Research Briefing Notes

# Mapping Social Protection and Conflict Prevention Research about the Middle East and North Africa (Mapping MENA)

## Summary

*Mapping MENA* addresses the core research question and purpose of the MENASP network. It investigates the production of social protection (SP) and conflict prevention (CP) research about the MENA region. The project had two aims.

1. To trace the development of SP and CP from the 1970s to the present day and investigate the extent to which the fields are equitable. This was achieved by analysing (a) who produces knowledge; (b) which perspectives are prioritised, and (c) whether MENA-based experts contribute to Anglophone research.
2. To understand the potential for integration and collaboration between SP and CP research about the MENA. This was achieved by tracking the interconnections between SP and CP through authorship collaborations, institutional affiliations, and shared research themes

Unlike existing studies on the region's intellectual life, Mapping MENA neither isolates MENA scholars from the global research community nor focuses on sub-regions (e.g., the Levant or Gulf). Instead, it examines MENA as a whole—both as a research subject for global scholars and a site of knowledge production. This research highlights barriers to participation, dominant narratives, and key institutional hubs, helping to strengthen collaborations and amplify MENA voices in global scholarship.

## Research Background

Rather than exploring specific policies, programmes, or countries Mapping MENA adopts a broader 'field' perspective to understand the structure of knowledge production in both SP and CP across the MENA region.

Using 'big data' based on journal publications from 1973 – 2023, the project conducted a comparative analysis of CP and SP scholarship. This facilitated the mapping of the global distribution of CP and SP scholarship about the MENA; the identification of key research themes within each field and ones which cross CP and SP research; and identifying intellectual networks and collaborations within and beyond the region.

By taking a regional and relational approach, this project uncovered institutional hubs, potential barriers to participation, and opportunities for greater collaboration. The findings will contribute to discussions on how to create a more inclusive and representative knowledge ecosystem for social protection and conflict prevention in the MENA region.

## Key Findings

Scholarship from Anglophone countries and the Global North dominates the knowledge produced about the MENA region. The United States, in particular, is a key producer of research, alongside Britain, Canada, and Australia. In contrast, Central Africa appears to have minimal representation in this dataset. While MENA-based scholarship contributes to the wider body of research, MENA researchers do not necessarily speak for the region. This pattern is consistent across SP and CP research.

Most SP research focuses on development economics and health-related topics (healthcare, public health, epidemiology), while most CP research centres on terrorism. Though both fields revolve around key themes, terrorism research dominates CP scholarship. Social protection research tends to have higher citation levels, likely reflecting a larger scholarly community. Bridges exist between the fields – development economics links SP and CP, while mental health research connects individual-level violence with social protection.

The analysis highlights research gaps in the following areas: social welfare systems/peace processes, healthcare delivery/conflict resolution, and economic justice/post-conflict reconstruction.

## Key Explanations for these Findings

The dominance of Anglophone scholarship partly stems from the dataset itself, which focuses solely on English-language research. This inherently favours scholars proficient in English, often from or employed in English-speaking/Western countries. While this bias is expected, it reflects a broader structural issue—English's dominance in academic discourse and publishing.

The dataset spans from the 1970s to 2020s, meaning much of the data predates significant investment in research infrastructure within the region. Even today, the Global North generally possesses more advanced research facilities, contributing to knowledge production and dissemination on a scale often unmatched in MENA. This structural advantage enables Global North scholars to shape research agendas, define key debates, and set disciplinary boundaries in MENA studies.

Patterns in research themes reflect disciplinary distinctions. SP research is policy- and systems-focused, addressing structural and institutional responses, while CP research concentrates on immediate security challenges and peace processes. Differences in citation volumes likely stem from SP's broader cross-disciplinary appeal.

Key events may drive country-specific research. For example, the build-up and aftermath of the second Gulf War likely increased Iraq-focused studies. Analysing publication trends over time could reveal whether similar patterns exist for other countries, suggesting broader research trends rather than isolated cases.

## Key Implications for Policy Action or for Further Ways to Address Knowledge Gap

Enhancing MENA-based research infrastructures is beyond the scope of the MENASP network and its stakeholders. However, policymakers and academic institutions should invest in capacity-building within the region. Expanding funding opportunities for local scholars, promoting multilingual publishing, and supporting regional academic networks and global partners can help to diversify knowledge production.

Bridging the thematic divide between CP and SP research requires interdisciplinary collaboration. Research funders should encourage integrated research initiatives that explore how economic stability, social welfare systems, and healthcare contribute to conflict resolution. Expanding studies beyond terrorism to include broader security and governance issues would provide a more comprehensive understanding of conflict dynamics.

Addressing country-specific research gaps requires sustained investment in underrepresented areas such as economic justice, healthcare delivery in conflict zones, and post-conflict reconstruction. Encouraging locally driven research agendas and fostering partnerships between MENA institutions and global research bodies can help balance knowledge production.

Finally, ensuring equitable representation of MENA scholars in academic publishing and discourse is essential. Universities, journals, and funding bodies should prioritise diversity by providing platforms for MENA-based researchers to lead studies and shape debates. These measures will contribute to a more inclusive and representative body of scholarship on the region.

## Key Policy Targets

Research funders, academic and policy researchers specialising in the MENA region, researchers within the fields of SP and CP, international organisations, think tanks, and government departments

## Author's Contract Information

**Jordan Tchilingirian**
Department of Social and Policy Sciences
University of Bath

Email: jst50@bath.ac.uk