security of society and the state. This issue is fundamentally tied to the philosophy of freedom itself.

While this concern gained global attention after the events of September 11, 2001, it has remained particularly relevant to the Arab region. There are no purely security-based solutions to the problem of ideological extremism; instead, addressing it requires engaging both the intellect and the spirit. This necessitates comprehensive media, educational, and cultural efforts that must be integrated into Arab human development strategies.

Finally, the challenge of integration or social coexistence extends from the issue of intellectual security. The extent to which a society successfully resolves this challenge determines its ability to foster internal harmony and build peaceful relations with other nations and peoples. Mutual respect and acknowledgment of the uniqueness of others are fundamental to the national security approach of any region or nation (Al-Marhoon, 2022).

CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion presented, we conclude that national security policies in the Arab world face a range of challenges that threaten their borders, structure, cohesion, and internal stability. This ongoing state of threat necessitates the implementation of various security measures to protect the state in all its institutions, secure its facilities and interests, and safeguard its citizens—both domestically and abroad—while countering hostile forces at both internal and external levels.

Thus, the goal of national security policies is to ensure the continuity of internal and external strength, both militarily and economically, across various aspects of life to confront threats arising from within and beyond, in times of war and peace alike, so as to achieve a sense of safety and security.

Moreover, national security in the Arab world faces both traditional and contemporary challenges.

Traditional challenges include agricultural and industrial vulnerability, organized military crime, local armed conflicts, prolonged organized violence, the dominance of intra-regional conflicts, the weakness of pan-Arab cooperation, and the prevalence of negative interactions in Arab environmental relations.

Contemporary challenges include the intensification of climate extremism and its threats to major cities and population centers, the rise of invisible lethal pollutants, the emergence of new generations of viruses and uncontrollable infectious diseases, the risk associated with the illicit acquisition of nuclear and radioactive materials, the spread of radicalism among youth, and the decline of national integration in favor of pre-national identities that contradict the overarching national identity.

Addressing these challenges and striving to achieve Arab national security cannot be accomplished overnight, nor through rapid military and security mobilizations alone. Rather, it necessitates a stringent policy that includes the establishment of an infrastructure capable of equipping the state, its citizens, armed forces, and security agencies with the expertise and scientific mindset required for precise planning and execution. Achieving this infrastructure requires attention to the following key points:

- **Rebuilding the Arab Individual:** The primary guardian of Arab national security is the individual—the citizen. Without an empowered citizenry, there will be no one to safeguard and defend this security. Currently, the Arab world's primary issue lies in the absence of an engaged and empowered citizen due to oppression, authoritarianism, and persecution by security agencies. Many citizens also suffer from poverty, hunger, poor healthcare, and inadequate education.
- **Liberating the Arab Citizen from Ignorance, Illiteracy, and Lack of Awareness:** The Arab world's education system—whether at the school

or university level—is significantly underdeveloped. The primary cause of this is the suppression of freedoms and the silencing of educators through various means. The region suffers from high illiteracy rates, making it imperative to focus on eradicating illiteracy—not only in reading and writing but also by elevating citizens’ awareness and enhancing their intellectual and analytical capacities to better understand the world around them.

- **Eradicating Poverty and Economic Hardship:** Despite the Arab world’s vast wealth and resources, many of its citizens suffer from extreme hunger and deprivation. Numerous instances have seen foreign countries providing food aid to Arab nations. Currently, the Arab world imports approximately 70% of its food needs.
- **Advancing Arab Technological Development:** Technology serves as the foundation for nations seeking progress, independence, and global competitiveness. Countries that develop their own technologies using domestic expertise and natural resources can establish themselves as global competitors and contributors to human civilization. Conversely, those that fail to achieve technological advancement remain dependent on Western nations, which continuously innovate and may restrict access to their scientific breakthroughs.
- **Achieving National Unity within Each Arab State:** Over the past two decades, the Arab world has experienced alarming levels of division fueled by tribalism, sectarianism, and ideological fragmentation. Arab governments have played a significant role in fostering corruption and internal discord, leaving the region fragmented.
- **Clearly Defining Friends and Enemies:** This is a critical responsibility for Arab decision-makers. However, it is a complex task due to the diversity of Arab regimes and their varying political, cultural, and social orientations.

Achieving Arab national security requires long-term strategic planning that transcends mere military preparedness. It demands investment in human development, education, economic stability, technological self-sufficiency, social cohesion, and diplomatic clarity. Only through such a comprehensive approach can the Arab world establish a secure and stable future.

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