



THE ARAB WORLD BEYOND CONFLICT

Arab Center Washington DC
المركز العربي واشنطن دي سي



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PREFACE

On behalf of the Executive Board of Directors, the Academic Advisory Board, and the staff of Arab Center Washington DC (ACW), I am delighted to offer you this compilation of articles titled *The Arab World Beyond Conflict*. This volume is the fourth in a series of books published by ACW and is based on the proceedings of its third annual conference held on September 20, 2018, in Washington, DC.

Following the conference agenda, the book begins with introductory remarks entitled “The Path to Ending Conflicts: Prospects and Hindrances” by Yemeni human rights activist, cabinet minister, and international diplomat H.E. Amatalalim Alsoswa. The choice was not accidental. The perspectives she shares, as well as other contributions to this volume, reflect the core mission of “Arab Centers” worldwide—in Doha, Beirut, Tunisia, and Paris—to contribute meaningfully to the peaceful end of conflicts that have afflicted Arab politics over the past century and prevented the region from realizing its full economic, political, and social potential. As a nonprofit, independent, and nonpartisan research center focused on the Arab world and US-Arab relations, ACW remains committed in its mission to democracy, civil liberties, human rights, tolerance, and just and peaceful resolutions to conflict. This publication was designed by ACW staff with these precise objectives in mind.

As a long-term observer of Arab politics, I am aware of the ambitious implication of our title, “The Arab World Beyond Conflict,” which could be interpreted by some critics as naïve and idealistic. We are certainly mindful of the overwhelming and continuous presence of conflict

throughout modern Arab history. Indeed, Arab political life throughout the 20th century—and until the present—has seen more conflicts and wars than periods of peace and stability. It has been a depressing long list of violent clashes since the early part of the century until the present day, with ongoing strife in such places as Yemen, Libya, Syria, and Palestine. Indeed, wars in the modern period have caused millions of casualties between dead, wounded, and homeless victims, not to mention the devastating effects of wars on Arab countries' infrastructure, resources, and path toward democratization and equality for all.

As a research center committed to the peaceful resolution of conflict and the pursuit of democracy for the Arab people throughout the region, we feel compelled to examine the root causes of these conflicts, numerous as they might be, and prescribe some solutions for a better Arab future. This book aims to do just that. I hope readers find that the insights presented in these pages will help to create awareness about the Arab world's detrimental conflicts and ways to resolve them fairly.

Finally, a word of gratitude is due to all the contributors to this volume. The credit for the success of this publication is all theirs. Special thanks also go to the staff of Arab Center Washington DC for their professional assistance, particularly to Imad K. Harb and Zeina Azzam for editing this publication.

Khalil E. Jahshan
Executive Director

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS: THE PATH TO ENDING CONFLICTS: PROSPECTS AND HINDRANCES*

Amatalalim Alsoswa

I am honored to speak to you at the beginning of this important conference and to thank Khalil Jahshan and his distinguished team for the invitation and for the preparation and arrangement of this third annual conference of Arab Center Washington DC entitled “The Arab World beyond Conflict.” This is a very important topic, but also one that is full of risks.

The theme of the conference and the main issues it addresses are important for exploring the horizons of development in the Arab world and promoting opportunities for peaceful resolution of the ongoing armed conflict.

Parts of the Arab world are suffering from conflict that resulted in humanitarian crises, loss of life, and destruction of homes, livelihoods, and businesses. In order to alleviate this suffering, rival forces must be encouraged, perhaps even dictated, to return to the negotiating table and search for peaceful solutions. Although there are political differences, everyone will benefit from equitable national reconciliation and transitional justice that go beyond empty words and broken promises.

It is natural that centers of international scientific research are concerned with political, economic, and social developments in the Arab world. The Middle East was the transit area for the first human migrations from Africa to Asia, Europe, and the rest of the world. It was the home of the Pharaonic, Babylonian, Assyrian, Canaanite, Phoenician, Sasanid, Aramaic, and Arab civilizations. Here were born three major religions of the world: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. As the cradle of

these religions, the Middle East contains the most important holy places dear to the hearts of their followers.

The Arab world has a vast and unique material and intangible heritage that includes dozens of languages and hundreds of local dialects, traditional crafts, folklore, poetry, and literature. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has designated dozens of non-traditional heritage styles from more than 70 sites in the Arab world on the World Heritage List. These include the old city of Sanaa, the coastal center of medieval learning Zabid, the architectural wonder of Shibam Hadramawt, and Socotra Island in my own country, Yemen.

On the geographical side, the Arab world straddles the continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa. It overlooks the Atlantic and Indian oceans, the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, and the Arabian Gulf. Located here are the vital ports for world trade and international shipping as well as critical crossing points such as the Strait of Gibraltar, the Suez Canal, Bab al-Mandab, and the Strait of Hormuz. The atmosphere above the Arab world hosts lanes for international air traffic across continents. There is nothing isolated about this region, and this makes its welfare an issue that extends far outside its geographical borders.

The Arab world is rich in material resources and human resources. Arab oil and gas have global significance in terms of production and export with extensive reserves for the future. Arab funds, much of them derived from oil wealth, play an important role in the global banking system, international money markets, and worldwide investment activity. The mineral resources in the Arab world include iron, copper, potash, and aluminum, attaining a modest position in the global market. It should not be forgotten that demand for foreign goods makes this region one of the most important global consumer markets. Worldwide there are tens of thousands of migrant Arab minds working in research centers, health professions, and international companies.

It goes without saying that the Arab world is of great importance to global security and peace, especially in recent years. The map of most of the region was redrawn after the fall of the Ottoman Empire in World War I and the eventual withdrawal of British and French colonization. The competition for control of resources and politics in the region has a

long history. Resolving the conflicts formed due to local rivalry and foreign interference will not be accomplished overnight.

Despite all the resources enjoyed by the Arab world, as a whole it continues to suffer from a chronic failure to break the deadlock over past grievances. In addition, it has been unable to keep pace with the path of global development. Imagine what the region would look like today if it had embraced political reform, economic policies that benefited entire populations, and the pursuit of excellence in education and scientific research. It is not too late for an intellectual renaissance that builds on the positive elements of the region's cultural heritage, but this requires educational systems that promote creativity and religious reform that reflects the moral values of each religion rather than blind obedience to one sect or another. Such change forward requires governance systems that provide justice for all rather than power to a few. What are the reasons for this failure?

Internal, External, and Historical Factors

Some Arab and foreign researchers focus on the internal factors of the various crisis situations in the Arab world. It is true that conflict does not erupt in a vacuum. Throughout the history of the region there has been discrimination and intolerance on all sides. Sectarian rivalry that dates back centuries too often becomes an excuse for current disagreements, most often over control of resources and maintenance of exclusive political power. Yet this is also a region that has been victimized by foreign influence, especially the ambitions of regional and international powers. One need not go back to the medieval crusades or the fall of Baghdad to the Mongols to realize that the Arab world has never been a closed system. In fact, the suffering of the Arab world is the result of pressures and influences that are both internal and external.

The colonial era administration helped deepen the stagnation of political structures by denying legitimate opposition. The 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement and other agreements that drew the borders of Arab countries after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire caused many border disputes between Arab countries and between them and foreign countries. Economic resources in the region were exploited by colonial powers, local

cultural practices were considered inferior, and little was done to alleviate widespread poverty in the region.

The Cold War era turned the Arab world into a region of rivalry between the two global giants: the West, led by the United States, and the Eastern bloc, led by the former Soviet Union. The Arab-Israeli conflict has contributed to fueling tension and instability in the Middle East since the establishment of Israel in 1948 and the forced exodus of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their homes. In recent decades, the Arab world has become the primary area for the work of the International Coalition Against Terrorism.

Globalization and the achievements of the Fourth Industrial Revolution played a significant role in exacerbating the internal crises faced by the Arab world. These contributed to weakening the central state and deepening its inability to meet minimum internal obligations toward its citizens. Such a reality stirred public discontent against state authorities and helped revive regional, tribal, and sectarian differences in Arab societies.

In sum, the internal causes for this chronic failure are due to the deep defects and problems of economic structures, which benefited elites, educational systems that did not train people to think for themselves, the weak role of the judiciary, tyranny and corruption, rhetoric that heightens regional and sectarian tendencies, and the narrow social base of some ruling elites.

Although reformists and thinkers such as Rifaa al-Tahtawi, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi, Sheikh Muhammad Abduh, and others emerged, their voices had little lasting impact. Reformist calls have emerged in Egypt, Iraq, the Arab Maghreb, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen, but these were silenced.

It is not surprising that after the First World War, liberal, socialist, and nationalist ideas were very popular in Arab countries. The elites who espoused such theories did not succeed in mixing them with local cultural principles and were unable to carry out urgently needed historical reforms. Few Arab reformist thinkers had the charisma of such figures as Gandhi, Nehru, Nelson Mandela, and Mahathir Mohamad. Nor were they prophets of peace.

In the past century, there have arisen several streams of Islamic groups including ultra-conservative groups, but these currents have stifled genuine religious reform. It is important to remember that so-called “fundamentalist” religious groups have not been unique to the Arab region or Islam. Religious faith has always been an integral part of cultures in the Arab world and will continue to be so in the future. The problem is a lack of tolerance for opposing views, assuming that one’s own religion or sect is the only true one. When this leads to persecution or criminal prosecution on the basis of religious views, the essential message of peace is denied. Genuine reform looks forward, not toward what is imagined to have been the case in the past. Religion must be allowed to play a positive role in promoting justice, sound governance, equality of citizenship, women’s rights, civil rights, and peaceful political participation.

The so-called Islamic Awakening has echoes of the devastating conflict between Catholics and Protestants that plagued Europe after the 15th century. In both cases there has been a catalyst for armed violence, terrorism, and civil wars. Countless thousands of innocent people have been killed due to intolerance. This is not just between religions, as in the medieval Crusades, but also between sects within religions. The rupture started after the Rightly Guided Caliphs, but the bottom line is invariably political. The current negative rhetoric between different regional powers, for example, is about who gets to dominate. It serves as a political battle, not a theological disagreement. The inability to tolerate religious differences and moderate behavior blocks the religious spirit that is needed at this critical time.

Before the Islamic Awakening, great hope was placed in Arab nationalism, the opportunity for Arab states to rise up out of their colonial past. The Arab League was formed in 1945 in Cairo, the same year as the founding of the United Nations. What started out as six nations, most of which were still under mandate administration, the League now comprises 22 members, although Syria was suspended in 2011. Disagreements between members have greatly affected the ability of the Arab League to institute meaningful cooperation and change. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), created in 1981, is impacted by the recent blockade of Qatar. The Arab Maghreb Union was finalized in 1989 as a trade agreement, but internal differences have largely sidelined it. My point is that part of the failure

of reform in the Arab world is reflected in the inability to work together and overcome political differences.

The Arab Spring was heralded in the West as a kind of democratic awakening fueled by popular uprisings. It is true that regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen were toppled, but seven years later it is clear that, as the French say, the more things change, the more they stay the same. Libya, Syria, and Yemen are torn apart by conflict, creating a devastating humanitarian crisis and a refugee problem that has polarized European politics. Iraq still has not recovered from the American invasion, which started in 2003. Even though the Islamic State has lost virtually all of the territory it once controlled, the threat of terrorist attacks continues. It is safe to say that statecraft, not just certain individual states, is failing in much of the region.

The current crisis is not confined to the countries covered by the Arab Spring. The impact extends to other countries that ignore deep reforms, fail to expand opportunities for political participation, or guide governance and ways of managing natural and human resources in these countries. Complicating resolution of conflict in the region is the ongoing issue over Palestinian rights as Israel, with American support, continues to expand its settlements in occupied territory and brutalizes the population in Gaza. The war in Syria involves Turkey to its north and Iran to its east. Syrian refugees have flooded into Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Europe. As a result, European politics has taken an anti-immigrant shift to the right.

Trends in the Arab World

Arab countries have witnessed a number of internal armed conflicts, civil wars, and wars with their neighbors that have resulted in millions of human casualties and massive material losses. Half a million people were killed during the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s. As many as 100,000 Kurds were killed in the Iraqi Anfal campaign of 1988. The Kuwait invasion by Iraq's Saddam Hussein had its devastating consequences that are still felt until now. Between 1945 and 1995, there were at least 92,000 casualties in the Arab-Israeli wars, not counting recent deaths in Gaza and the Occupied Territories. Over 120,000 were victims in the Lebanese

Civil War. Sudan suffered roughly two million deaths by war, famine, and disease.

Half a million Syrians have died in the recent conflict and at least 50,000 Yemenis have died due to the war that began over three years ago. It is important not to forget the one million cholera cases and the dependency on humanitarian aid of nearly 80 percent of the entire Yemeni population. These figures do not include the large numbers of children who died from malnutrition, destruction of infrastructure, and other deprivations in war time. No country in the region has been immune from civilian casualties, whether through war or by its own government.

Conflict after the Cold War has heated up in recent years. In the past the various blocs, west and east, used Middle Eastern countries as proxies. Both global powers armed the region to its teeth, thus guaranteeing that conflict would reach far into the future. One noticeable shift is the reluctance of western powers, especially the United States, to remain the police force of the Middle East. American involvement in both Afghanistan and Iraq has demonstrated that foreign military action does not lead to political stability. Although there are still American troops stationed in the region, the current policy of the Trump Administration is one of arming certain nations to defend themselves—an approach that has an economic and not simply a strategic benefit. There is still a focus on the “War on Terror,” but that is being fought with drones rather than tanks and soldiers on the ground.

Modern weaponry allows bombing missions without exposing soldiers to armed conflict. External technical support makes it possible for poorly trained personnel in the region to operate sophisticated military hardware. Political differences are overlaid with religious rhetoric, creating sectarian polarization.

The Disease of Violence

How shall I characterize this disease of violence? There is no single causal factor but a complex of local, regional, and international interests that lead to the following symptoms:

- Undermining the structure of the state and dismantling it.
- Internationalization of conflicts.

- Participation of a large number of armed militias in conflicts, often with their military operations concealed and evidence of their atrocities suppressed.
- Imposition of de facto authority by violent coercion with the absence of government services.
- Use of sectarian religious slogans to foment local and regional conflicts.
- Genocide, identity killing, child soldiers, and forced displacement, and the abduction and forced labor of women, such as sexual slavery.
- Dumping all types of weapons into conflict zones, alongside excessive use of violence.
- Continuing undermining of negotiations and peace opportunities.

This catastrophic qualitative shift in Arab conflicts is due to the heavy legacy of internal conflicts in these countries, the diminishing legitimacy of regimes, and the lack of confidence in nationalist, socialist, and liberal theories and ideologies that prevailed in these countries after the post-World War I era. The imbalance in the current international order has also contributed to deepening and prolonged conflict, the diminished role and importance of regional alliances, and the lack of respect for the values of human rights and international law.

Can the situation get worse? Yes, if the superpowers and regional players do not realize the danger of these imbalances for the security and peace of the world. Serious efforts must be renewed to cooperate in drawing the parameters of an international order that respects human rights.

The Challenges of Natural Resources

These imbalances coincide with the increased risk to life on our planet due to climate change, global warming, and overuse of vital natural resources. The Middle East and North Africa region is the most water-scarce in the world. Three decades ago Boutros Boutros-Ghali, who was then Egypt's foreign minister and later secretary-general of the UN, predicted that the next war in the Middle East would be fought over water. Other factors have led to the recent conflicts, but the water shortage is a fire waiting to be lit. Yemen, with its population of some 28 million, is

literally running out of water due to overuse of its aquifers and growing demands for urban needs. Jordan does not have enough water for its own population, let alone the influx of several hundred thousand Syrian refugees. Iraq is furious with Turkey and Iran for limiting flow into the Tigris River; Egypt and Sudan are angry at Ethiopia for damming the Nile. People can survive if certain resources run out, but not without water to drink or grow their food.

These imbalances can only be addressed by humanizing the international system, curbing the arms race, promoting confidence and constructive cooperation among nations at all levels, and renewing the spirit of international organizations and freeing them from bureaucratic complacency and corruption. The major powers and the member states of the Security Council have a responsibility to exert greater effort to transform the rivalry in the Arab world into a constructive and balanced competition that serves everyone's interests and lessens the danger of regional and local conflicts with their humanitarian catastrophes.

Political Will

Despite the extremely complex conflicts in Arab countries, these will not be difficult to deal with if there is a serious international and regional will to make positive change and put past differences behind. Consider the lesson from the aftermath of World War II, when Germany and Japan were able to redefine themselves as productive and peaceful partners in the international order. The success of the peace processes in the Arab countries depends on unifying the efforts of the regional and international countries to provide material and moral support for peace negotiation. The Security Council has adopted explicit resolutions requiring the cessation of military operations in areas of conflict, the provision of safe-keeping and humanitarian assistance to parties in conflict, and an end to the export of banned weapons such as cluster bombs as well as arms smuggling in these areas. Support is needed for practical policies and field-ready plans to oversee the cease-fire, withdraw fighters from areas of confrontation, and intervene quickly to stop cease-fire violations. It is necessary to safeguard the human rights of victims, the wounded, and combatants and assist them for rehabilitation into civilian life.

What should be done now? There are ongoing initiatives by the United Nations and concerned leaders in the region to bring warring parties together at the negotiating table. None of the current conflicts will be resolved by armed conflict. Only by aiming words rather than bombs at each other can progress be made in sorting out differences.

In parts of the Arab world children are dying, pregnant women are not able to get proper health care, people are starving, victims are trying to survive after the deaths of loved ones or cope with injuries, and far too many families have been forced out of their homes or had their livelihoods destroyed. If we cannot recognize their needs, the conflicts will never be resolved.

As I close, let me be specific about my home country, Yemen. I believe the fundamental wish of the Yemeni people is for a resolution of this conflict, a chance to rebuild their lives in safety and with dignity. As a member of Yemen's National Dialogue, I participated in an effort to propose a national framework that would work for all parts of the society rather than favor a few. This effort, unfortunately, has yet to be acted upon by the Yemeni people. It is necessary to ensure that all the parties to the conflict abide by a comprehensive Peace Agreement, that a functional government of unity or consensus be created to restore services to its people, that reconstruction be directed first at the most vulnerable, and that human rights be the primary pillar for future growth. Resolving outstanding problems with neighboring countries is critical, but Yemen must be allowed to chart its own course.

The problems I have covered are many and the proposed solutions are not going to be easy. No single country, no single alliance, no superpower can resolve the issues that have led to the current conflicts in the Arab world. A first important step is for Arabs to recognize that it is in their best interest to make peace among themselves, not to fight over ethnic or religious differences. Following this, it is necessary to stop the blame game of current rhetoric.

Such efforts at reconstructing and restoring confidence will cost a lot of money, but not nearly as much as is spent on preparing and executing wars. Imagine if the millions upon millions of dollars spent on weapons and bombs in the current conflicts in the Arab world had instead been used to build schools, hospitals, bridges, and recreational parks. Imagine

if youth of the region were given hope for meaningful jobs, safe neighborhoods, and the best education possible. Imagine if elites stopped filling their own pockets and did everything in their power to eliminate poverty and discrimination. My question is: why do we have to imagine, when we need to act and make all this possible?

*These remarks are the edited transcript of the keynote address Dr. Alsoswa delivered at Arab Center Washington DC's annual conference on September 20, 2018, "The Arab World Beyond Conflict."



FOREWORD: CONFLICT IN THE ARAB WORLD AND THE WAY FORWARD

Imad K. Harb

For decades, interstate and intrastate conflicts have been an enduring and poignant characteristic of life in the Middle East and North Africa. Active and dormant wars and disputes dot the stretch of the Arab region, from the Western Sahara on the Atlantic Ocean, to the plains of Syria and Iraq on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, and to the far reaches of Yemen's Bab al-Mandab and the coasts of the Horn of Africa. Millions of combatants and innocent civilians have risked—and lost—life and limb. Massive tracts of land and entire countries have been destroyed in the pursuit of asserting control, maintaining occupation and authoritarianism, defending against nascent insurgencies, fighting non-state actors, and addressing myriad other forms of violence.

The Arab world's wars and disputes have become more intense since the Second World War and the dramatic and successful liberation from colonial rule, some of which was achieved through armed struggle. The wars arguably became more complicated and now involve active as well as passive participants, domestic and foreign. Political scientists, security experts, military and strategic thinkers, policy-makers, and others have composed various typologies of these wars: civil; inter-, intra-, and extra-state; low intensity; asymmetrical; insurgent, counterterrorist, or separatist; and ethnic and sectarian, among others. All have had devastating effects on Arab society and have been the main contributors to poverty, underdevelopment, illiteracy, inequality, poor education and health, and many other serious socioeconomic problems.

To be sure, over the last seven decades, only a handful of Arab countries escaped the scourge of civil wars. Most devastating, and to differing degrees, were those in Lebanon between 1975 and 1990; Yemen in the 1960s, the 1990s, and since 2004; Sudan between the 1980s and 2011; Somalia since the 1980s; and Syria since 2011, with tragic political, social, and economic consequences. In addition to the human and humanitarian costs, some had geostrategic ramifications. For example, the Sudanese war eventuated in the breakaway of the country's south and the creation of a new African nation, South Sudan, while the Somali war helped lay the groundwork for dismembering the federal state and the semi-independence of Somaliland and Puntland.

Many Arab countries have also experienced interstate wars such as the many rounds of fighting between Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq, on the one hand, with Israel, since its establishment, on the other. Those wars led to the loss of the rest of Palestine and Arab lands to Israeli occupation. Iraq in the 1980s fought a war with Iran that helped destroy both countries' economies. Iraq also invaded Kuwait in 1990 and only left after an international coalition coalesced to liberate the tiny emirate. Iraq was subjected to a sanctions blockade in the 1990s and then again to an American-led invasion in 2003 that spawned different forms of instability and a number of extremist organizations. These cross-border wars resulted in the death of hundreds of thousands of Arabs and others in the region and the destruction of property and infrastructure of states and societies.

The Arab world also underwent low-intensity warfare between politicized ethnic communities seeking recognition of their rights, while central governments sought to assert both their exclusive Weberian right to a monopoly on the use of violence and their Westphalian tradition of preserving their nation-states. A clear example is the decades-old struggle between Iraq's Kurds and the central government in Baghdad. That conflict eventually resulted in the creation of the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq that, despite operating within the country's territory and drawing a sizeable proportion of its budget from the federal government, has the potential—if local, regional, and international conditions allow—to inaugurate its full independence from the center. Ethnic and sectarian conditions also obtain in other countries such as Syria, Yemen, Libya,

Algeria, and Morocco and these could potentially lead to the same scenario as that in Iraq.

Importantly, the Arab world has been beset by the establishment of the state of Israel in historic Palestine and the dispossession and expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who were made refugees in neighboring countries and around the world. They now number in the millions and a large number live in difficult conditions in inhospitable camps. Those who remained became second class citizens in Israel or lived under Jordanian and Egyptian control until 1967, when an interstate war resulted in the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, the Golan Heights, the Sinai Peninsula, and the Gaza Strip. At no time did the question of Palestine cease to be an underlying cause of conflict and instability in the Middle East because it affected all other elements of struggle in the surrounding countries. Today, the Palestinian-Israeli and Arab-Israeli conflicts continue to be at the heart of developments in the Arab world and the Middle East.

Social, economic, political, and religious polarization as well as nefarious sectarianism have also wreaked havoc on Arab societies and states. Religious extremists possessing their own version of the ultimate truth have taken it upon themselves to rend their societies and expand to the international arena to spread their political and religious beliefs. Acts of violence, reciprocated by equally brutal state responses, were perpetrated against innocent groups and communities within individual polities. Other devastating attacks against targets around the world—specifically in the United States and Europe—elicited reprisals and gave ambiguous justification for counterterrorism policies that have contributed to social and political tensions in the Arab world and added to the instability besetting Arab societies.

These different manifestations of conflict and instability in the Arab world should not be seen as reflections of endogenous circumstances only. In fact, many of them have been affected by factors exogenous to the Arab world and have tended to originate from two general conditions. The first was related to the influence of the bifurcated international environment during the cold war, when some conflicts reflected alignments between some Arab states and one or the other of the two poles of international politics, the United States and the Soviet Union. The other less

clearly delineated factor reflected—and continues to reflect—the global conditions after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since 1989, there have been conflicts in the Arab world that were and remain associated with ethnic and sectarian disputes, invasions, cross-border wars, and the so-called war on terror, all seeing interference by international actors such as the United States. To be sure, many of today's active Arab conflicts—in Syria, Yemen, and Libya—and low-decibel, under-the-radar tensions in Arab societies are in good part influenced by outside actors in the form of counterterrorism efforts prescribed and perfected by American and other strategists.

This Book

The above brief, inchoate, and incomplete list and rendition of the state of conflict in the Arab world by no means suffices to explain the origins, causes, trajectory and development, or potential conclusion of strife in the region. Indeed, it only serves to raise awareness—if that is in fact needed—of the poignancy of conflict in the region and its impact on Arabs' hopes, aspirations, and future attempts at joining the international community's development goals. In the political science literature on democracy, some theorists have viewed the Arab world as “exceptional”; that is, it is unlike other regions in the developing world that have undergone waves of democratization and successful transitions from authoritarian rule. But this so-called exceptionalism theory—mistaken, shallow, and facile as it is—may not be so wrong when it is applied to the conflicts the Arab world has suffered for the last few decades. While there are some conflicts today, in Africa and Asia specifically, no other region is currently experiencing the wrenching instability that besets the Arab world.

This volume seeks to look at conflict in the Arab world from a different perspective than typologies of violence and geographical assignments. The essays argue that whatever its form, wherever it persisted, and however variegated its consequences, conflict was precipitated first and foremost by endogenous conditions for which the responsibility lies on the shoulders of Arab leaders, decision makers, and elites. They precipitated the environment that made conflict inevitable; in fact, they participated in perpetuating the circumstances that made it a defining characteristic of Arab societies. That many Arab leaders immortalized themselves in their positions of authority—many have served for decades as monarchs and

presidents and refuse to allow the development of institutional mechanisms for good governance—is testament that the conditions for conflict could not be ameliorated. Their coteries of consultants, advisors, beneficiaries, and hangers-on have been happy to perpetuate such conditions—a measure of the leaders’ satisfaction with their service.

To be sure, for Arab leaders and their elite supporters, conflict was and remains a cynical tool for helping to maintain control. In addition, they see that conflict in general—whether internal or cross-border—occupies people and prevents them from demanding change from authoritarian rule. Authoritarian regimes have always used times of conflict as national emergencies during which the opposition is silenced and demands are rolled back as distractions. Authoritarian leaders can always count on the fact that a needy population is usually too busy just making ends meet. Indeed, perpetuating poverty and inequality in the Arab world may undergird an official policy whose aim is to stifle opposition and replace it with resigned acquiescence.

By avoiding the discussion of ongoing conflicts—civil wars, cross-border fighting, insurgencies, and the like—this book examines different aspects of the domestic causes for conflict in the Arab world and the prospects of its amelioration on two interrelated and interdependent pillars. The first is reforming the Arab state—its makeup and institutions and its position in society—and the second is affirming the importance of citizenship for Arab states’ inhabitants. In other words, the book seeks to evaluate the domestic conditions for the existence and perpetuation of conflicts and recommends strategies for mitigating them by highlighting the dual and dialectical relationship between the state, as the legal political entity, and the citizen, as the agent for legitimizing the state’s rule. Most importantly, this volume calls for strengthening the Arab peoples’ agency in helping not only to lessen the causes giving rise to conflict in their lives but to participate in building the states that work to prevent conflict from afflicting their societies in the first place.

Section I: Addressing Causes of Conflict

Three contributions to this collection emphasize the essential conditions giving rise to conflict in the Arab world: socioeconomic disparities, poor records of human rights, and challenges to security. By providing the basic conditions giving rise to conflict and instability, the contributors lay

the groundwork for how to combine the dual remedies of state building and strengthening citizenship in the Arab world as strategies that would arguably alleviate the state of conflict for Arab societies.

Relying on United Nations studies and using a sweeping historical view of the economic decline of the Arab world since the 1970s, Rami Khouri exposes the current state of poor socioeconomic conditions in day-to-day life in Arab societies. He explains that poverty, disparities in the distribution of income, vulnerability to uncertainties, and marginalization govern the Arab region today. His analysis shows that at present, some two-thirds of Arabs are poor or vulnerable to poverty. The United Nations' Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) found that in ten non-oil-producing Arab states, approximately 116 million people were classified as poor (this is about 41 percent of the population) while 25 percent were vulnerable to poverty. The total could top 200 million. Perpetuating this catastrophic socioeconomic situation are two associated facts: the deficient levels of education in many Arab countries and the lack (or weak state) of social services provided to the poor. It is hard to see how such poverty and marginalization can be sustained without additional state repression.

Looking at repression, marginalization, and disempowerment, Sarah Leah Whitson highlights the use of tools like arbitrary arrest, torture, killings, rights abuses, and curtailment of citizens' freedoms as a way to perpetuate authoritarianism. To her, these constitute critical elements for a deliberately designed system of control that disempowers civil society and individual citizens and prevents populations from participating in governance and the economy. Whitson accurately links authoritarianism with corruption, abuse, and ineffectiveness and posits that the policies of marginalization and rights violations have been used by governments as conflict avoidance strategies. To her, governments in the Arab world see power as a zero-sum game where the state stands in opposition to the citizen, a situation that prevents stability and justice. She states that empowering civil society groups and assuring political inclusion and human rights are the only ways that Arab states could avoid the fragility that makes them unstable houses of cards.

Mehran Kamrava highlights the security challenges facing countries in the Middle East and examines four different but overlapping categories.

The first is the security architecture that has developed in the region that excludes Iran, a country not seen by the United States and the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council as having legitimate security concerns. The second is the widespread neglect of non-military security threats such as identity politics and sectarianism. The third and fourth challenges are a dialectical combination of the belligerence exhibited by some actors in the Middle East—basically, creating instability and hostility because of their own insecurity—and the traditional security dilemma that both reproduces itself and is reproduced by the constant upgrade and importation of yet more defense and military systems. Complicating these challenges are three general unknowns: the fate of the oil economies in the post-oil era when international investments become crucial, the future direction of Iranian foreign policy, and the shape of American security policies in the region.

Section II: Reforming the Arab State

One of the remedies for addressing the condition of conflict in the Arab world is addressing the mechanisms of reforming the Arab state as a structure of institutions, laws, regulations, organs, leaders, and elites. This book devotes four varied contributions by specialists in the fields of international law and transitional justice, conflict management and humanitarian response, macroeconomics and governance, and democracy and social change.

In the chapter on transitional justice in the Arab world, specifically after the protests of the Arab Spring, Noha Aboueldahab cautions against considering the practice in the Arab region as similar to areas of the world where a change from authoritarianism took place. To be sure, she protests that all post-Arab Spring processes of accountability have failed to truly hold leaders accountable because of obstacles erected by the states themselves. In fact, only in Tunisia was a process of transitional justice implemented after 2011; but even that was weakened and aborted by state leaders' machinations, which prevented the implementation of its proper mandate. On the other hand, she lauds Syrian activists' efforts at documenting atrocities in Syria, for future accountability. What is critical, according to Aboueldahab, is that transitional justice efforts are cumulative and should not wait for perfect conditions to be undertaken. If properly planned and

executed, such efforts could pave the way to liberal democracies that can build accountable states.

Sultan Barakat contends that the states of the Arab world can no longer pretend that poor economic, social, environmental, and other conditions only affect some of them and not others. He writes that individual states are manipulated by competing interests inside and outside the Arab region and that this has perpetuated their fragmentation and division. He thus proposes a strategy of inter-Arab collaboration and cooperation to implement a regional development and reconstruction plan that can help ameliorate conflict. As Barakat puts it, this should not do away with individual states in the service of a collective; states can be involved in joint action without losing their uniqueness and independence, and such engagement would show political maturity and visionary acumen. To do that, he proposes ten steps for regional collaborative reconstruction that can serve as a holistic, problem-solving outlook with conflict management at its heart.

In her analysis of Arab socioeconomic policies and problems, Bessma Momani approaches economic liberalization efforts as a significant root cause of conflict because they simply transferred ownership of state-owned enterprises to groups of elites who were and remain connected to the centers of political power. Any growth that was achieved in Arab economies has been “non-inclusive”: large swathes of Arab societies have no stake in their countries’ economies. What needs to be done, and quickly, is to redirect economic activities toward benefiting the underprivileged class and improving its standard of living. To Momani, this is the single most important function of states in the Arab region because of their inordinate influence over economic activities. In addition, she sees such an effort as best accompanied by political liberalization to enhance legitimacy and by inclusive policies involving women, rural communities, and the young.

Finally, Daniel Brumberg examines the Arab state, which he sees as having sharpened the instruments of autocracy and identity-based politics. What he calls the “pillared state” has developed to become unified with regimes, the economy, and the security sector. Thus, a challenge to any of these elements of control is a challenge to all, prompting a necessary tightening of leaders’ hold on power. Using the Syrian, Libyan, and Egyptian cases over the last eight years, he argues that the responses of

Assad, Qadhafi, and Sisi to protests were conditioned by this “sectorized” understanding of the individual states. For a long time, Arab leaders have used sectarian and other rationales to legitimate their state projects, but only as these served their interest in remaining in power, supported as they are by like-minded elites benefiting from the pillared state. Brumberg believes that the current shift to more authoritarianism in the Arab world is likely to continue and become more acutely felt, likely leading to more conflict.

Section III: Toward Inclusive Citizenship

Examining the other side of state-society relations, that of the Arab peoples, the book delves into the mechanisms that prevent the peoples of Arab states from exercising their citizenship rights in an open social and political environment. The contributions in this section thus try to address identity concerns and the problems of exclusion, the scourge of sectarianism, Islamism and its purported incompatibility with democracy, and the impact of social media on Arabs’ relations with their states.

Leveling a reasoned criticism at how Arab states have practiced exclusive identity politics vis-à-vis their minorities, Linda Bishai and Elly Rostoum explain the old trend as a product of undemocratic applications of governance that seek to divide Arab societies, in the process increasing the chances of conflict. They use Sudan, Syria, Iraq, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt as examples of ethnic and sectarian identity divisions in the service of a predatory regime feeding on identity conflict for survival. Their remedy is a combination of several factors, chief among them the transition to real democratic notions of governance that rely primarily on revising the idea of an Arab identity so that it becomes inclusive and heterogeneous. Such a change will help minorities gradually shed their grievances and feelings of marginalization and encourage them to have a sense of belonging as nationals in their countries.

Reaffirming prior ideas about Islamism and the right of Islamists to be political players, Shadi Hamid argues that disliking Islamists should not be a cause for excluding them from a functioning democratic system. He writes that it is always possible to oppose and even hate a particular group without going as far as removing its members from political life. Using the examples of Lebanon, Iraq, and Tunisia, Hamid cogently

writes that Islamist parties—even Shia ones in Lebanon and Iraq—have played significant roles in their governments. In Morocco, Islamists are in government, although no one can call that monarchy a democracy. These examples only sharpen the conclusion that Islamists' participation in government has simply become uncontroversial, and that the more they engage politically, the more difficult it becomes for adversarial political actors to exclude them legally or constitutionally.

Looking into sectarianism in the Arab world, Marwan Kabalan argues that it is a recent phenomenon that reflects contemporary events and problems. In essence, sectarianism is a political ruse used by elites and furthered by serious developments over the last few decades such as the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the wars in Syria and Yemen. However, Kabalan sees the rise of sectarianism as a natural outgrowth of the failure of state building that, in turn, was facilitated by outside intervention. The Arab state has not shouldered its responsibilities properly nor has it carried out its duties of providing security and public services and protecting the rights of citizens. Importantly, Kabalan states that the remedies for sectarianism include distinguishing between religious and ideological differences, on the one hand, and the political and cynical usage of the phenomenon by elites, on the other. Ways to address sectarianism also include differentiating between the so-called Islamic State, a Sunni organization, and the Sunnis who do not think it represents them. Finally, citizenship, along with the Arab state, must be strengthened to assure Arabs of their natural rights under equal protection of the law.

A final contribution by Tamara Kharroub looks into the weaponization of social media, which has become the conduit for identity conflicts in the Arab world. She argues that as groups feel threatened, they retreat into primordial identities such as tribalism to express their distinctiveness. On the opposite end, powerful elites use identity designations to deprive certain groups of their rights, aided by manipulation of social media. In so doing, they exacerbate social divisions and thus escalate conflictual relations. Kharroub proposes a two-pronged strategy that can be effective in dealing with this weaponization. The first is related to the large companies that control social media outlets. As big businesses, they should realize that their profits do not lie only with the powerful; indeed, part of their social mission is to oppose the spread of hate speech and bigotry. The

second strategy is directed at helping societies overcome the legacies of poverty, inequality, and marginalization that fuel conflict both online and offline. This task should be undertaken by civil society organizations and educational institutions whose responsibility is to design and implement digital literacy and civic education programs.

What Tomorrow Will Bring

Conflict has been a common feature in the Arab Middle East and North Africa. Disparate conditions and causes have given rise to conflict, exacerbated its seriousness, and made it the bane of effective development in the region. But if human history is any guide, conflict in the Arab world will eventually find its end, together with the demise of the authoritarianism that fed its cycles and benefited from its calamities. But that eventual-ity will depend on a dual approach that combines reforming the oppressive Arab state, which mostly served the interests of powerful leaders and elites, and rehabilitating Arab citizens to become agents for change.

It is true that the wave of protests that represented an Arab Spring in 2010-2011 failed to effect a full-blown surge of democracy and social peace. However, it helped to shake the foundations of the Arab state that has failed to address the many causes of conflict and discord in Arab society. And because agency matters, the hope is that the Arab peoples will continue to work toward becoming agents of change, with the goal of achieving and enjoying a peaceful existence. We hope that this book helps in explaining the domestic conditions that afflict the Arab world and make it “exceptional” regarding conflict, and in elucidating the important remedies for the devastating impacts of enduring conflicts in the region.



ADDRESSING THE ROOT CAUSES OF CONFLICT IN THE REGION

Deep Socioeconomic Disparities Exacerbate Arab Tensions

Rami G. Khouri

Government Survival Strategies in the Middle East

Sarah Leah Whitson

Chronic Insecurity in the Middle East: Causes and Consequences

Mehran Kamrava

The Legacy of the Pillared Arab State

Daniel Brumberg



DEEP SOCIOECONOMIC DISPARITIES EXACERBATE ARAB TENSIONS

Rami G. Khouri

The far-reaching turmoil that plagues most Arab countries today reflects problems that have festered for decades, such as sectarian tensions, political violence, civil wars, foreign military interventions, and widespread human vulnerability due to poverty and unmet basic needs. To fully understand current Arab events and trends we must grasp the arc of the twentieth century as it relates to the conditions and fates of the 22 Arab states that were born in it. Such a long view shows that most Arab states performed well in the first half century of their independence, achieving significant and sustained state-building from the 1920s to the 1970s. This included growing middle classes and several generations of citizens who expected that their future and that of their children would continue to be promising.

Weakness Sets In

The 1975-85 decade was a transition period that saw contradictory trends. Bursts of development—due mainly to massive availability of oil and gas income that permeated the entire region—alternated with periods of regression due to oil price drops and structural stresses that saw the sustained development of the previous half century run into serious constraints. The half century since 1970 has been characterized by erratic development, with pockets of sustained and equitable growth, entrepreneurship, and innovation amid stagnation, regression, and today's most recent serious regional threats: growing poverty, vulnerability, and

disparities that have started to threaten the stability and viability of some states.

The Arab political economy model of rentier states that had generated growth and relative equality for five decades slowly weakened after the 1970s, for many reasons. The end of the Cold War reduced the strategic value of some states to their superpower patrons. The direct and indirect negative impacts of the century-long Arab-Israeli conflict contributed to military rule in key Arab states, ushering into power often incompetent and corrupt leaders and their crony capitalist friends, cousins, and allies. By the 1980s, the former Arab nationalist developmental states increasingly had become family-run security states, as citizens became consumers and once sovereign states became outsourcing or commission agents for foreign powers. Domestic autocracy and incompetence coincided with continued high population growth rates and lower economic growth, as corruption and environmental deterioration also expanded steadily. Non-stop foreign military intervention in Arab lands since Napoleon landed in Egypt contributed to the wars and domestic destruction that some countries suffered—as we witness still in the continued fighting in Syria, which includes big powers along with direct regional interventions by states like Iran, Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and others.

These and other trends slowed the developmental thrust of the first half century of Arab statehood, bringing us to the point today of what might be called the *de-sovereignization* of many Arab states that rely for their survival on foreign military or economic support and endure the humiliation of foreign armies fighting at will inside their lands. It is not too harsh to conclude that many Arab countries during the past century have broadly failed the triple tests of sovereignty, statehood, and citizenship.

Our recent awareness of greater poverty, inequality, and desperation among Arab families does not mean that these problems only reflect events of the past few years. The region has witnessed numerous early warning signs since the 1970s that things were not going smoothly for all members of society.¹ Yet decision-makers ignored all the signs and persisted with policies that brought the Arab states to their current condition, including corruption, lack of decent jobs, state cronyism, environmental degradation, low social protection, and declining educational standards. Throughout the past four decades, national economic growth measures

inadvertently exaggerated the well-being of state and society and failed to capture the rising levels of poverty and vulnerability among families who used to be counted among the middle class/middle-income category. Those shortcomings of technical measurement or political awareness are no longer valid today.

Challenges to Sovereignty, Statehood, and Citizenship

In the context of this erratic historical legacy, the most significant dynamic that now shapes Arab countries is the fragmentation of many individual states and the entire Arab region itself. Consequently, we now pass through the second great fragmentation and reconfiguration of the modern Arab world. The first one occurred in the decades after World War I, when Ottoman and western colonial control gave way to the creation of new and independent Arab states. Today we experience the second Arab fragmentation and reconfiguration, as individual countries continue to polarize, fragment, and even shatter in a few cases, and the entire region has lost its integrity as a single Arab cultural and national unit.

Poverty, vulnerability, and inequality are core causes of the current collapse of state integrity and regional unity, as desperate individuals and families seek any source of assistance that will keep them alive and safe. The consequences of this continuing and painful trend are already visible throughout the region, in polarization and fragmentation in social, economic, political, ethnic, sectarian, and other fields. Almost every dimension of life that is now measured well by polls, surveys, and studies—gender, ethnicity, rural-urban location, education, health, security, wealth, poverty, self-confidence, trust in government, and others—reveals disparities and inequalities that continue to increase across the Arab region (with the exception of generally more homogeneous populations in energy-producing states with their more modest populations in relation to their ample income).²

A Dismal Socioeconomic Record

The realities and threats that define the Arab region are captured most dramatically in new evidence from Arab Multidimensional Poverty (MDP) studies³ by Arab and international organizations; these provide a much more accurate picture of the real conditions of our populations,

where more than two-thirds of households in the non-oil-producing countries are poor or vulnerable.⁴ This is supported by evidence from region-wide annual surveys by academic groups in the United States and Arab countries showing that in non-oil-producing states outside the Gulf region, an average of 60-70 percent of surveyed Arab families cannot easily or at all meet their basic monthly needs.⁵ Most previous measures of well-being developed by the World Bank, donors, national statistics agencies, and others mostly measured family incomes and expenditures and defined national economic growth in macro terms of total national income and GDP growth. These often reflected solid macroeconomic annual growth rates of 5-7 percent—for instance, in the years just before the 2010-11 Arab uprisings⁶—which did not capture the lack of improvements in family conditions, the declining middle class, rising poverty, and widespread concerns for the future. The MDP studies, on the other hand, more accurately reflect national economic realities and the distribution and prevalence of wealth and poverty, in large part because they capture both the very wealthy and the very poor who often were missed in traditional studies.⁷

Significant research in recent years has been conducted by economists at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), the World Bank, the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, and other institutions. They have used the MDP measure to gauge poverty and vulnerability more accurately than the previous reliance on money-metric measures such as \$1.25 or \$1.90 in expenditures per day. The Multidimensional Poverty Index, published by UNDP and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, provides many critical insights into this issue.⁸

The MDP approach more accurately measures real life conditions of families because it looks at a range of key indicators in health, education, and living standards (including nutrition, child mortality, years of schooling, sanitation, electricity, drinking water, and assets). ESCWA's analysis of conditions in Arab countries over the past 20 years reveals dangerous and persistent trends. The most striking is that actual levels of poverty and vulnerability in the Arab region are higher than previously thought, with some two-thirds of citizens being poor or vulnerable.⁹ The MDP

figures indicate poverty rates as much as four times higher than previously assumed. In ten Arab states surveyed by ESCWA, 116 million people were classified as poor (41 percent of the total population), and 25 percent were vulnerable to poverty. In Egypt, poverty increased from 19.5 percent in 2005 to 28 percent a decade later.¹⁰ If the level of 66 percent poor/vulnerable holds for all the non-energy-rich Arab states, this could mean that 200 million or more people are poor or vulnerable, out of a total Arab population of 400 million.¹¹

Even when the World Bank's poverty measure of less than \$1.90 daily expenditure per capita is used, in the period 2011-2015 extreme poverty in the Middle East increased from 2.7 to 5 percent—and the Middle East was the only region in the world where this indicator increased in that period. Consequently, the middle class in non-oil-producing Arab states has shrunk from 45 to 33 percent of the population, according to ESCWA economists.¹² They see middle income families continuing to slide into vulnerability, and vulnerable families in turn still falling into poverty.

The vulnerability measure is as striking as the poverty figure because vulnerable families on the edge of poverty who suffer a catastrophic event that reduces or entirely eliminates their income quickly plunge into poverty, for they usually have no savings or major assets and mostly do not enjoy insurance or social safety net protections. The income of middle-class families is not high enough to protect them from price increases or new tax burdens, which would drop them into the poverty category.¹³ One reason for the continuing demonstrations against government policies in many Arab countries in recent years has been the imposition of higher taxes and fees on citizens, which some demonstrators explicitly express, such as in the 2018 demonstrations in Jordan. In addition, once they sink into the ranks of the poverty class, they likely will stay there for decades, due to prevailing economic realities and the lack of social safety net programs across the region. Poverty/vulnerability rates are high and families who plunge into poverty cannot easily find relief because most economies grow slowly. Even those that grow at a 5 percent rate have little impact on the poor; this is because new jobs are not being created fast enough and the middle class continues to shrink, with the vulnerable and poor segments of society growing.

To make things even worse, we cannot expect any speedy economic improvements that can lower poverty and vulnerability, given that almost all the drivers of substantial economic growth in needy Arab lands are stagnant or declining; these include tourism, labor remittances, direct foreign investment, trade income, foreign loans and grants, and other factors. Such a grim economic environment is often due to the direct damage of wars in the region, but also to the loss of confidence among many investors.

The political consequence of a growing number of poor and vulnerable Arabs is that many of them are also increasingly marginalized and alienated from the mainstream of economic growth—and in many cases, from the political and national institutions of the state, which often drives them to consider leaving the country.¹⁴ In other words, citizen alienation and a larger gap between citizens and state lead to a fragmented and polarized society, to the point where it is safe to say that we cannot speak any more of a single “Arab world” that reflects an integrated and homogeneous group of like-minded states and societies. We can only speak today of an “Arab region” whose population comprises four distinct groups: wealthy and professional people who earned money in legitimate or corrupt ways and have no material concerns in life for themselves or their children; a shrinking middle class; over 50 percent of the population who are poor or vulnerable; and a small number who have exited state and society to find refuge abroad, or at home, in tribal, ethnic, or religious groups, criminal networks, or militias and terror groups—because their states failed them in terms of jobs, income, social and economic justice, opportunities, and basic human needs and social services. Many in this last group remain physically in the Arab world, but they operate outside its formal political and economic institutions. They look elsewhere, outside the state, for their identity, security, opportunity, voice, basic needs, and other critical factors that once defined the relationship between the state and its citizens.

The poverty/vulnerability and marginalization indicators are not only worsening in most cases, but they also seem to have become chronic. This is indicated in MDP studies that show that two factors significantly are associated with a family’s chronic poverty and vulnerability over successive generations: a low education level of the oldest family members, which condemns most uneducated workers to informal jobs that lack worker

protections and result in family vulnerability; and poor social services during early childhood years, which retard child development and impact negatively on a person's potential for decent education and employment. One of the reasons why so many Arab citizens are frustrated with their governments' performances in recent decades, according to analyses of the UN ESCWA, is the deteriorating quality of state-provided social services, which include education and early childhood development needs.

These and other factors in family life now are all linked in a vicious cycle that augurs poorly for Arab well-being in the coming decades because this scale and depth of pauperization and vulnerability cannot be reversed quickly. The new reality today is that once you are poor in the Arab region, you and your descendants almost certainly will be poor for many decades.

One reason for this conclusion is that new job opportunities on a large scale simply are not on the horizon. The sustained expansion in employment opportunities in the industrial, tourism, agriculture, and service sectors that characterized the Arab developmental spurt in the second and third quarters of the 20th century has long ended. Projections by the IMF and others indicate that the Arab region must create 60-100 million jobs by 2030, and 27 million jobs in the period 2018-2023, in order to reduce unemployment significantly, absorb new job market entrants, and increase incomes for millions of families.¹⁵ The prevailing policies and management capabilities of current Arab governments and private sectors show no signs of being able to achieve anything near this level of new job opportunities.

For another thing, most Arab labor markets will be defined heavily by informal labor for years to come. Recent regional studies¹⁶ suggest that labor informality averages in the range of at least 50-60 percent. This makes it likely that poverty and vulnerability will persist and even expand, due to the erratic and low pay and the lack of protections that workers in the informal economy suffer. Less than one-third of Arab workers enjoy the benefit of pension funds, and informal workers usually lack legal protections such as minimum wages, maximum working hours, workplace safety rules, retirement and health insurance funds, training and promotion opportunities, and other critical elements of decent employment. Informal Arab workers in cities or on farms do manual labor that requires back-breaking toil but no critical thinking,

and it rarely offers workers opportunities to acquire new skills or benefit from training in new fields. Workers with low and irregular pay, with no chance of improving their lot in life and no means of politically expressing their grievances, only experience heightened feelings of dehumanization and social marginalization—and such sentiments can easily spill over into political alienation which some studies suggest can drive some susceptible individuals toward violence.¹⁷

A critical link in this cycle of informal-labor-linked poverty is the education system, which generally performed well in the first half century of Arab statehood; however, it has faltered in recent decades and become a major contributor to the human distress outlined in this chapter. The declining quality of public education in most of the non-energy-producing states with the largest Arab populations is reflected in universal testing scores. These show that as many as half the students in primary and secondary schools across the Arab region are not learning, as they do not meet minimum reading, writing, and mathematics levels for their ages.¹⁸

Chances are that most of these non-performing students will drop out before completing primary or secondary education. Many others remain in school and are routinely graduated to the next level of schooling, to avoid exposing the severe weaknesses and incompetent management that plague public education. It is estimated that over 20 million school-age young Arabs are out of school today, and nearly half the 75 million in primary and secondary school are likely to drop out before their graduation date. Here alone is a cohort of some 50 million young Arabs today whose lack of education will guarantee them a lifetime of low-quality well-being as they struggle to make ends meet, for the most part in the informal labor sector.

Equally troubling are the several reasons why youth drop out of school early or do not learn anything in school. Some must leave school to work and contribute to their family income. Poor school environments are also a problem. Regional surveys show that most students in Arab primary and secondary public schools do not feel safe physically, emotionally, or socially, which either drives students out of schools or explains their low academic performance if they stay in school. The wars in Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Yemen, Libya, and Somalia are a major reason for the large number of out-of-school children, especially among refugees and

internally displaced families. This problem continues to worsen, with UN figures showing a total of 30 million displaced Arabs and 60 million people who need essential aid just to survive (food, water, shelter, and medical care).¹⁹

This rather catastrophic regional human development situation is widely ignored in the Arab and international media and is rarely discussed or analyzed in the Arab public spheres. The poor and vulnerable Arab citizens continue to increase in numbers; moreover, they enjoy no voice or accountability to improve their lot in society through political action. They are invisible people who do not exist in the mainstream media or the international arena, and often they are not visible even to the political elites who manage Arab countries. The combination of economic desperation at the family level, with an almost total lack of political opportunities for a redress of grievances, now routinely leads to outbursts of demonstrations, as we have witnessed in 2018 in Jordan, Sudan, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and other Arab lands. Citizens' legitimate grievances are rarely acknowledged and addressed. If this situation continues to expand the pool of poor, vulnerable, and marginalized Arab men, women, and youth, we should not be surprised to see them directly or indirectly contribute to the stresses, conflicts, and national fragmentation that plague so many Arab countries today, and these are often linked to political violence and warfare.

The fact that two-thirds of our fellow Arab citizens are poor, vulnerable, and marginalized, with little hope of improving their conditions in the near future, should be taken as the latest early warning sign that deep dysfunctions in our societies must be addressed as soon as possible, if we want to avoid further bouts of violence and upheaval.

Notes

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⁸ See "Policy—A multidimensional approach," and "Multidimensional Poverty Index."

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¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Author interview with ESCWA economists, September 2018.

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GOVERNMENT SURVIVAL STRATEGIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Sarah Leah Whitson

Regional and global geopolitics, intrigues, and rivalries often attract the most attention among analysts examining the conflicts plaguing the Middle East. But it is in fact the persistent, grinding, and often stagnant domestic conditions that are at the core of every national conflict; they provide the brittle kindling that foreign and domestic actors can easily ignite into actual military conflagrations. When we examine “what went wrong” in Arab countries facing wars, rebellions, and uprisings, we do not need to look much farther than the systematic human rights abuses, the endemic political marginalization, and the disempowerment or de-development of civil society for our first answers.

The traditional recommendations on how to fix states confronting these conditions are calls for reform: urging governments to amend laws, revise policies, and proactively reverse their deliberate efforts to keep civil society weak and under heel. The challenge for a human rights activist, an academic, or even a journalist seeking to “reform” Arab politics is the governments’ firm and deep belief that their populations must remain marginalized with no meaningful voice in their affairs and no accountability for the powers—economic, political, or security—that govern them. Arab states simply don’t want to be reformed.

The human rights abuses that these states commit typically include arbitrary arrest coupled with torture; extrajudicial or judicial executions; and curtailment of citizens’ free expression in writing or in protest. These are part and parcel of a system of control over their populations. The disempowerment of civil society—that is, refusing to allow its organizations

to operate independently—is also a product of deliberate design. This is because states that exercise absolute and unchecked authority perceive as an existential threat a citizenry with a voice in the levers of government and in the economy, demanding respect for their human rights.

What can be done about the most authoritarian governments whose survival depends on suppression of their citizens? At best, civil society can chip away at the margins of their abuses in areas like systemic torture and push for a loosening of press restrictions or the release of political detainees—constituting an exercise in a kind of “liberalization” that is usually advocated by softer western states.

The fact remains, however, that when there is a little more freedom, space, and engagement, the first impulse of civil society is to get rid of undemocratic governments that face no test at the ballot box. This is typically because authoritarianism goes hand in hand with corruption, abuse, and inefficiency. A government that has no accountability and whose primary purpose is to block any challenges to its rule, no matter how faint, will by nature become corrupt, abusive, and ineffective—at least that is the pattern in the Middle East where, sadly, such governments proliferate. In reality, the intentional policies of marginalization, human rights abuses, and knee-capping of civil society have become governmental “conflict avoidance strategies.” They typically work for a long time until there is an eruption of the sort we saw in the 2011 uprisings or Iraq’s war against the Islamic State (IS).

Egypt as a Striking Example

Egypt is a perfect case in point. The Egyptian revolution unfolded at a time when the former president, Hosni Mubarak, had eased up on his absolute control over the population. In 2005, well before the uprisings, the Mubarak government bowed to pressure from the George W. Bush Administration to “democratize” and allowed the Muslim Brotherhood, long a semi-tolerated opposition, to compete more broadly in elections. The Brotherhood then won 88 seats in parliament—although not without eight deaths during violent polling booth clashes.¹ The sudden opening of political space reflected the government’s desire to show the world what political pluralism in Egypt would look like, with Islamists in ascendance; in a sense the lawmakers were saying, “You want democracy? Here’s democracy for you. But are you sure you want democracy?”

By 2011, the Egyptian press was certainly freer than it had been in prior decades, and Egyptian civil society organizations—primarily Muslim Brotherhood groups providing social services, but also human rights organizations and emerging media outlets—were strong and active, if tightly overseen by the government and functioning in narrow spaces.² What remained entrenched, however, was torture and abuse by Egypt's security forces; indeed, the monopoly on authorized violence is a state's ultimate form of societal control, and it is clearly quite addictive to security forces that operate with impunity.

Violence by the state was what broke the back of the Egyptian people. When the Egyptian uprising erupted in January 2011, it was on the anniversary of the death of Khaled Said, a young Egyptian man whom security forces had tortured to death in Alexandria. The initial protests across the country were overwhelmingly about the demand for accountability for abuse by the security forces in addition to ending the harsh military trials of civilians.³

The electoral success of the Muslim Brotherhood following the 2011 Egyptian revolution, in both the parliament and the presidency, reflected its strength in civil society throughout the country and its popularity among a wide segment of the population. Many speculate whether more secular or nationalist candidates would have been more successful had they had the same space to organize and reach the public; others explain away the weak showing of secular and leftist parties as a product of their forced disorganization.

After the 2013 counterrevolution, it was no accident that the coup government's first act was to jail all of the country's viable opposition—some tens of thousands of Muslim Brotherhood members or sympathizers.⁴ Next, the government moved to kill over 1,000 protesters at Rabaa and al-Nahda Squares in 2013 as well as hundreds more in protests in the year or two after the massacre.⁵ Such government crackdowns have largely ended popular street protests as a mode of resistance in Egypt, at least for now.

The Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi government learned its lesson from what it now regarded as the naïve and weak Mubarak regime; it has moved to ensure that there will not be an iota of space for another uprising like the one in 2011. Apparently, the Sisi government is not satisfied that its

aggressive and violent campaign against the Brotherhood and its supporters—including declaring it a terrorist organization, shutting down its civil society organizations, and confiscating all of its private and organizational assets from schools, hospitals, and the like—is enough to curb political threats in the country.⁶ Therefore, it has turned to all other political opposition, including people who pose no actual political or competitive threat like members of the secular and leftist parties or even old regime loyalists like Ahmed Shafiq, and most recently Mubarak’s sons.⁷

One of President Sisi’s first acts was to pass a draconian Public Assembly Law, effectively making it illegal to protest anywhere. His government then passed a new NGO (non-governmental organization) law that ends the notion of any independent civil society organization in the country.⁸ And still not satisfied with this extreme disempowerment of civil society, Sisi has moved to arrest or ban travel by the country’s human rights activists and journalists; this now applies even to photographers, actors, dancers, musicians, singers, and artists.⁹

There is no free press in Egypt anymore; instead, there is mass surveillance of private communications thanks to technology sold by western companies. In recent months alone, Egypt adopted a law that empowers the state’s top media regulatory agency to use the “fake news” label to shut down social media accounts with more than 5,000 followers, without having to obtain a court order.¹⁰ Another new law allows blocking websites with content deemed a threat to national security.¹¹

The one concrete gain from the revolution was ending military trials, but the Sisi government moved to restore those as well, trying more civilians since it has come to power than during over 30 years of Mubarak’s reign.¹² Human Rights Watch’s most recent report showed widescale, systemic torture in Egypt’s prisons and at the hands of Egypt’s security forces.¹³ Clearly, the situation is worse than ever before.

The population is quiescent for now, save for the limited war in Sinai where, for five years, the government has been unable to defeat no more than allegedly a few thousand militants.¹⁴ The situation there is not tenable because at times, state repression and marginalization can have disastrous outcomes, creating a backlash of horrific proportions. This is what happened in Iraq in entirely predictable ways.

The Iraqi Example

The rise of the Islamic State in Syria and its remarkable takeover in 2014 of large swaths of Iraqi territory, facilitated by the near instantaneous evaporation of Iraqi security forces, captured world attention. In reality, this had unfolded for over a decade, starting with the traumas of the 2003 Iraq war, including the death of over half a million people as well as imprisonment and torture of Iraqis at the hands of American forces. The radicalization was thus foreseeable. The rise of IS was also a result of the highly sectarian government of former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, which divided the nation into Sunni and Shia warring camps for many years to come.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) and others sounded the alarm about Maliki's policies against the Sunni population during his rule. HRW also warned against his administration's laws of political exclusion and arbitrary mass arrests and torture, a corrupt judicial system, and indiscriminate killings and bombardment (including the use of barrel bombs against protests and violence in the Sunni provinces), advising that they would lead to war.¹⁵ In 2013, this writer warned in a *New York Times* op-ed that, "[T]he Iraqi government has hurled the country to the brink of a new civil war."¹⁶ By early 2014, well before IS's appearance, 500,000 Sunnis had been displaced by the fighting.¹⁷ The Iraqi government's conflict avoidance or conflict abatement strategies had created a vastly worse social and political crisis. These were the conditions that galvanized support for extremist groups in Sunni areas, which coalesced into IS and spawned a renewed terror crisis.

Unfortunately, the most important measures to avoid a reemergence of a new outright war are still missing in Iraq. In dealing with the Islamic State, Iraqi security forces have committed outrageous violence against IS suspects and their family members, with the most horrific torture and abuse videotaped and proudly published on Facebook posts of Iraqi police and soldiers. Since its battlefield victory over the organization, the Iraqi government has pursued mass prosecutions of over 16,000 alleged IS members with no regard to what crime they may have committed, resulting most often in life sentences or the death penalty.¹⁸ And while these prosecutions have taken place in the name of justice, they have been devoid of any meaningful participation from IS victims, including the

Yezidis who arguably suffered the most at the hands of the organization. The ongoing detention of IS wives and children shows that the government remains focused on collective punishment instead of reconciliation. Rather than meet the demands of its people half-way, the government has doubled down on its brutality, as seen in the attacks in summer 2018 on protesters in Basra, whose grievances were primarily economic.¹⁹

Ultimately, there is far more hope for reform in Iraq, given its democratic structure and semblance of real political competition. The recent peaceful transfer of power from Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to Adel Abdul-Mahdi, in elections whose results no one inside or outside the country could predict, is a meaningful step in Iraq's political development toward a place where power is contested at the ballot box and not at the barrel of a gun. But for Iraq to secure its status as an emerging democracy in the Middle East and as a state ruled by law, in contrast to armed groups like IS, it must first and foremost grapple with accountability for the gross abuses of its security forces.

Meanwhile, so long as governments in the Arab world continue to see power as a zero-sum game, as the state versus its own citizenry, it is difficult to envision stable and just states in the region, at least in the short term. Without empowered civil societies, broad political inclusion, and respect for human rights, Arab states will remain fragile houses of cards, to be played, manipulated, and conquered by the next strongest interloper.

Notes

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CHRONIC INSECURITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES

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Even before the discovery of oil in southwestern Iran at the start of the 20th century, the Middle East was viewed as a strategically vital region, both for the global economy in general and for the continued prosperity of advanced economies in particular. In the process, the region has become an arena for the emergence of multiple and often overlapping security challenges, many of them indigenous to the area and many imported from abroad. Up until the 2011 Arab uprisings, most of these security challenges revolved around territorial, political, and military competitions and conflicts within and between actors in the region itself and from outside actors. While threats and challenges to human security were also present, they were often overshadowed by more immediate and more tangible threats to territorial sovereignty and by various forms of political and military competition between state actors.

The 2011 Arab uprisings added a new dimension to security threats and challenges in the larger Middle East: identity politics. More specifically, the rise and spread of sectarianism introduced a new element in the societies and cultures of the region in which large swaths of the population felt threatened because of their core identity and belief systems. In its latest iteration, sectarianism has become a politically salient tool used by regional states for purposes of deflecting blame and enhancing faltering legitimacies. But its instrumentalist use occurred within receptive social and cultural milieus where it was readily adopted and internalized by influential non-state actors and nongovernmental organizations, with religious clerics, mosques, and the traditional and social media chief

among them. The cross-border conflicts and civil wars that dominate the Middle East as well as the Iranian-Saudi competition in and around their immediate neighborhood only reinforce the salience of sectarian beliefs among peoples of the region. In the contemporary era, threats to human and hard security have converged and have assumed a mutually reinforcing relationship with one another in the Middle East.

Sources of Insecurity

The sources of this insecurity can be divided into four broad and overlapping categories. First, the security architecture that has emerged in the region is itself a source of insecurity. So far, it has largely rested on the exclusion of Iran and the continued and extensive efforts of an external balancer and its footprints, namely the United States. US and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) security and strategic thinking were long premised on the assumption that Iran does not have any legitimate security concerns of its own. The flawed nature of the assumption prompted the Obama Administration to rethink and revise its thinking on Iran, largely through ensuring that the long-running nuclear negotiations with the Islamic Republic came to a successful fruition in 2015. Despite considerable consternation among Saudi and Israeli leaders, the Obama Administration stayed the course. But its successor Trump Administration reversed course and US-Iranian tensions once again increased.

A second reason for pervasive insecurity in the Middle East is the widespread neglect of security threats that are not strictly military in nature. More specifically, the rise of identity politics in general, and sectarianism in particular, have created considerable tension within and between communities across the region. Sectarianism has added force and potency to the rhetoric of state and non-state actors who have sought to advance their own agendas, and to compensate for their own shortcomings, by claiming to be defenders of supposedly threatened identities and communities.

This has been fed and reinforced by a third cause of insecurity, namely, the belligerence of the actors involved. Agency matters. At their core, politics and international relations are products of actions by individual policymakers and reflect their preferences. Moreover, aspirations of regional hegemony, ambitions of power projections, and achievement of middle power status have propelled regional state actors to compete with and

undermine one another. These ambitions, combined with the force of sectarianism on the one hand and the proliferation of weak and fragile polities in the Middle East on the other, have made the region particularly volatile.

Foreign and security policy belligerence has had a fourth consequence: the ironic reproduction of insecurity itself, otherwise known as the security dilemma. This is when security-enhancing measures by one state increase the insecurity of its adversary, whose own countermeasures make the former insecure. The vicious cycle of security-insecurity that the security dilemma represents continues to undermine the prospects of regional peace and stability in the Middle East.

The result has been the emergence of a highly volatile and tense regional security complex characterized by chronic tensions, diplomatic disputes, exceedingly charged and tense emotions, deep-seated anxieties and animosities, and, more recently, open military conflict and warfare. In the current global context, the Middle East's instability is not occurring in isolation and is fed by—and is in turn feeding—instability in other places, near and far. In fact, it can be argued that the flows of instability from Yemen to Somalia are tying together one regional security complex with another.¹ Since 2011, the world has witnessed uncharacteristic diplomatic and military assertiveness, often bordering on bellicosity, from the likes of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Further, the proliferation of weak and fragile polities has afforded them, in addition to Iran, the opportunity to try to expand their respective spheres of influence to places as far flung as Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Libya. Ruling elites across the Middle East have historically demonstrated pragmatism in pursuit of political survival strategies.² It is unclear whether their new pursuits—meant not so much to ensure their survival as to enable them to project power—will end up presenting them with new security challenges.

Looking Ahead

Not surprisingly, for some time now the question of what needs to be done to foster security in the Middle East has attracted the attention of numerous analysts, diplomats and policy practitioners, and academics.³ Three critical independent variables whose change in one direction or another is likely to greatly affect the overall security architecture and

stability of the region should be highlighted here. These include the role of the region's natural resources, namely oil and gas, in shaping ongoing domestic and international politics; perceptions toward and the direction of Iranian foreign policy and the Islamic Republic's evolving strategic role and position in the region; and the shape and direction of US foreign and security policies as they relate to the Middle East. These are the great unknowns on the road to the evolution of security dynamics in the Middle East.

Natural resources have played the role of a double-edged sword for the Middle East. On the one hand, they have brought the region a resource curse on the domestic front and the unwanted intrusion and attention of the West. On the other hand, natural resources have turned what were once desert outposts and dusty fishing villages not that long ago into global cities and regional powerhouses today.⁴ Given their oil reserves and wealth-driven foreign policies, many GCC states have in fact emerged as "strategic and commercial pivots" around which shifts in the global balance of power are taking place.⁵ And oil and gas reserves will no doubt continue to keep global interests in the region high for the foreseeable future.⁶

But given the centrality of hydrocarbon resources to the evolution of the region's contemporary political economies, and their continued role in enabling politically unaccountable regimes to stay in power, the nature and shape of the post-oil era remain a big question. By most accounts, the second oil boom of the early 2000s has now come to an end. The petroleum bubble has burst, with prices going from more than a \$100 a barrel in 2014-2015 to between \$30 and \$40 in 2015 and early 2016. By mid- to late-2017, they had crawled back up to the mid-\$40 to \$60 range.⁷ No oil-dependent country can withstand this kind of a decline in revenues without facing a crisis.⁸ International investments, along with serious moves across the GCC to prepare the domestic economy for the post-oil era, are likely to go part way toward alleviating some of the potential pains of transitioning to a new political economy. But exactly what that new era will look like, and how domestic populations and international and other regional actors will react, remain unknown.

Most observers agree that the post-oil era will be one of increasing domestic conflicts and threats to human security in the Middle East.⁹ What is unclear is the extent to which current moves toward fostering

a knowledge-based—instead of a resource-dependent—economy are substantive and appropriate enough in addressing potential future needs. Also unknown are the intra-regional and international ramifications, if any, of the arrival of the post-oil era. Will the Middle East remain geopolitically important in global strategic calculations? As small, security-dependent states, will the GCC countries still be able to attract offshore balancers and, especially, the United States? Finally, will new and as yet unforeseen sources of tension and competition emerge and become points of contention within and between states?

A second unknown is Iran's evolving role in the Middle East. More specifically, there are two questions concerning Iran and the rest of the region. First, what direction will domestic Iranian politics take as the country continues to decide the precise terms on which it wants to engage the rest of the world? Although labels such as "hardliners," "moderates," and "conservatives" are notoriously inaccurate indicators of who governs the country at any given point and how these leaders perceive Iran's role in the region and beyond, factional alignments in Iran do continue to change, often quite unpredictably, and such changes often alter the country's foreign policy and its international relations in significant ways. If there is a constant in Iranian politics, it is its fluid and unpredictable nature.

One of the primary structural causes of tension in the Middle East is the deliberate exclusion of Iran from the prevailing regional security arrangement. As the United States and its regional allies have sought to isolate and marginalize Iran in the Middle East and elsewhere, the Islamic Republic has cultivated ties with militias and other non-state actors across the Middle East. These include not just the Lebanese Hezbollah or the Iraqi al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya (the Islamic Resistance), but even the Afghan Taliban.¹⁰ The outcome has all too often been a zero-sum game in which strategic competition between Iran and its southern Gulf neighbors has only heightened regional and intranational tensions and instability. Mohammad Ayoob warns that "isolating Iran and building a security structure to contain it rather than include it is bound to fail."¹¹ He likens such a scenario to building a South Asian security structure without India's participation. Iran's integration into a regional security framework, Ayoob and others agree, will no doubt result in lowering Arab-Iranian tensions.¹²

The third and final independent variable affecting Middle East security in the coming years is the United States, which has been one of the central constitutive elements of the regional security arrangement in the region for several decades. As recently as the early 2000s, experts were confidently stating that “the *sine qua non* of any future Gulf security system will be a U.S. military umbrella.”¹³ Today, more than a decade later, however, it is no longer clear whether the historic *raison d’être* of American military presence in the Middle East still holds. For decades, both before and after the Cold War, America’s strategic interests in the region boiled down to oil. In his 1987 statement to the US Congress, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger was clear in outlining American strategic objectives in the Middle East. For over four decades, he said, America’s “vital national interests are at stake in the Gulf” and have required the United States to be “present, vigilant, and resolute....” These national interests included “denying Soviet access/influence in the region which would threaten free world access to regional oil resources; stability and security of the Gulf states which is critical to insure Free World access to oil; and access to Gulf oil resources, the disruption of which would seriously affect the Free World oil market.”¹⁴

In the second decade of the 2000s, imported oil in general, and Middle East oil in particular, do not have the same significance to the US economic engine that they did in the 1980s. Beginning with President Barack Obama’s second term in office, a new strategic perception seemed to be emerging in which the US military presence in the Middle East was no longer strictly necessary.¹⁵ Moreover, the Obama Administration’s notion of “leading from behind,” coming on the heels of George W. Bush’s hegemonic interventionism, appeared to be signaling “US acknowledgement of the end of its regional hegemony.”¹⁶ But actual signs of a lessening of US military commitment to and presence in the Middle East were few and far between. In fact, there is no reason to believe that Obama’s evolving views about US security commitments in the Middle East, especially near the end of his tenure, were shared by the Trump Administration or, for that matter, within the larger US foreign policy establishment.¹⁷

What has been clear for some time is that unilateral US attempts at imposing liberal democracy and a return to the old-fashioned balance-of-power approach—reminiscent most recently of George W. Bush’s foreign policy toward the Middle East—are no longer viable options.¹⁸

Also problematic have been US attempts to act as an external balancer using unsteady or unreliable regional allies.¹⁹ Despite the failure of such approaches to produce desired results so far, the Trump Administration has declared its pursuits to be integral to its policies toward the region. Ideally, US engagement in and commitment to the Middle East should move in a non-military direction.²⁰ If oil supplies are generally safe, and a *modus vivendi* is reached between Iran on the one side and the United States and its allies on the other, then the American military presence in the Middle East can be substantially reduced.²¹ This would not resolve all regional tensions, but it would go some way toward reducing them. It could then pave the way for gradually replacing the current balance-of-power system with one that takes into account a “balance of interests.”²² As Wehrey and Sokolsky argue, “a new regional security forum should be an integral element of the United States’ vision of a rules-based and more stable security order in the Gulf.”²³

These are only *ideal* scenarios that could potentially turn the United States from one of the region’s most powerful belligerents into a primary catalyst for reduced tensions and increased stability. Academics often excel at laying out such visions, but seldom do politicians and policymakers think they are viable or even realistic. These types of scenarios have been around for some time, but none has been considered seriously so far.

More than a decade ago, for example, Michael Kraig called for a “principled multilateralism” in which “security is sought with other states rather than against them.” He argued that “domestic developments in the Gulf will follow a more beneficial course if all states are gradually intertwined in a web of military and economic agreements that create strong interdependence.”²⁴ Today, Iran and Saudi Arabia are locked in an intense and conflict-prone competition; there are proxy wars raging in Syria and Iraq; Libya is in tatters and has become a new arena of power projection for the United Arab Emirates; and a Saudi-led military coalition is unable to fully extricate itself from Yemen without having the country devolve completely into chaos and disorder. And neither the Saudis nor the Iranians appear willing to reverse course or capable of containing the destructive sectarianism which their policies keep fueling. Middle East security today remains as elusive as ever.

Notes

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THE LEGACY OF THE PILLARED ARAB STATE

Daniel Brumberg

Introduction

Among other things, politics provides a means of managing conflicts. Autocracies foster and manipulate disputes, while democracies—when they function correctly—negotiate, reduce, and if possible, resolve economic, political, and ideational tensions. Thus, democratic transitions involve a fundamental change in how conflicts are mediated. In the Arab world, efforts to move from authoritarian to democratic conflict management have largely failed. Indeed, with the partial exception of Tunisia, the 2011 Arab revolts not only intensified social and ethno-religious movements, ideologies, and conflicts, but they also opened the door to efforts by leaders of Egypt, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates to recast and sharpen the instruments of both autocracy and identity-based politics.

This essay offers a framework for analyzing these corrosive dynamics by focusing on the “pillared state” and its lasting influence on the domestic and regional politics of the Middle East. This state is distinguished by the intertwining of state institutions with regimes, the economy, and the security sector. The more the survival of each of these power arenas depends on the survival of the rest, the higher the risk that ruling elites attach to any effort to peel away any one strand in the power structure. In the pillared state, the mere prospect of even a modest political or economic opening often generates a relentless drive by ruling regimes to hold on to power at all costs.

The violent reaction of several Arab leaders to the 2011 revolts illustrated this all-or-nothing logic. But what drove Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Libya's late strongman Muammar Qadhafi, and Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi was not merely their fear that any significant loss of economic or political control might lead to their political or even physical demise. In a more basic structural sense, their reaction to events was fueled by the crucial role that the pillared state had long played in protecting specific tribal or ethno-religious groups from domination by their rivals. Thus the "new sectarianism," while hardly ancient, was not born in 2011 or following the rebellions. On the contrary, it reflected and was shaped by a long-standing legacy of pillared states, one that was invented and reinvented over the previous 50 or so years.

Yet if the pillared state has cast a dark shadow on the trajectory of Arab political systems since 2011, it has done so under unprecedented domestic and regional conditions. Until the Arab Spring, the region's autocrats had never faced mass revolts aimed at toppling entire power systems. To ensure that such a threat would never emerge again, many Arab leaders drastically narrowed the room for political competition and free speech. Pressed by both regional and domestic challenges, they also invoked sectarian rationales (including hyper nationalism) to legitimate their exclusionary projects. Thus, autocracy and identity conflict have once again been joined. This outcome will surely inhibit more democratic forms of conflict management in the years to come.

Why Does the Pillared, Sectarianized State Resist Democratic Transition Pacts?

The South American and southern European cases demonstrate that democratic transitions usually require the readiness and ability of one or more of the groups that constitute the ruling regime to trade away political power in return for retaining their primary source of institutional clout. Thus, some wing of the security apparatus must conclude that it can retain control over the military or police by "returning to the barracks." Business leaders must secure assurances that they can safeguard their bank accounts and investments by separating themselves from ruling parties, while bureaucrats must be reassured that their ministries will endure and will be protected from retribution. For a transition to unfold

in a reasonably peaceful manner there must be some form of negotiation that sets out the conditions by which such power groups can still prosper by extracting themselves from regimes. In political science terms, such insurance agreements are called “pacts.”¹

In the Middle East, the nature and evolution of state building and state power have blocked the forging of such pacts.² This is because state institutions, regimes, economies, security services, and dominant ruling groups or regimes were tightly woven to create one interdependent power pillar.³ Rulers came to fear that if they lost or relinquished any one strand of this structure, the entire pillar would collapse. For these leaders, there was no obvious or reliable insurance policy that could provide sufficient guarantees such that they could credibly believe that giving up even a little power was worth the risk. In the Middle East, the pillared state could never be the subject of any fundamental renegotiation because rulers assumed that the alternative to the pillared state was political or even physical annihilation.

This resistance to change was magnified by the crucial role that the pillared state played in providing protection and patronage for specific identity groups.⁴ The smaller and thus more vulnerable the protected group, the more determined regimes were not to give up any strand of power. It is no coincidence that in the fully developed autocracies of the Arab world (i.e., regimes that tolerated little to zero political, social, or ideological pluralism), rulers ensured that minorities—such as Alawites in Syria, Sunni-Tikritis in Iraq, Sunnis in Bahrain, or the secularized middle class in Tunisia—were protected by violently excluding their rivals from the political arena. By contrast, in “liberalized autocracies”—such as Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, and Kuwait—rulers actually included rival groups (such as secularists and Islamists in Egypt from 1976 to 2011) in the political arena, thus fostering an element of controlled competition that enhanced the regime’s room for maneuver. But to reiterate, in both full and liberalized autocracies, rulers opposed any fundamental challenge to the pillared state. Instead, their survival depended not only on robust security services but, in a wider sociological sense, on manipulating and institutionalizing identity conflicts.

Reconstituting the Pillared State: Domestic, Regional, and Global Dynamics

Following the 2011 uprisings, rulers not only tried to reinvent the pillared state, but they also sought to redefine the place of identity conflicts in the overall political system. The impetus for this process of authoritarian identity reengineering was rooted in the unprecedented domestic and regional challenges that these regimes faced. On the domestic plane, many Arab leaders confronted something new: mass rebellions that toppled or seemed to nearly topple not just rulers but entire political systems. The reaction of those autocrats who survived this upheaval was not limited to repressing their opponents. More ambitiously, they have initiated efforts to drastically narrow the arena for formal political competition and pluralism.

Egypt offers the most dramatic example of such authoritarian reengineering. Sisi has tried to dismantle the political institutions that for nearly 40 years had allowed for a measure of competition between various identity groups—including the Muslim Brothers. In effect, Egypt is undergoing a transition from liberalized to full autocracy. Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa has closed down the limited opportunities for the country's Shia leaders to participate in politics, which had existed prior to the 2011 revolts. In Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) is creating his own "monarchy of fear" (to echo Kanan Makiya's famous term describing Saddam Hussein's Iraq) that is bereft of the mechanisms that his predecessors had used to manage elite and tribal conflicts.⁵ As the club of autocrats grows, cooperation between its members is expanding, creating a regional Sunni authoritarian axis led by the UAE and Saudi Arabia, with Bahrain and Egypt taking up the rear. Assuming that Assad prevails in Syria, he will probably follow suit with similar reengineering.

This emerging axis highlights the second factor that has shaped efforts at authoritarian reengineering, namely the emergence of new regional forces and dynamics. These included not merely efforts of Arab leaders in Egypt, Syria, and Bahrain to cooperate with regional and global friends. Of equal importance was the so-called diffusion effect generated by state collapse in Libya and the events that led up to it.⁶ Heeding the proverbial "road to hell is paved with good intentions," the most important event may have been the passing of UN Security Council Resolution

1973.⁷ Formulated in May 2011 by the United States and its European allies and endorsed by Arab states, the resolution authorized a no-fly zone to protect civilians from the massacre that Muammar Qadhafi had threatened.⁸ But the ensuing western-led bombing campaign gave cover to his armed opponents, who murdered him in a gruesome act that was broadcast globally.⁹ His October 20, 2011 murder, and the eventual geographical and tribal fragmentation of Libya, seem to have reinforced the conviction of Assad and other Arab autocrats—and their regional and global backers—that death and state collapse would result unless they decimated their opponents.

Beyond such pragmatic—if ruthless—calculations, other regional events helped to sharpen the identity fears and concerns of regimes, thus ensuring that efforts to reconfigure the pillared state acquired a “sectarian” color of one kind or another. For example, Libya’s fate fed Assad’s perception that he faced a US- and Saudi-dominated Arab League “conspiracy” to topple his regime and replace it with an Islamist government.¹⁰ The Muslim Brotherhood’s Mohamed Morsi’s election to the presidency of Egypt, and his ensuing decision to call for a no-fly zone in Syria, further convinced Assad that regional and global powers wanted to topple his regime.¹¹ Morsi’s June 2013 decision to break diplomatic ties with Syria seemed to confirm Assad’s worst fears.¹² His turn to Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia was thus impelled by his belief that Gulf-backed Sunni jihadist ideologies and movements presented a basic threat to his regime and state. Similar fears of what the Egyptian military believed was a conspiracy of Egyptian and Islamist movements from outside their country to topple the state itself prompted Sisi’s July 3, 2013 coup and subsequent effort to move to full autocracy.¹³

“Sectarianization” and the Revenge of the Pillared State

It is worth noting that the above events occurred before the rise of the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria after 2013.¹⁴ In other words, the concerns of Arab autocrats about Sunni Islamist movements predated the much-studied phenomenon of the so-called Shia-Sunni sectarian conflict. That said, there is little doubt that the intensification of sectarianization in the region has both boosted and complicated the efforts of Arab leaders to reengineer their autocracies.

Much ink has been spilled on whether these dynamics were spurred by an actual religious conflict or by the calculated efforts of state leaders—and their non-state allies—to manipulate these conflicts for geostrategic advantage. But this distinction is empirically and conceptually misleading.¹⁵ In fact, the region's sectarianization was rooted in a conflict between two countries that structurally (and even ideologically) were mirror opposites: both the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia were created by state builders who aligned their political projects not only with religious leaders but also with intensely religious doctrines that were deeply antagonistic. Although forged by leaders, these doctrines were also rooted in a long-standing schism regarding the nature of religious—and thus political—legitimacy in the Muslim world.¹⁶ However much reformists in Iran or Saudi Arabia strive to move beyond this ideological fissure, they cannot do so without risking a counterattack from religious establishments that are aligned with regimes, the security sectors that protect them, and the oil-based economies whose rents remain critical to the survival of both systems. Amplified by their clashing religious doctrines, this pillaring of institutional, economic, coercive, and ideological power in Iran and Saudi Arabia has hindered any major change in their domestic and regional policies—especially during periods of domestic and regional instability. Indeed, because such dynamics magnify fears about regime survival, they also stimulate intense efforts to strengthen the multiple strands of state power.

This was certainly the case in the escalating sectarian conflict that was prompted in part by Syria's civil war. Iran's entrance into that conflict (along with its proxy, Hezbollah) had little to do with ideological or sectarian interests. Tehran's overriding concern was to save its key geostrategic state ally.¹⁷ But with the rise of IS in Syria and Iraq, the number of Sunni jihadist forces coming to fight what they perceived were Shia infidels swelled, thus shifting the nature and symbolism of the battle. In response, Shia militias from as far away as Pakistan and Afghanistan jumped into the fray, adding even more sectarian fuel to the fire. For Tehran, the stakes continued to grow as evidence mounted that IS forces were linking up with armed separatist groups in Iran's Sunni majority provinces such as Baluchistan.¹⁸ If the extent of this domestic threat is hard to determine, these developments certainly raised the salience and domestic political

leverage of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), two thousand of whose members died in the battle against Sunni jihadist forces—including quite a few high ranking officers from the IRGC and the military.¹⁹ Iran's leaders justified the "martyrdom" of these forces in both security and religious terms by arguing that Iranian forces were protecting Shia shrines from destruction at the hands of Sunni fundamentalists.²⁰ Whatever their instrumental purpose, these sectarian claims have worked their own dark magic, thus adding to a process by which the battle to defend Assad—and then destroy IS—was transformed into a new and very modern sectarian holy war.

If the logic of and motivation for war shifted over time and in ways that none of the key protagonists envisioned at the outset, the deeper causes of the above story of unexpected, if violent, sectarianization was rooted in a history of modern state building that was predicated on the institutionalization of identity conflicts. Such legacies created their own constraints and traps, thus making it more likely that when faced by challenges to their own systems, the preference of rulers would be to reinvent rather than abandon the logic and tools of the sectarianized pillared state.

On this score it is worth noting that Iraq's recent parliamentary elections—which featured an effort to create an electoral alliance across the Shia-Sunni divide—has invited speculation that the country's very imperfect democracy might finally provide a means of moderating sectarian tensions.²¹ This does not appear to be the case, however.²² Instead, the logic of sectarian conflict continues to define the boundaries of political action. Indeed, as Shia-Sunni conflict once again heats up in Iraq, so have concerns that IS will exploit this dynamic to reassert its ideological and military influence in Syria, Iraq, and perhaps Iran's own border provinces.

Tunisia's Transition—the Exception That Proves the Rule

It is instructive that Tunisia is the only Arab country that has managed to make the transition from authoritarian to democratic conflict management. Whether this shift will be consolidated remains to be seen. Tunisia suffers from myriad economic, social, and political problems that threaten to undermine the relative progress it has made. Still, the country has benefited from four closely linked advantages.

First, Tunisia never had the equivalent of Egypt's massive military or Iran's IRGC. Tunisia's professional military was not enmeshed in the economy or invested in any ideological enterprise; as a result, the military had no compelling interest in opposing a transition.²³ Second, Tunisia's economic and social development fostered politically significant social constituencies that favored a more secular nationalism over Islamism. This provided a democratic advantage because it ensured that in open competitive elections, Islamists would gain a plurality rather than a majority. In contrast to Egypt, Tunisia's security leaders have far less to fear from the threat of "democratic exclusion."

Third, while the secular-Islamist divide in Tunisia was real and deep, it was not the source of, or channel for, a sectarian or tribal conflict. In contrast to Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain, Tunisia's identity conflict pivoted around ideological and symbolic differences that were amenable to negotiation, particularly by a political and business elite whose secular-Islamist division was mitigated by a shared sense of Tunisian nationalism. Finally, Tunisia benefited from the relative strategic disinterest of key regional and global powers—namely Algeria, Egypt, Turkey, the Gulf states, France, and the United States—that did not act as spoilers and encouraged intra-elite agreement.

Conclusion

The current regional and global context has enabled processes of authoritarian and identity reengineering that stand in steep contrast to each other in Tunisia. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's January 2019 Middle East tour demonstrates that at least for now, Washington is an active ally of an emerging authoritarian coalition led by the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.²⁴ The Trump Administration is trying to leverage fears of Iran to embolden this coalition. However, as noted above, what unites the leaders of this axis is their hostility to Iran (or Shia Islam, more broadly), and even more so, their long-standing hostility toward independent Sunni Islamists. Washington is backing the violent exclusion of these forces from the political arena—along with any potential non-Islamist leaders advocating for more open politics. In effect, the United States has once again played the role of a "Black Knight," but now at a level of openness and zeal that is unparalleled in the history of US Middle East policy.²⁵

The assumption that playing this role will enhance the security of the United States and its regional allies is questionable. Indeed, the shift to more closed autocracies may prove destabilizing for one crucial reason: it requires levels of escalating state repression that could eventually provoke opposition within the political or security apparatus, or even from key social sectors such as the secularly oriented professional intelligentsia or business communities.²⁶ The potential for defection—or at least internal pushback—goes beyond leaders and groups who are unfriendly to Islamism. Because the clerical establishments of Egypt and Saudi Arabia were part of the pillared state, and because they remain important, if potentially troublesome, state actors today, Sisi and MBS must constantly manage this source of potential dissidence.²⁷ Neither their embrace of a more nationalist stance nor their efforts to cozy up to the Trump Administration by espousing an anti-Iran agenda will provide obvious or easy solutions to these deeper structural contradictions.

Notes

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STATE-BUILDING IN THE ARAB REGION: FUTURE PROSPECTS

Time, Transition, and Justice in Arab States

Noha Aboueldahab

A Collaborative Regional Reconstruction Strategy in the Arab World

Sultan Barakat

Inclusive Economic Growth in Arab States

Bessma Momani

TIME, TRANSITION, AND JUSTICE IN ARAB STATES

Noha Aboueldahab¹

What does it mean to pursue criminal accountability in the context of resurgent authoritarianism and ongoing conflict? This question has been put to the test vigorously in the Arab region. The prosecution of political leaders and other high-level government officials was central to the justice demands of the societies emerging from the mass Arab uprisings of 2010 and 2011.² Transitional justice policy and scholarship have operated predominantly on the assumption that transitions entail a shift from violent authoritarian rule to liberal democratic rule.³ However, unlike transitions in other parts of the world, the Arab region did not see such a shift and instead underwent transitions that saw the reemergence of old regime figures and a descent into war. This means that lawyers, activists, civil society groups, and victims and their families have had to grapple with the pursuit of justice in a climate that is intensely hostile to it.

In 2011, former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak was tried in court, alongside his two sons, Alaa and Gamal, and a number of Ministry of Interior officials including the former interior minister, Habib el-Adly. They were being tried for corruption and for the murder of peaceful protesters during the 2011 uprising that toppled Mubarak. Earlier that year, former Tunisian President Zine El-Abidine ben Ali was tried in absentia and the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants for Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi, his son Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, and Chief of Intelligence Abdullah Al-Senussi.⁴ The ICC issued additional arrest warrants for Libyan army commanders Al-Tuhamy Mohamed Khaled and Mahmoud Al-Werfalli in the years that followed.⁵

In Yemen, former president Ali Abdullah Saleh agreed to step down in a deal brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) that guaranteed his immunity from prosecution.⁶ An attempt by the UN Security Council to pass a resolution that would refer Syria to the ICC was blocked by Russia and China in 2014.⁷ Since then, Syrian lawyers and activists have succeeded in using universal jurisdiction laws in European countries such as Germany, Sweden, and France to build criminal cases against Syrian perpetrators.⁸

Still, many of these leaders in the Arab region have either been released (such as Mubarak), remained out of the reach of the courts (Ben Ali), held onto power (Syria's Bashar al-Assad), or been killed (Qadhafi and Saleh). The whereabouts of other principal actors, such as Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, are wrapped in secrecy.

These cases from the Arab region present valuable material that calls for rethinking our expectations of transitional justice and how we understand its relationship with time. They challenge the concept of "transition" and the concept of "justice," both of which have very real consequences on the ground. This chapter will begin by discussing how contentious transitions have led to contentious justice processes in the Arab region, with an emphasis on how law has been wielded to influence the course of both. It will then argue that the parameters of transitional justice policy need to be adjusted to recognize the active pursuit of justice during violent conflict and in the context of renewed authoritarianism. It concludes by drawing attention to the complex linkages between transitional justice and time and calls for recognition of transitional justice as a form of resistance to ongoing violence and authoritarian rule.

A Contentious Transitional Justice Process

The challenge regarding "transition" stems from the fluid ways in which the Arab transitions unfolded.⁹ Put simply, the aftermath of the uprisings saw protracted violent conflict and the emergence of new governments within a persistent authoritarian regime structure.¹⁰ As a result, the transitional justice process saw ebbs and flows, much like the transitional justice processes that unfolded in certain Latin American countries since the 1980s, with some important differences in contextual factors. The challenge in understanding how "justice" is pursued lies in the use of

transitional justice as a battlefield for various actors with competing interests. These actors can be grouped in two broad categories.

On the one hand, activists, activist lawyers, journalists, and civil society organizations have been using the law to fight the injustice of the law. This has been done primarily through litigation activism that aims to push for the enactment of transitional justice laws and for criminal prosecutions. On the other hand, interim and post-transition authorities, the military, the judiciary, and other elite actors have been using the law to entrench authoritarian rule. For instance, Egypt and Tunisia passed controversial so-called “reconciliation” laws that stipulate that those individuals who had engaged in financial corruption would be spared criminal prosecution if they returned their stolen assets to the state.¹¹ The alleged reasoning for such reconciliation laws was that the return of stolen assets, and not the imprisonment of such individuals, would benefit the battered economies of Egypt and Tunisia.

The enactment of repressive laws about protests, media and speech, and other legislation aimed at crippling the work of civil society has also served to block the pursuit of a genuine reckoning with the past. Politicized trials and investigations in Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen not only reflect the use and abuse of transitional justice to further authoritarian rule, but they also serve as a warning to those who seek accountability for decades of state-sanctioned atrocities: if such efforts persist, those asking for accountability—and not those who are the subject of criminal investigations—will, in the end, occupy the state’s prison cells. Finally, there has been a trend that constitutes the proliferation of laws as a means to legalize socioeconomic and political injustice. Amnesties, lustration, immunity laws, as well as the reconciliation laws in Egypt and Tunisia are examples of this obsessive enactment of laws, a trend which exemplifies rule *by* law as opposed to rule *of* law.¹² The resulting justice process throughout the Arab region, then, is highly contentious.

While transitional justice, with some important exceptions, has often been regarded as a post-conflict issue, the Arab region’s cases demonstrate that justice can and has been pursued in both authoritarian contexts and during armed conflict.¹³ What does that justice mean and what are the objectives of those who seek it? These are complex but crucial questions that must be addressed if scholars and practitioners are to better

understand transitional justice in the Arab region. First, however, it is worth examining briefly another implication of the pursuit of prosecutions of political leaders in the Arab region: their limited scope.

Prosecuting Political Leaders: A Limited Scope

The limited charges and selection of individuals who were subject to investigation and prosecutions, particularly in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia, are a strong reflection not only of the nature of the transitions, but also of the use and abuse of transitional justice. Most of the charges leveled against these leaders had to do with crimes committed during the uprisings. In the case of Egypt and Tunisia in particular, this meant that judicial processes sought criminal accountability for a period of a few weeks in December 2010 and January 2011. Moreover, many of the criminal charges addressed corruption and financial crimes; they covered a longer period of time that included the pre-uprising era and outnumbered the human rights charges.

There are several reasons the prosecutions were—and continue to be—limited in this way. First, the prosecutions of political leaders such as Mubarak and Ben Ali were highly symbolic as these were heads of state who represented a legacy of decades of oppression. The trials were, effectively, used as a way to appease public anger and to give the impression that there had been a definitive break with the former regime. Second, the prosecutions of Mubarak, Ben Ali, and others were a political strategy to sacrifice a part of the regime to save the whole.¹⁴ They were a way to protect the interim and post-transition authorities from prosecution for their role in past atrocities. This was exemplified in Tunisia's President Beji Caid Essebsi government's hostility toward the Truth and Dignity Commission (TDC), which had the power to refer cases to the courts. The troubled relationship between the Essebsi government and the TDC was marked by accusing the latter of corruption as well as denying it access to certain governmental archives. Third, the limited scope of the criminal charges served to portray the mass uprising period as an exceptional one. This was and continues to be an attempt to control which narrative about the past emerges on top.

Finally, the emphasis on corruption and socioeconomic crimes was also in large part a result of decades of mobilization by labor unions and

workers' movements. A major element of how injustice is practiced and perceived in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen constitutes the daily visibility of corruption and unequal access to economic resources. Consequently, there has been a reckoning with the transition itself as opposed to the decades of atrocities that preceded it. Regimes and their allies attempted to foreground the "exceptional" circumstances of the 2011 uprisings, as though the decades of atrocities leading up to them did not happen or did not matter. In effect, the "post-conflict" dimension, even the term "transitional," constricts or limits our ability to understand the reasons why transitional justice unfolded the way it did in the Arab region.

The important exception here is Tunisia's TDC, whose mandate allowed for a reckoning with a past that extended to 1955—the year before Tunisia gained independence from France. This is significant in part because the TDC process demonstrated very powerfully the linkages between socioeconomic crimes, in particular financial corruption at the political level, and civil and political crimes.¹⁵ As a result, the transitional justice process in Tunisia aimed to address the structural as well as the human rights roots of multiple decades of oppression.¹⁶ The TDC heard thousands of testimonies of those who suffered under both the Ben Ali and the post-independence Habib Bourguiba regimes. In November 2016, the TDC began a series of televised testimonies, further galvanizing a very public national debate about how to address the painful past. It is unsurprising that, almost immediately, the TDC became a thorn in the side of the Essebsi government, which was hell-bent on preventing the commission from doing its work. When the government passed the administrative reconciliation law in September 2017, it not only created a transitional justice process that runs parallel to the existing one, but it also violated the Tunisian constitution and the mandate of the TDC.¹⁷

Rethinking the Parameters of Transitional Justice Policy

Law emancipates as it represses, and the legal enforcement of transitional justice is no exception. More importantly, however, is the idea that transitional justice is a process, not an outcome.¹⁸ Ironically, victims are often overlooked in transitional justice processes. There is a very real dilemma of managing the justice expectations of victims and their families. Some would argue that now is not the right time to seek justice,

given the tumultuous transitions marked by renewed authoritarianism and ongoing conflict.¹⁹ Is this not, though, what victims of the Assad, Mubarak, Ben Ali, Qadhafi, and Saleh eras were—and continue to be—told already? When understood and approached as a process and not a definitive outcome, transitional justice can and should be pursued in the immediate term rather than stall until a mythical ideal transition emerges. As the Arab region's cases demonstrate, the pursuit of transitional justice during violent conflict and in the context of resurgent authoritarianism is an effective tool of reckoning with the past and the present. Even where it fails in doing so—largely due to oppression and crackdowns on civil society—the pursuit of transitional justice and its various mechanisms in these challenging contexts succeeds, at least, in laying part of a foundation for addressing past injustices in the future.

Transitional justice policy needs to take this complexity of time into account by adopting more innovative approaches. Through their documentation and litigation efforts, Syrians have succeeded in sustaining the momentum behind the search not only for justice, but also the truth about the fate of victims. For example, the robust documentation movement led by Syrians has been very diverse. Both professionals and ordinary citizens have been documenting. Activist lawyers, activists who are not lawyers, victims, and civil society actors have been documenting and filing court cases against alleged perpetrators through the use of universal jurisdiction laws in certain European countries. While some criticize this because they are concerned about documentation procedures that do not meet so-called international standards, the critique overlooks the power of this victim- and survivor-led documentation movement.²⁰

This organic movement, which has generated powerful material for truth and accountability mechanisms, enhances the legitimacy of the overall transitional justice process. If we think about justice in this way when we look at the difficult examples of renewed authoritarianism and ongoing conflict, then we might be successful in managing the expectations of victims, who understandably seek a rapid and retributive justice. It is futile to wait for an ideal transition to emerge. Instead, active efforts to pursue justice in various ways—whether through documentation, litigation activism, or a combination, as is happening with Syria—lay a strong

foundation that future societies can use to pursue the transitional justice mechanism they deem appropriate for dealing with their painful past.

That said, a major obstacle to this is the collective, largely self-imposed amnesia at the societal level that has, in a sense, buried any kind of meaningful public dialogue to address the past in much of the Arab region. Documentation, then, is not simply something that facilitates the pursuit of transitional justice. It is a powerful form of nonviolent resistance to ongoing, violent conflict.²¹ Indeed, when understood as a form of justice that can be pursued immediately, without having to wait for a model democratic transition to emerge, the transitional justice process can be very empowering for victims and their families.

Much like transitions in other parts of the world, those in the Arab region are marked by fluid processes of change rather than linear paths to liberal democracy. The absence of accountability and lack of justice were major drivers of the 2011 uprisings and calls for reform; this is a point that is often forgotten, if not buried, in the few public debates about the past. The continued use and abuse of transitional justice since 2011 attests, then, to the significance that various and competing actors attach to transitional justice. Most of all, it demonstrates the importance of taking time and expectations into account when designing transitional justice policy and evaluating its performance in such challenging circumstances.

Notes

¹ The author would like to thank Arab Center Washington DC for its support in producing this chapter, which was presented at ACW's annual conference, "The Arab World Beyond Conflict," in September 2018.

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³ The definition of transitional justice continues to be debated, but it essentially refers to addressing the past: past atrocities, human rights violations, and social grievances. This is done through a number of judicial and non-judicial mechanisms including truth commissions, prosecutions, reparations, vetting, and other forms of national reconciliation. See "Guidance Note of the Secretary-General: United Nations Approach to Transitional Justice," United Nations, March 2010, <https://bit.ly/2W2PYAt> and Ruti G. Teitel, *Transitional Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

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¹⁴ Aboueldahab, *Transitional Justice and the Prosecution of Political Leaders*, 2017.

¹⁵ Noha Aboueldahab, "Navigating the Storm: Civil Society and Ambiguous Transitions in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia," in Jasmina Brankovic and Hugo van der Merwe, *Advocating Transitional Justice in Africa* (New York: Springer, 2018).

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¹⁹ Aboueldahab, *Transitional Justice and the Prosecution of Political Leaders*, 2017; Aboueldahab, *Writing Atrocities*, 2018.

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A COLLABORATIVE REGIONAL RECONSTRUCTION STRATEGY IN THE ARAB WORLD

Sultan Barakat

Introduction

Developments in the Middle East, from Syria to Yemen to Palestine, have prompted a reassessment of what needs to be done to resolve the issues of conflict and fragility in the region. Of course, the Arab world is diverse, which makes generalizations difficult. By and large, however, the so-called Arab Spring and what followed in terms of bloody conflicts—directly or indirectly involving most Arab states—and state weakening (and in a case or two, total collapse) demonstrated the fragility of many of the individual regimes in the Arab world as well as the impotence of the collective order of the Arab states.¹ In particular, it exposed the wide gap that existed between ordinary citizens and their political and, by extension, administrative institutions. This chapter provides an examination of one potentially transformative idea for conflict response in the Arab world: a collaborative approach to reconstruction in the region.

Regionalism and Reconstruction

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the global mood was enthusiastic and embracing of a move toward greater regionalization. The long-term success of the European Union (EU) in ushering in a half century of democratic peace after the Second World War was heralded as a shining example for other regions to follow. Guided by the prevailing philosophy of globalism, multilateralism, and free market economics, regional and global governance were prescribed to solve the problems of underdevelopment and

international insecurity.² Alongside this post-Cold War optimism, regionalism was also driven by changes in the nature of war—from interstate rivalries to internal instability and civil conflict—which radically altered the perception of postwar recovery processes. In the words of Adetula, Bereketeab, and Jaiyebo, “the growing complexity of conflict dynamics and security challenges in the post-Cold War world require greater cooperation and coordination among states within regions.”³

Referring to the war-ravaged Balkan countries of Bosnia, Macedonia, Albania, and Serbia, Hasic writes that “on the regional scale all the countries suffer from similar problems ... In order to survive these countries need to work closer together, taking advantage of their proximity, if they are to become stronger economies.”⁴ While the technical and economic requirements for regional cooperation in post-conflict reconstruction have long been well-understood as rooted in innovation, cluster building, and the network economy, the major barriers to realizing this model in the Balkans and elsewhere are commonly socio-psychological and political. Balkan reconstruction required a Marshall Plan for southeastern Europe. However, forward-looking regional recovery plans were not realized because too often, accession to the European Union was used as a stand-in for a unified and concerted strategy.

The Need for a Regional Reconstruction Strategy in the Middle East

Unfortunately, the socio-psychological and political barriers to a regional reconstruction strategy for the Middle East are currently very high. First, the continued Israeli occupation of Palestinian land is at the very heart of the region. Second, the long-standing geopolitical fissures that overlay the region, in particular tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran and to a lesser extent between the United States and Russia, continue to complicate efforts at cross-regional collaboration. Third, the Arab world lacks regional platforms on which to collaborate in even the most mundane technical fields. Rare examples of successful cooperation that could model a more effective and united reconstruction response include the Synchrotron-Light for Experimental Science and Applications center (SESAME)⁵ particle accelerator in the Jordan Valley. Fourth, the blockade of Qatar by Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates since

June 2017 has had the effect of further fragmenting the region at a critical moment, creating new obstacles to regional security and development cooperation and limiting the effectiveness of technical assistance for post-conflict reconstruction. This is already being observed in a number of areas, including Syria and the Gaza Strip.

Conflict itself is another major barrier to regional cooperation. For instance, the conflict in the Western Sahara, often forgotten, is perceived from the outside as a low intensity, low impact conflict that has killed a relatively low number of people—about 15-20,000 over many years. However, the conflict has led to high economic, social, human, and political costs for the Sahrawi people and for Morocco not only through displacement of over 100,000 Sahrawis and the separation of families and communities but also because of its wider impact of impeding regional cooperation and development across northwest Africa. This perpetuates the conditions of impoverishment and frustration that have fueled extremism throughout the region. It is important to note that Morocco's accession in 2017 to the African Union (formerly Organization of African Unity) after decades of shunning the organization, while not guaranteeing any outcome, does offer an institutional arena in which Morocco and Algeria—the two countries most involved in the Saharan issue—could attempt to resolve their underlying conflicts with the support of third parties.⁶

Even if the goal of a truly regional reconstruction strategy seems impossible to achieve, it should be seen as an ideal to seek. In the wake of World War II, in a beleaguered and battered Europe, the promise of a half century of peace ushered in by mutual cooperation would have been perceived as way beyond the limit of what was politically possible. A successful example in the region is reflected in efforts that were made during 2007-2010 by Jordan's Prince Hassan bin Talal to establish the West Asia-North Africa Institute as a meeting place for the leading minds in the region through which a collaborative network capable of undergirding transnational solutions could be forged.⁷

By now it is well-understood that the challenges faced by the region are fundamentally interconnected. These include the need to transform economies to create meaningful jobs, enable new forms of mobility fit for the 21st century, address pressing ecological threats that could render much of the region uninhabitable, as well as resolve long-standing conflicts that

have torn apart the region's social fabric. In the past, governments could control information, construct public opinion, and simply command people to do certain things, but this is not so easily done nowadays.⁸ The problems that Arab states face are becoming increasingly multidimensional and complex. We live in a world where more interests have specialized knowledge, more citizens are educated, and more individuals use social media to rapidly form and then re-form collective identities. In addition, changes in global geopolitics mean that there are now more opportunities for regional and international intervention in the Middle East than in the past 60 years or so.

We can no longer just live in isolation and pretend that these issues affect only one country. This is the core weakness of the region—that it is dealt with and perceived as individual entities and manipulated and driven in all directions by competing states inside and outside the area. Fragmentation and division are not new; they have been advanced starting with the Mongol invasion and through the Crusades, Ottoman rule, the British and French mandates, and in the post-World War II era when unifying ideologies and institutions in the region have been subject to manipulation and control.

Calls for regional cooperation do not require that the nation-state be dismantled. There is a need for a level of sophistication to act regionally at one level and act nationally or globally at other levels; indeed, the situation does not have to be black and white. For example, while European Union countries see eye-to-eye on some policies, they lobby against each other regarding certain interests. There is a need for this political maturity in the Arab world. The starting point should be to move away from any process that reinforces the image of the West devising solutions and proposing what it deems as new visions for the region. Such approaches are reminiscent of the Sykes-Picot agreement of the early 20th century or the neoconservative “grand strategy” at the end of it, which clearly do not appreciate that the Middle East has changed fundamentally since 2011. The region, at all levels, now expects to be the driving force behind its own development.

Steps Toward Regional Reconstruction Efforts in the Middle East

Since the spread of conflict throughout the Middle East in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, some new initiatives have been launched toward regional reconstruction. The Syrian conflict, in particular, has demonstrated the inadequacy of the international aid architecture to address and mitigate the effects of the crisis.⁹ The spillover ramifications of the conflict beyond Syria's borders, such as the massive refugee crisis, necessitate a coherent regional response.

Several Multi-Donor Trust Funds (MDTFs) have also been established to finance humanitarian and development responses in Syria and the wider region. For instance, the New Financing Initiative to Support the Middle East and North Africa Region was established in April 2016 as a World Bank-led package offering concessional loans, grants, and guarantees. The initiative consists of a Concessional Financing Facility that offers soft loans to middle income refugee host countries and a Guarantee Facility that supports post-conflict reconstruction across the MENA region. The European Union and its member states have supported refugees, internally displaced persons, and the hosting communities by pledging nearly two thirds of the total contributions announced during the "Supporting Syria and the Region" conference held by the Council of the European Union in London in February 2016.¹⁰ Part of the European funding is channeled through the EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis (the Madad Fund) established by the European Commission in December 2014.¹¹ MDTFs for the Arab world enable war-torn countries in the region to access sustained and predictable funding. This institutional mechanism is particularly important to avoid the pitfalls of bilateral funding of reconstruction in the Arab world. This includes conflicts such as Israel's assault on Gaza, which is viewed by some donors as too politicized for contributions toward recovery funding. Another problem is donor fatigue in the case of protracted conflicts that also include that in Gaza.

While welcome, these initiatives do not go far enough to constitute the building blocks of a truly collaborative regional reconstruction strategy. In particular, the last few years presented both a social and an institutional challenge that requires a shift in our thinking when considering the role of the state in society. As such, the approach to the effort of

state building should focus more on governance rather than government; on how changes can be accomplished rather than just what can be done; and on collective development rather than the singular state-by-state approach. Such a shift is critical in order to establish a badly needed new social contract between citizens, their states, and the wider Arab region. Regional ties are indispensable if millions across the region are to make meaningful progress on the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals.¹²

Pillars for a Collaborative Regional Reconstruction Strategy¹³

At the regional level in the Arab world what is needed is the ability to come up with a vision that can undergird the establishment of a reconstruction strategy to address the fallout of conflict. Such efforts risk being characterized as overly idealistic; nonetheless, it is important to keep trying to discuss ways to unleash resources from various corners of the Arab world and mix them together so that transformative development and change in the region are possible.

The region needs an ever-evolving strategy that maintains a holistic, problem-solving outlook while drawing on various forms of intervention (such as community-driven development, interregional development projects, targeted counterinsurgency operations, and state-building) without being straightjacketed by any one toolkit or template. Novel approaches rooted in genuine regional leadership, broad participation, youth engagement, and the utilization of technology will increasingly need to be applied. The pillars of such a strategy should be a collective regional vision, effective local participation, smart security, reconciliation and justice, equity, reconstruction and development, human potential, and capacity.

Collective Vision: With the aspirations of the Arab Spring unrealized and many countries descending into sectarianism, what is needed now is a collective vision that goes beyond national borders. This would include pooling the region's resources and specifically, all the ingredients for large-scale development such as human resources, an educated population, capital, mobility, and nature. The goal would be region-wide development that is synergistic and not a predatory or zero-sum game. What Morocco has achieved with solar energy is a shining example: a visionary investment has addressed regional developmental and environmental

challenges, stimulated employment, and raised confidence that high-tech and innovative sectors can thrive in the Middle East. Such a broad vision is crucial if the region is to leapfrog into the 21st century and not remain in a vicious cycle of conflict and failed development. Key to an inclusive and non-adversarial vision will be both accepting and embracing Islam as a majority religion while building on human security as an area of common ground. To that end, serious changes are required in places such as Iran and Saudi Arabia to enable both to exercise their regional leadership in forming a constructive collective vision rather than perpetuating sectarian hostility.

Broad Participation: It is important that the regional vision recognizes that development requires an active civil society, a free media, and action and ideas rooted at the local level and with popular participation. The process of engaging in a region-wide consultation where contributions originate in schools, villages, city halls, political parties, unions, and many other civic forums can help the region start dreaming about what it wants to look like in the 50 years to come.

Smart Security: The region prioritizes defense—using the excuse of fighting the Islamic State—instead of focusing on a collective vision for development. All appreciate that a minimum level of security is important for implementing reconstruction, but a lack of security cannot be a pretext to do nothing. Experience has shown that delaying reconstruction efforts pushes people down the slope of conflict and violence and leads to dependence on humanitarian assistance. The region needs to find ways of better understanding the granular texture of security at local and regional levels so that strategies can be developed in which localized insecurity does not hold back development in other areas. This could support “spot reconstruction” or “area development” efforts that create exemplars of what a degree of stability, combined with reconstruction intervention, can achieve in the midst of larger instability.

Reconciliation and Justice: No long-term investment in reconstruction can be protected without genuine reconciliation across the region. Twenty years ago, the main fault line was Israel-Palestine. Today, there are many additional fault lines that need to be addressed, including Muslim-Christian discord, strained relations between displaced and host communities, and tensions between Sunni and Shia communities. The most fundamental

way to initiate reconciliation is to make sure that the rule of law applies to all and that everyone has access to justice regardless of the mechanism. Much can be built on local and traditional systems for achieving justice and reconciliation.

Equity: A common mistake with reconstruction is that it proceeds without sufficient regulation and monitoring to ensure that benefits are equitably distributed. This region has repeatedly seen how easily reconstruction “lords” (most of whom were previously warlords) can emerge to line their pockets at the expense of the general public, thus perpetuating a country’s crisis. World Bank arguments for the private sector to take the lead in reconstruction in Afghanistan and elsewhere have done nothing but strengthen this model. President Bashar al-Assad’s efforts to liberalize Syria’s economy prior to 2011 led to the further enrichment of a corrupt elite, contributing to the present situation. Going forward, reconstruction efforts must take into consideration the poorest and least capable so that nobody is left out.

Development: There is an urgent need to find new ways of inducing development through international engagement with the region. Current instability has shifted spending toward security and away from development basics. As a result, some of the most important indicators—women’s participation, poverty, quality of education—are reflecting eroding development. All this is unfolding while the region is facing financial challenges due to severely reduced oil prices. This may prove to be an opportunity as some countries need a wake-up call to the pernicious effects of a capital development model where billions of dollars are invested in the West, generating jobs and stabilizing economies thousands of miles away at the expense of the region. If the West wants to help, it should focus minds within the Arab world on the value of mutually beneficial investment in addressing regional problems. Ultimately a more stable region will lead to more prosperous neighbors in both East and West.

Unleashing Human Potential: There is a vibrant workforce in the region; however, it is trapped and possesses no mobility. It is probably easier to look for work by crossing from one Arab country to another than to seek a job at home. Arab states are endowed with rich resources and energy and much of it is exported as raw material; very little is being exploited in the first, second, and third stages of development to provide jobs. It is vital to change these realities in order to create meaningful

job opportunities to fulfill the human potential of Arab youth. The Gulf states together import millions of workers from Bangladesh, Pakistan, the Philippines, and India—the latter alone has over six million people in the region. Meanwhile, there are millions of Arab youth stuck in their areas, unable to do anything and prone to expressing their frustration and marginalization through civil unrest.

Building Capacity: To build skills and competence, states must provide enormous amounts of funding in fostering sustainable regional, national, and local capacity. It is essential to invest in education, in particular to support youth beyond the primary grades; indeed, these are the young men and women who will become leaders with the conviction and capabilities to rebuild the region. In a rush to capture development, the Arab world has focused on the hard sciences, engineering, business studies, and computer science while ignoring its own cultures, languages, and history. It is imperative to correct this imbalance and develop local ideas—in the Arabic language and without relying on translation. For all this to happen, fragility must be addressed within a coherent regional vision and not individual national plans. To reiterate, it would be constructive if the international community would view the region as a whole—as one canvas in which to facilitate cross-border mobility of population, capital, ideas, and labor—and encourage regional responsibility with different countries leading in their areas of competency. International partners can support such an effort with innovative forms of funding that utilize collateral guarantees from the region, not just from individual countries. A truly regional approach could, one day, elevate human dignity and development above petty politics and sectarianism.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that a regional collective vision is required in order to address the challenges posed by the spread of conflict in the Arab region over the past decades. Ultimately, the most effective form of intervention to address the thorny issues of fragility and poor governance will be state building—not just of institutions but of rebuilding the broken social contract in the region. Such a regional perspective could bring about a mindset to transform governance in war-torn societies and enable states and citizens to innovate and participate in broad-based societal recovery.

Notes

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INCLUSIVE ECONOMIC GROWTH IN ARAB STATES

Bessma Momani

Introduction

The global economy is undergoing considerable structural shifts that will affect the Arab states' trajectory of economic development. Increasingly, governments across the globe are constrained in taxing corporate wealth because tax avoidance has become entrenched in many jurisdictions as a legal mechanism of corporate wealth planning. Arab governments, particularly oil-importing states, no longer have the luxury of depending on state-led economic incentives to spur economic growth. Simply put, a pro-free market global economy is a fact with which Arab states need to reckon, and this requires a shift toward increasing sales and personal income taxes on their citizens.

While this shift already has taken hold in many western countries and is a condition pressed on Arab governments by donors, international financial institutions, and global markets, the reality is that it will also require a change in the Arab social contract. The Arab public will want to see services and accountability of finances in exchange for complying with tax payments. To do so, Arab governments will need to build institutions, promote inclusive economic development, and recognize their citizens' legitimate calls for enhanced rights. Arab governments could also help rural communities, women, and those working in the informal sector to facilitate inclusive economic growth.

Pressure of Structural Economic Shifts on Arab States

After years of state-directed development strategies and relative trade protectionism, many Arab countries embarked upon economic and institutional reforms in order to pursue greater integration with the world economy and open their economies to foreign direct investment. These neoliberal policy choices were further shaped by conditions imposed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, western donors, free trade agreements signed with western countries or regions, and global corporate interests. These policies included exchange rate liberalization, devaluation of currency, restrictions on budget deficits, decreased interest rates, increased energy prices, lower government subsidies, revised labor laws that favor employers, implementation of sales and income taxes, privatization and selling of state-owned enterprises, banking and trade liberalization, removal of rent control, and facilitation of foreign investment. Such liberalization policies were meant to decrease state intervention in the economy and encourage a climate that allowed the private sector in Arab economies, be it domestic or foreign, to prosper.

While these pro-market economic policies were adopted in many Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries, high levels of cronyism allowed elite businesses connected to the state or its leader to receive access to cheaper land, subsidized energy prices, lucrative license deals, special financial arrangements, or inside information.¹ Ultimately, many of MENA's liberalization reforms resulted in a transfer from state ownership to crony elite ownership in the hands of a few politically connected people.

Despite decades of attempted neoliberal reforms, Arab economies lag in their efforts to attract foreign investment, particularly when compared to other emerging market economies and developing countries.²

While many pro-market economists advise Arab countries to entice or promote foreign development investment in the region, there remain challenges with seeing this as a panacea to Arab states' economic development. After all, the strategy of labor-intensive production for exports, which has been successfully adopted in Asian countries, would be difficult to apply in the Arab region as there are now many lower cost competitors in populous countries such as India, China, the Philippines, and other East Asian nations. Some relatively populous Arab nations like Egypt and Morocco have been moderately successful in producing labor-intensive

manufacturing goods for export, particularly in the textile market, but most regional countries do not possess the cheap labor required to be globally competitive in this regard. Moreover, Arab countries also had a difficult time attracting international investors because of the negative “neighborhood effect” of regional insecurity.

That said, there has been an influx of billions of dollars in direct foreign investments coming from oil-rich Arab Gulf states with large capital surpluses to many non-oil-exporting Arab states.³ As a result, several Arab cities have become replete with high-rise towers and mega-development projects like malls and resorts. Although many Arab governments and elites publicize—and aspire to attain—this so-called “modernization” of their countries and cities, many people in the Arab region have remained disconnected from these rapid attempts at urban development. And while we do not yet know the specific causes for the Arab Spring—let alone its long-term consequences—the non-inclusive urban development experienced throughout the Middle East may have been a contributing factor to a social sense of frustration that led, in part, to the events of the Arab revolts. This is in keeping with the view of scholars who have argued that the revolts were the Arab people’s attempt to reclaim public places as a result of a profound sense of social exclusion and alienation.⁴

Arab cities are becoming fractured into glamorous, shiny, and modern urban centers with clear official and private investment as well as poorer and neglected and dilapidated areas. The latter are also on the rise as governments increasingly rely on private capital to fund and finance public works projects and developments. Moreover, private investors gravitate toward the affluent areas, thus increasing the discrepancy of services and development within cities. Throughout the 2000s, the Middle East experienced competition for regional and international real estate companies, consulting firms, and urban consultancies to create neoliberal and large-scale urban developments.⁵ Finally, as cities are forced to compete for private and foreign investment, land and business taxes need to remain low and competitive. This decreases potential revenue earnings and creates incentives to direct limited tax revenue into urban areas, where investors predominate.

Megaprojects throughout the Middle East have attempted to reshape urban cores, such as Solidere in Beirut, Lebanon; Dreamland and Citystars in Cairo, Egypt; and Jabal Omar in Mecca, Saudi Arabia.⁶ This

regeneration of urban development in a western, neoliberal fashion is what Adham refers to as “Oriental vision of Occident.”⁷ Similarly, the creation of exclusive resort towns along Egypt’s coastline—such as Marabella and Marina—was little more than the building of fantasy towns that remain disassociated from the daily lives of most Egyptians. This universalizing trend in urban design throughout the Middle East is also related to the fact that much of the capital and investment that is flowing into the region comes from the same relatively small pool of developers and financiers in the Arab Gulf who reproduce similar models and plans throughout the Arab world.

Arab urban transformations are also emblematic of class inequalities. As Mona Abaza notes about Egypt, “walled off, protected areas, gated communities, condominiums, private beach resorts, leisure islands of peace, snow cities in the desert and amusement parks, monitored by private security forces and advanced technology to protect them against the ‘barbarians’ outside, are no longer just futuristic fantasies.”⁸ In some urban projects, such as Saifi village in Beirut’s Solidere district, many people are excluded from entering wealthy neighborhoods and shops based on markers of social class. The “Dubai model” of economic development, where malls and towers overtake the urban landscape, is not an inclusive form of development. Such projects are in overabundance in most Arab states and produce an added source of youth frustration. Moreover, as Rami Khouri explains, the premise of this model views Arab people as consumers, as opposed to citizens.⁹

We saw this come to a head during the Arab Spring, when people protested because they were not advancing materially and politically. The Arab Spring was started by educated, unemployed, disenfranchised, and likely lower-middle-class youth of the region who took to the internet and the streets to protest being squeezed for more and more taxes as their income per capita diminished, while their governments were providing inadequate services and curtailing—or not improving—political rights. Notably, the Arab Spring began in countries that were experiencing some measure of economic growth; some were also viewed as lead economic reformers, having successfully liberalized their economies to a certain degree. Nevertheless, despite economic expansion in the Arab world, rebellions transpired because the diffusion of the gains from growth did

not keep pace with the rising expectations of educated youth. The region was experiencing what is known as non-inclusive economic growth.¹⁰

With unequal distribution of economic growth across Arab countries, people perceived a gap between their present circumstances and what they believed they deserved. In other words, on a psychological level, Arab youth viewed their socioeconomic situation as unjust, particularly in comparison to where they thought it ought to be. This is known as “relative deprivation,” a concept developed by Ted Gurr.¹¹ The Arab Spring was a reminder to governments that economic growth, for its own sake, is not enough if its benefits are not adequately distributed to people so that they feel their lot is improving. Otherwise, people will rebel or revolt against governments for the lack of wealth that they perceive should reach them personally.

Undoubtedly, the Arab world needs foreign investment to provide technology and technical knowledge (which are in short-supply throughout the region’s production value-chains and energy facilities), to create labor-intensive jobs, to augment the technical and post-secondary education sector, and to invest in infrastructural development projects that meet urbanization challenges such as transportation, housing, food security, and sewage systems.¹² This chapter does not suggest that foreign direct investment is wholly bad. However, Arab governments need to get the right balance between promoting the private sector and extracting more income and sales taxes, while providing services and institutions that Arab citizens feel are adequate for their needs. Simply put, inclusive economic growth is good for Arab economies, people, and governments.

Inclusive Economic Growth

Inclusive economic growth is a multipronged effort that begins with understanding that economic development must be distributed to all sectors of society and this, in turn, builds momentum for bottom-up prosperity that is fair for all. As Ranieri and Ramos note:

...the emergence of the concept of inclusive growth may be seen as relating to the realization that growth processes may have different impacts not just across the distribution of income, but also among ethnic and gender groups and geographical regions, as

well as that rather than outcomes being the only important aspect, whether and how people engage in the growth process matters.¹³

To achieve inclusive growth, Arab governments need to help create better opportunities for young people in the labor market, assist in making the informal sector a more prosperous and regulated one, and remove barriers that prevent women from fully engaging the economy.

The labor market in the Arab world has a mismatch between private sector needs and the offerings of the traditional education system. Countries need workers with genuinely marketable skills and this can often be shaped through improved quality of education, enhanced training initiatives, and better understanding of the needs of the private sector. Technological investments into sharing better job information and counseling can also be of great value. While most job growth should come from the private sector, there is a need to reform public sector hiring practices and raise wages to attract the very best to want to work for the government. In the long run, Arab countries also need to work toward providing social security for all workers.¹⁴

Many people living in rural communities, particularly young graduates, continue to face mobility barriers in finding employment.¹⁵ Investment in transportation networks that allow rural communities to seek desirable employment opportunities in more economically prosperous areas would be welcomed in rural communities. Moreover, “housing loans to help workers relocate from a rural to urban area; investing in better modes of transportation and subsidized transportation services; and encouraging job creation in areas with high unemployment through tax breaks and other incentives”¹⁶ are also policy tools that Arab governments ought to pursue.

In the typical MENA country, the informal sector makes up one third of GDP and two thirds of the total labor force. This trend is especially evident in countries with large rural populations and high population densities, and oil-importing countries such as Yemen, Egypt, and Morocco. Between 2000 and 2007, 45 percent of the Egyptian labor force and just over 50 percent of the Tunisian labor force were not contributing to social security (this is a common proxy measure for the size of the informal economy). The figure reached approximately 90 percent in Yemen and 76 percent in Morocco over the same time period.¹⁷ Indeed, the informal sector

needs urgent policy attention to assist in providing inclusive economic growth. Informal sector workers are often found in low-skill service sector jobs in transportation, retail, agriculture, and construction. The ranks of the Arab region's informal workforce are drawn disproportionately from younger generations. To be sure, reforming labor market regulation has proven exceedingly difficult for MENA countries. Personal connections are an even more important determinant of employment in the informal economy than is usually the case across the region, with young people often able to procure jobs through the contacts of older relations. Workers in MENA's informal economy are likely to transition from informal employment to the public sector as they age. This is somewhat different from the observed pattern in other developing regions.

An enormous opportunity for increasing inclusive economic growth lies in many Arab states: the full employment of women. Consulting firm McKinsey found that an increased women's employment (full and real gender parity) in the Arab world would contribute \$2.7 trillion to MENA's GDP by 2025, or \$600 billion per year. This would lead to an increase of MENA's GDP by 47 percent in a decade.¹⁸ A Peterson Institute study of 22,000 companies across 91 countries found that "the presence of female executives is associated with unusually strong firm performance."¹⁹ Advanced educational opportunities for women, providing the foundation for increased female participation in the labor force, will improve the material wealth of people and stimulate bottom-up economic growth.

Arab policymakers should conduct gender impact studies that examine gendered processes within the formulation of government policies. Additionally, incentives that can cultivate greater female participation in the labor force include increasing salaries; raising the retirement age across the Arab world; enhancing maternity benefits; and providing safe and affordable public transportation. Quotas and affirmative action programs aimed at securing positions for women in traditionally male-dominated fields could help them access all positions in the job market, as would support for female entrepreneurship initiatives.²⁰

On a national scale, data suggest that gender parity in the socioeconomic realm can lower dependency ratios in households, increase national output, cumulatively boost national savings, and allow for increased investment and productivity, thus leading to national economic

prosperity. Moreover, a rise in household earnings can have a positive effect on the broader market economy, as national consumption of goods and services also increase, making markets stronger and more effective.

Conclusion

Structural economic changes to the global economy, combined with persistent state-level cronyism and corruption, have often led to non-inclusive growth in Arab states. An inclusive economic growth strategy "... involves improving the lot of underprivileged people in particular and overall making opportunities more plentiful while lessening barriers to the attainment of better living conditions."²¹ In the opinion of this author, this is the only viable option for Arab governments to pursue for their future. Moreover, inclusive growth must be combined with offering political liberalization to a growing and educated young population to assure legitimacy. Involving women, rural communities, and youth in decision making as well as directing a fiscal stimulus toward helping them find employment would also encourage sorely needed political buy-in into Arab governments' economic development plans. Policy choices before Arab governments are very clear: to focus economic development efforts on inclusive economic growth and provide citizens with the political buy-in to be productive, tax-paying members of society.

Notes

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TOWARD INCLUSIVE CITIZENSHIP IN ARAB SOCIETIES

Identity and Inclusion: Rethinking Citizenship in Arab Societies

Linda Bishai and Elly Rostoum

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IDENTITY AND INCLUSION: RETHINKING CITIZENSHIP IN ARAB SOCIETIES

Linda Bishai and Elly Rostoum

The Arab world comprises 22 countries and more than 400 million inhabitants, a wide geographic spread, multiple religions and languages, distinctive cultures, and many unique histories. There is no reason why the Arab world should not be seen as plural and heterogeneous; yet, what is keeping it from acknowledging and valuing its multiple identities? Why does it have an exclusive view and concept of Arab identity and not an inclusive one that reflects its diverse peoples? Why does a restrictively exclusive concept of Arab identity prevail?

In the post-colonial era, a narrow conceptualization of Arab identity has been instrumentalized to strengthen a limited understanding of religion and state, which excluded people along lineage, ethnicity, patronage, and tribal, confessional, and racial lines. This concerted effort by Arab governments to “elitize” or maintain rigid strata and groups within their societies, based on exclusionary markers of what it means to be Arab, has had a profoundly deleterious impact on Arab societies. Identity politics are essentially counterintuitive: on balance, each individual contains a multitude of attributes and when certain ones are devalued or attacked, they grow in importance and eclipse others.¹

Exclusive notions of Arab identity, instrumentalized through undemocratic modes of governance, have created divides both within and among Arab societies that continue to feed violent conflict. Continued conflict in Sudan is perhaps most blatantly emblematic of the destructive nature of the construct of Arab identity as elite and illustrates an increasingly familiar model of governance whereby a predatory regime feeds on

identity conflict for survival. These identity dynamics are also at play in the Iraq-Kurdistan conflict, the marginalization of the Shia population in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, the government crackdowns on protests in Berber-majority regions in Morocco, and the marginalization of the Coptic minority in Egypt.

The Inadequacy of Identity Formation “in Opposition”

The simplest—but most shallow—way to form an identity is in opposition to an enemy, either in the context of a real confrontation (i.e., in a war, or asserting the right to be and defend oneself) or when dealing with an artificially constructed enemy. Resistance against colonialism throughout North Africa and the Middle East (MENA) in the late 1950s and early 1960s spurred the formation of a collective Arab identity solidified by animosity toward Israel.² The establishment of Israel happened alongside the nascent nation-building process in the immediate aftermath of the independence movements from colonial powers, and as such, served as a key driver that galvanized the cross-border appeal of “Arabness” and drastically narrowed the markers of Arab identity. As a result, this narrowed definition of Arab identity made it harder for an inclusive and rights-oriented governance model to take hold. Over time, heavily militarized responses to the anti-Israel security dynamics led to a set of serious political grievances for citizens in the Arab world. Suspension of the constitution and rule of law, removal of presidential term limits, and nearly three decades of permanent emergency law in places like Egypt, Iraq, and Libya transformed the hopes for democratic self-governance of postcolonial independence movements into the stifling oppression of authoritarian regimes.

Notably, the fervor that Israel spurred seven decades ago is starting to wane. Israel has become an increasingly less convincing scapegoat to justify overt violations of democratic governance. Instead, in the past two decades, an elaborately constructed view of Iran as an existential threat in the region—both geopolitically and religiously—has been replacing the image held by Israel for seven decades. The aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in the United States brought together strange bedfellows: the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. Geopolitical collaboration between the three countries commenced with the partnership to arm the Mujahidin

in Afghanistan in the 1980s and has since strengthened, thanks to the “global war on terror.” Both Saudi Arabia and Israel share an animosity toward Iran, and both have depicted the Persian neighbor as an existential threat and a menace to the region—an animosity that has echoed in Washington, given both Israel’s and Saudi Arabia’s influence in the American capital.³

Today, Arab governments juxtapose Arab identity *ethnically* in opposition to a Persian Iran and *religiously* against a Shia-majority neighbor in the middle of a largely Sunni-Muslim Middle East. In this effort, it is hard to underestimate the role, influence, and impact Saudi Arabia has had in promulgating the image of a threatening, nefarious Iran. The kingdom has already been engaged in proxy wars against Iran in both the Yemeni and Syrian theaters. In addition, many internal conflicts in Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain have manifested Saudi Arabia’s active cold war against Iran.

The Recourse to Islamism and the Rise of Violent Non-State Actors

This faulty conceptualization of Arab identity, and its instrumentalization to facilitate an exclusionary mode of governing, have led to the emergence of two major phenomena: the recourse to Islamism as political opposition, and the rise of violent extremist groups that espouse even narrower models of Arab identity. These two phenomena are a testament to a failed political governance that promulgated an Arab identity designed to create and reinforce divides among its citizens. It is important to note that Arab governments, Islamists, and violent political actors have all instrumentalized identity politics in their political quests.

The emergence of Islamist movements is essentially reactionary. They arose as a means of opposition to unjust rulers and gained prominence by filling the gap left by undemocratic regimes that failed to address the needs of their citizens.⁴ Harsh treatment of Islamists has further inflamed citizens’ grievances, exacerbated marginalization, and mobilized popular sentiment in favor of Islamists who are often perceived as the “lesser of the two evils.” Violent political groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State espouse even more exclusionary models of identity, centered around narrow understandings of Islam, to further their political goals.

Unfortunately, there is plenty of fodder in the discouraging political and socioeconomic conditions of Arab peoples.

The Need for Greater Adherence to the Rule of Law

Five out of the ten most corrupt countries in the world come from the Arab world: Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Yemen, and Syria.⁵ All of them have devolved into armed conflict, chronic political instability, terrorism, and dire humanitarian crises and violations. Since 2016, global trends have seen a decline in the support of human rights, the absence of corruption, checks on government powers, and the health of civil and criminal justice systems. However, what has been characteristic of the MENA region over the last few decades is its inability to break out of its status-quo stagnation in terms of improving rule of law benchmarks. According to the World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index, the MENA region has consistently ranked in the mid-range in adherence to rule of law; in 2018, it was fourth out of the seven regions surveyed.⁶ A recent survey of households in the Arab world by Transparency International found that 80 percent of respondents thought that corruption has either increased or remained the same in the past 12 months, with nearly one in three people saying that they paid a bribe to access basic services. Of even additional concern, 68 percent of respondents said that the government is doing badly and failing to fight corruption, and almost a third said they do not report corruption because they fear the consequences. The rule of law sector was particularly worrisome: almost a third and a fourth of individuals who dealt with the courts and the police, respectively, reported paying a bribe.⁷

In Egypt, the Central Auditing Agency—the country's highest supervisory authority—reported a new case of corruption every 1.5 minutes; indeed, rising levels of corruption are boosting Egypt's informal economy to the point that it accounts for nearly 70 percent of the overall economy, according to Transparency International.⁸ The government's efforts to address corruption levels have been either symbolic or limited at best. This is evidenced by the case of Hisham Geneina, Egypt's head of the Central Auditing Authority, who was fired by President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi and accused of "spreading false news and disturbing the peace" simply for publicly stating that he estimated corruption to cost Egypt nearly \$76 billion.⁹

The damage that these long-term and deep levels of corruption cause to social trust and peaceful stability cannot be overstated.

Certainly, there is a great appetite for reform throughout the Arab world. At the grassroots level, the efforts of civil society players have been heroic despite unhelpful institutional conditions.¹⁰ Demographic trends have also pushed the pendulum toward reform, with nearly 65 percent of the population younger than 30.¹¹ Despite this yearning for reform, however, efforts within the status quo have been unfruitful. Historic levels of protests in 2011 motivated reforms by regimes that were in survival mode. They have also come at the expense of loss of life in addition to unprecedented political and social upheaval that have resulted in a mass exodus from Syria, a dire humanitarian crisis in Yemen, the political fragmentation of Libya, and a still politically fragile Egypt.

Fundamentally, it would be difficult for any meaningful reforms to take root based on the current unsustainable model of governance. Instead, certain fundamental approaches to the concept of Arab identity have to shift. First, there must come the realization that Arab identity needs to allow and embrace the plurality of all its citizens, including individuals' rights and freedoms. Second, the political leadership cadre must forego the institutionalization of an exclusive conceptualization of Arab identity as the *modus operandi* of governing. Essentially, a precursor to achieving more democratic models of governance in Arab societies will be to take a hard look at the structure of Arab identity and its relation to the ethnic, religious, national, and individual identities of the Arab peoples. For much of the last century, the cross-border appeal of Arab identity has come at the expense of diversity.

Toward a More Inclusive, Pluralist Arab Identity

Change may be inevitable, but it will not happen overnight, as clearly evidenced by the wave of Arab Spring protests throughout the Arab world that shook decades-old authoritarian regimes. The relative success of the Tunisian case compared to the Syrian or even the Egyptian cases is a function of many factors, chief among them is a strong and steadfast commitment to reform and transition to truly democratic notions of governance. An integral first step toward that goal is to revise the conception of Arab identity—and what it means to be Arab—so that it is reflective

and inclusive of the diversity and heterogeneity of the Arab peoples. It is imperative to repudiate the exclusionary and discriminatory ways Arab identity has been promulgated. A democratic and inclusive notion of Arab identity will ease the sense of grievance and marginalization that encouraged violent extremists to flourish. It will also validate Islam as a religious path rather than as a means for dissent and opposition to undemocratic political regimes. In fact, engaged citizens—at the political, social, and economic levels—are at the heart of an inclusive model of Arab identity that caters to all its citizens.

An inclusive model of Arab identity that recognizes the diversity and plurality of the Arab world would do well to espouse the following democratic notions:

1. *Affirming a commitment to the rule of law.* This is a foundational element of any effective transition to democratic systems of governance that strive toward equity and peace for their citizens. Such a commitment includes creating greater collaboration and harmony between constitutional provisions and the practice, enforcement, and implementation of laws.
2. *Promoting values of individual rights and protections.* This will also necessitate valuing women as vital and essential, productive, and equal citizens.
3. *Guaranteeing freedom of speech and dissent.* Basic and mandatory institutional reform must include eliminating laws that restrict the freedoms of speech and dissent and devising and implementing guarantees and rights that allow for greater expression of dissent, opposition, and speech. Such laws are often unenforced or overturned by harshly enforced lèse-majesté laws against “insulting Islam,” “insulting the state,” or “disturbing the peace,” all of which are designed to suppress freedom of speech and expression of political opposition and criticism.
4. *Ensuring accountability and transparency.* Given the very high corruption rates in the Arab world, it is critical that politically independent and well-resourced mechanisms for checks and balances, auditing, and improving governmental institutions’

performance—including through the enactment of legislation that protects whistle-blowers—are adopted and implemented. The United Nations Convention against Corruption¹² and the G20 Principles on Beneficial Ownership,¹³ for instance, provide a helpful set of standards and benchmarks to measure against.

5. *Providing equitable access to resources, development, and economic empowerment.* Such access is critical for envisioning an inclusive form of governance. According to the World Inequality Lab, during the period between 1990 and 2016, the top 10 percent of the population in the Middle East enjoyed about 60-66 percent of the region's income, while the bottom 50 percent accrued, on average, less than 10 percent of regional income. More alarmingly, the share of income accruing to the top one percent of the population exceeded 25 percent of total regional income.¹⁴

Countries of the Arab world have widely divergent governance cultures, practices, and histories and they do not necessarily share common approaches to governance. In fact, it is important to caution against seeing or expecting the Arab world to behave as a monolith; what works in Tunisia is not bound to work in Egypt. However, the five previous recommendations are based on universal values and constitute foundational best practices necessary for any democratic, pluralist governance system. Furthermore, they are all linked to indicators of state success like peace, stability, and economic growth, thus making the right approach also the best one for governing.¹⁵ Following these general norms, each country can then continue to develop and improve its system of political governance, one that reflects the choices and plurality of its peoples.

Conclusion

Countries of the Arab world are inherently heterogeneous in ethnicity, religion, culture, history, and languages. The exclusive top-down imposition of a narrow Arab identity has only served to sharpen the sense of “otherness” and deepen feelings of alienation and marginalization among the Arab peoples. The current inclination by some Arab governments to vilify

Iran through reshaping Arab identity in opposition to Iran as a perceived political enemy and regional threat is very worrisome and ultimately counterproductive. While the appetite for reform is there, a precursor to any meaningful and sustainable change must first be the adoption of a rights-based, good governance model that recognizes the inherent diversity and plurality of the Arab peoples.

Pluralist and inclusive identity flourishes best in an environment that respects the rights of each human being; it values people as individuals rather than functioning exclusively on group stereotyping. As such, striving for a model of pluralism and inclusivity will not only require a readiness for tolerance and acceptance, but most fundamentally, it will be contingent on an embrace and promotion of rights and protections, freedom of speech, accountability, and transparency. An inclusive “democracy at large” vision for Arab citizenship will help provide a model in which there is little opportunity for violent and/or extremist groups to arise, and where active and politically engaged citizens are included and reflected in what it truly means to be Arab.

Notes

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THE DILEMMA OF “NORMALIZATION”: CAN ISLAMISTS PARTICIPATE WITHOUT POLARIZING POLITICS?

Shadi Hamid

The dislike, or even hatred, of mainstream Islamist parties¹ is assumed to lead to a desire to repress or exclude them from public life. This seems intuitive. It is indeed true that nearly all the activists, politicians, or commentators who support Islamist exclusion in the Arab world dislike those whom they wish to exclude.

In this chapter, however, I argue that there is nothing inevitable about the link between disliking a particular group or party and supporting their exclusion. It should theoretically be possible to oppose and even hate a particular group—and think their ideas are bad or dangerous—without taking the subsequent step of favoring their repression or removal from political life. In other words, there is a potential “third” constituency, beyond the traditional Islamist/non-Islamist divide, that could be ideologically anti-Islamist while supporting, advocating, and standing up for the right of Islamists to participate within the democratic process. Up until now, this group has been small and to some extent, particularly in Egypt, somewhat imagined, but the future of democracy and more modest political reforms depends on this constituency becoming significantly larger than it is at present.

Here, I start from the premise of granting the “badness” of Islamists in order to focus the debate on processes rather than the strong and often immovable ideological biases that arise from divides over religion’s role in public life. Discussing such foundational questions regarding Islam and the state tends to stop debate before it even starts. After all, if Islamists are “bad” (because they are Islamist), then their rights of participation must be curtailed. However, in most democratic theory, goodness, in a

normative sense, has not generally been a prerequisite for inclusion (this is quite apart from questions over the use of violence, but the overwhelming majority of mainstream Islamist movements, by virtue of being mainstream, do not use violence²).

Which countries in the Arab world have something akin to truly democratic competition, whatever else their faults? There are only three exceptions to the authoritarian rule: Iraq, Lebanon, and Tunisia. Iraq always tends to be accompanied by an asterisk, due to the US invasion in 2003, which means that it is often omitted or simply forgotten in such discussions. In 2014, a year after the military coup in Egypt and after the Arab Spring seemed to have failed, a leader of Morocco's Justice and Development Party (PJD) said, "We're the one last Islamist party remaining in government in the region."³ Although Morocco cannot be considered democratic due to the monarchy's veto powers over matters of sovereignty, the PJD leader's remark is telling for other reasons. As David Patel writes, "By almost any measure, the most successful mainstream Islamists in the Arab world are in Baghdad, where Islamists have governed Iraq since 2005 ... Yet, Iraq and its participatory Islamist movements remain pariahs for comparative scholars."⁴

After Iraq's January 2005 elections, Ibrahim al-Jaafari of the Shia Islamist Daawa Party assumed the position of prime minister. Iraqi Muslim Brotherhood members served in various cabinet positions, including as ministers of higher education and planning. In Lebanon, Hezbollah—however much the United States and Saudi Arabia oppose it—has become a fixture of coalition governments. The point here is not that these groups are "good" (Hezbollah is a US-designated terrorist organization as well as an active participant in the Syrian regime's mass killing of civilians) but rather that the more democracy there is in a given country, the more likely it is that Islamists will have significant political representation.

What is striking about these two cases is the extent to which Islamist participation has simply become uncontroversial. Few major politicians argue for banning the parties in question. This participation "norm" gains a certain momentum over time: the longer Islamist parties participate, the more difficult it becomes for political actors to argue for placing legal or constitutional restrictions on them. In turn, the less political actors

argue for proscribing Islamist parties, the more the participation norm is strengthened.

Tunisia meanwhile finds itself somewhere in between Islamist participation and Islamist normalization. The Islamist Ennahda Party has participated in coalition governments as either lead party or junior partner for most of the period since the fall of dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011. It has prioritized the cultivation of its image as a "normal" political actor intertwined in the fabric of Tunisian culture and society. Yet Islamist participation—and particularly the notion of Islamists leading government—remains controversial in secular circles, and Ennahda leaders continue to fear a return to the authoritarianism of the past. One way of judging the success of the ongoing Tunisian transition to democracy is to consider the extent of Islamist normalization.

Justifications for Islamist Exclusion

In an ideal world, it might be better if Hezbollah were not a major political actor in Lebanese politics with a large popular constituency. But in the real world—if democracy is, in fact, an important long-term objective—one's commitment to democratization should take precedence over opposition to Hezbollah, however strongly held. But what if someone does not share the premise that Arab democracy is or should be a goal, either for the United States or for Arabs themselves? A different starting premise here completely alters the conversation, since a main justification, if not *the* main justification, for Islamist inclusion is that it is a cause or result—or both—of democratization.

For Arab liberals, the primary goal is often—and unsurprisingly—liberalism, with an emphasis on individual rights, women's rights, some degree of social permissiveness, and opposition to state promotion of conservative religious interpretations. If perceived liberal goods come into tension with democracy, then liberals may decide to prioritize the former at the expense of the latter (as the overwhelming majority of "liberals" did in Egypt during the July 2013 military coup against the democratically elected government of Mohamed Morsi). As this author has argued elsewhere, in religiously conservative societies such as Egypt and Jordan, where large constituencies advocate greater implementation of sharia, liberals understandably fear that democratization will reflect and strengthen

such religious conservatism in the form of electoral support for Islamist parties and Islamist policies.⁵ If liberalism and more “enlightened” religion are treated as ultimate goods, then the pursuit of democracy would conceivably undermine the prospect of securing these goods. Egyptian liberal parties, for example, underperformed in successive elections and referenda during the 2011-2013 period, contributing to a perception that liberals were fundamentally disadvantaged by democratic competition. As the prominent liberal and parliamentary candidate Shadi Taha, put it, referring to his Islamist counterparts, “To them, it’s faith. You tell me how you can add faith to liberalism and I’ll build you an organization like [the Brotherhood’s]. That’s why religion always beats politics in any match.”⁶

After the coup—as well as after prominent liberals’ subsequent support for the August 14, 2013 Rabaa massacre, where the Egyptian security forces’ violent dispersal of protesters led to the deaths of at least 1,000—many western liberals argued that these liberals could not in fact be “true” liberals. But liberals, like anyone else, are capable of supporting coercion and violence while still being who they are. Not only that, their very liberalism—from a philosophical perspective—may have *contributed* to the willingness to support the 2013 military coup against a democratically elected government.

A year after the coup, the political theorist Faheem Hussain discussed the potentially liberal premises of military intervention into civilian life. “What will concern us,” he writes, “is to scrutinize philosophically whether a liberal justification for a military coup can be provided.”⁷ In his search for answers, he travels the canon of western liberal thought, from John Locke to John Rawls.

As Hussain argues, there is a long history of liberals striking Faustian bargains to protect hard-won liberties from overly pious masses: “Enlightenment philosophes were prepared to make a spoken or unspoken agreement with authoritarian interests, promising obedience and loyalty as long as core liberal values such as freedom of expression over private beliefs were maintained, at least those opinions that wouldn’t trouble the security of the state.” It makes sense, then, to compare Arab liberals not to western liberals today but to liberals during a comparable period in western history, when the choice between liberal values and mass democracy was starker. Hussain writes: “As the philosophes did before them, Egyptian liberals find themselves within societies that have religious

majorities who view liberal ideas as at best religiously problematic, or at worst foreign or infidel.”

While the use of violence may not be legitimate, holding things other than democracy dear is. This is not to say that attributing priority to both liberalism (as constitutionally guaranteed rights) and democracy (as expressed through the results of elections) is impossible, but rather that they can be—and historically often have been—in tension.⁸

To acknowledge this is to offer the prospect of clarity to a confusing debate, where disagreements can simply seem too deep to make sense of. These disagreements often draw on fundamentally different starting assumptions about political philosophy, and those assumptions should be elucidated.

Participation Is Not Enough

Islamist *participation* is a positive and necessary first step, but it is not enough on its own. Moreover, if it does not develop into *normalization*, it can be counterproductive and lead to more—rather than less—polarization in societies. Egyptian politics during the transition is a clear example of how this suspended state can undermine democracy. Islamist groups, which included large numbers of Salafis in addition to the Muslim Brotherhood, participated en masse. But this participation never solidified into normalization, and perhaps it could not, considering the short time period in question. In other words, the very presence of Islamists in political life was highly contested and a major driver of polarization, particularly after the first parliamentary elections in 2011-2012 when nearly three-quarters of the seats went to Islamist parties. Moreover, the out-sized, uninterrupted role of the military since the 1952 revolution, and its own self-conception as guardian of the Egyptian nation-state, always left open the possibility that electoral outcomes could be undone. References to military intervention in politics became commonplace in the first half of 2013, intensifying in the months leading up to the coup.

Participation in the absence of normalization runs the risk of being the worst of both worlds, putting a democratic transition on perpetually shaky ground. There are few cases of long-term participation without normalization (in part because of its destabilizing effects), so it is difficult to draw generalizations. However, the case of Turkey is worth considering.

Its putative transition arguably began in 1946, with the first peaceful transfer of power through elections taking place in 1950. Islamist parties entered parliamentary politics in the 1970s, first with the National Order Party (1970-71) and then the National Salvation Party (1972-81). Each was banned. Its successors, the Welfare Party (1983-98) and Virtue Party (1998-2001), also ran afoul of restrictions on anti-religious activity and were dissolved. Fears of an anti-Islamist coup by the military or judiciary against the Justice and Development Party (AKP) continued through the late 2000s. In this respect, Islamist parties were never truly normalized, with military intervention remaining a Sword of Damocles nearly four decades after they first began participating in the political process.

It is telling that the AKP, which first came to power in 2002, would explain away its increasingly authoritarian behavior as being necessary for normalization, in effect undoing the artificial imposition of Kemalist and secular ideology. AKP officials and leaders have often spoken of the secularists who previously repressed them—and denied them a normal political existence—as deserving of punishment and purging.⁹ These are the two sides of participation without normalization, producing polarizing and potentially dangerous behavior by both those who deny normalization as well as those who are denied it.

Participation *with* Normalization: The Cases of Indonesia and Malaysia

There are, however, more cases of participation *with* normalization. I have already mentioned examples from the Arab world, but perhaps more successful—and promising—are Indonesia and Malaysia (and to a lesser degree, Pakistan). Here, too, Islam plays an outsize role in public life. According to Pew surveys from 2011-12, 93 percent of both Malaysian and Indonesian Muslims say religion is “very important” in their lives, easily surpassing the percentage who say so in Egypt, Turkey, or Tunisia, while 86 percent of Malaysian Muslims and 72 percent of Indonesian Muslims favor making Islamic law the official law of the land in their countries.¹⁰ This is the supply side of Islamism, but it does not—and does not need to—translate into support for Islamist parties.

An individual can support some Islamist ideas without being an Islamist. Such is the case for the vast majority of the citizens of Malaysia

and Indonesia, where Islamist parties only receive the backing of a small, if still significant, percentage of the population. This is precisely what is so interesting about these examples: demands for sharia legislation have spread well beyond the usual Islamist suspects, enjoying the sanction and support of ostensibly secular ruling parties. As the scholar of Islamism in Southeast Asia Joseph Liow notes, most Malaysian states have laws on the books regarding sharia criminal offenses, backed by government-sanctioned religious bodies. "A large segment of the incumbent UMNO party," he writes, "has also been either sympathetic to this push or, in some cases, actively involved in agitating for implementation of sharia."¹¹

Indonesia, meanwhile, has featured the passing of more sharia ordinances on the local level than Egypt, Tunisia, Turkey, Algeria, Morocco, or Lebanon. Democratization has gone hand-in-hand with decentralization, which has allowed more conservative provinces and localities to experiment with religiously inspired legislation. In one article, the Indonesia scholar Robin Bush documents sharia bylaws implemented in South Sulawesi, West Java, and other conservative regions. They include requirements for civil servants and students to wear "Muslim clothing"; for women to wear the headscarf to receive local government services; and for residents to demonstrate Qur'anic reading ability in order to be admitted to university or to receive a marriage license.¹² But there is a catch: according to a study by the Jakarta-based Wahid Institute, most of these regulations have come from officials of *secular* parties like Golkar.¹³

How is this possible? In Indonesia, the implementation of sharia is part of a mainstream discourse that cuts across ideological and party lines, again suggesting that Islamism is not necessarily about Islamists but about a broader population that is open to Islam playing a central role in law and governance. As Liow writes, "The piecemeal implementation of sharia by-laws across Indonesia has not elicited widespread opposition from local populations."¹⁴ Islamism, contrary to popular belief, does not necessarily require the existence of Islamists.

This is the defining characteristic of countries where Islam and Islamism have been normalized: the role of Islam in politics is still controversial, to be sure, but it is no longer a raw, existential divide that threatens the very foundations of democracy. In short, normalization does something that becomes particularly important during democratic transitions. It lessens the stakes and takes what might otherwise be sources of

antagonism and political violence and transforms them instead into “normal” issues that can be debated and disagreed on as mere policy differences and not as absolute, incontrovertible truths.

The Costs of Normalization

In Southeast Asia, democratization has fueled Islamization. If the latter has depended on the former, then it casts the process of democratization in a more complicated light. There are tradeoffs, and these “costs” of normalization may be perceived by liberals as simply too high to bear, considering their ultimate aims beyond democracy, as discussed earlier. Significant Islamization has obscured and weakened some of Indonesia’s and Malaysia’s pluralistic traditions. The most striking example is the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial elections, where a Muslim candidate, Anies Baswedan, rallied his conservative supporters and stoked anger and outrage against the incumbent, Ahok, who is Christian. What followed was a religiously charged campaign, replete with accusations of blasphemy, for which Ahok, as of writing, is serving a prison sentence.¹⁵ The link between elections and targeting minorities is not necessarily unique to Indonesia. Regarding India, Michael Cook writes, “the political advantage to be gained by Hindu politicians from a successful communal riot is clear enough.”¹⁶

In western democracies, electoral campaigns also often exacerbate popular sentiment against minorities, in part because doing so can be quite effective. Discussing Hungary, Peter Kreko writes, “The refugee and migration question was central in the 2018 electoral campaign. Unlike in 2014, economic issues hardly figured. Baldly put, the central Fidesz claim was that Brussels and [billionaire George] Soros were scheming to flood Europe with Muslim migrants ... Before the refugee crisis, Fidesz’s popularity was on the decline. After it, Fidesz not only recovered but added half a million new voters.”¹⁷ To pretend that democracy is a panacea, or to expect that more established democracies are immune, is to raise expectations that generally cannot be met. The danger of such expectations is that they can drive support for authoritarian reversal, as we have seen in the post-Arab Spring Middle East.

Again, liberals can (theoretically) argue, as many western liberals did in centuries prior, that the establishment of constitutional liberalism—along

with mass “enlightenment”—should precede universal suffrage. But this order is difficult to replicate artificially. With democratic elections becoming a relatively uncontested normative good, it is difficult, if not impossible, to expect most citizens to abide by an indefinite postponement of democratic life. This means that replicating the sequencing of liberalism first, then democracy later, almost invariably requires high levels of repression. In effect, then, this is what many Arab liberals are arguing—and have argued—is necessary. This is not to delegitimize their arguments—they would only be illegitimate, after all, if one considers authoritarianism absolutely unacceptable—but rather to lay out more clearly the stakes of the debate.

Notes

¹ I define “mainstream” Islamist groups as movements and their affiliated political parties which operate within the confines of institutional politics, accept the notion of the Westphalian nation-state, and enjoy popular support. I am not making a normative judgment about the content of their beliefs. This includes the Muslim Brotherhood and other movements that use the Brotherhood as a frame of reference.

² In certain exceptional cases like that of Hamas (in effect the Palestinian equivalent of the Muslim Brotherhood), the groups in question do not use violence as a matter of unchanging theological conviction, in contrast to extremist organizations like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

³ Avi Spiegel, “Morocco,” in Shadi Hamid and William McCants, eds., *Rethinking Political Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 69.

⁴ David Patel in Shadi Hamid and William McCants, “Rethinking Political Islam,” Brookings Institution, May 6, 2016, <https://brook.gs/2BefOsm>.

⁵ Shadi Hamid, *Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁶ Interview with author, Shadi Taha, November 20, 2011.

⁷ Faheem Hussain, “Egypt’s Liberal Coup,” Faheem Hussain - Some Thoughts, August 13, 2014, <https://bit.ly/2WAZ8Jm>. A shorter version was published on *Open Democracy*, <https://bit.ly/2RuZ0Tq>.

⁸ See, Dalia F. Fahmy and Daanish Faruqi, *Egypt and the Contradictions of Liberalism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2017); Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003); and Richard Youngs, *The Puzzle of Non-Western Democracy* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment, 2015).

⁹ See Shadi Hamid, *Islamic Exceptionalism: How the Struggle Over Islam is Reshaping the World* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2016), pp. 173-76.

¹⁰ Pew Research Center, Forum on Religion & Public Life, “The World’s Muslims: Unity and Diversity,” August 9, 2012, pp. 131, 201, <https://pewrsr.ch/2S1H1Ji>.

¹¹ Joseph Liow, “Southeast Asia,” in Shadi Hamid and William McCants, eds., *Rethinking Political Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 186.

¹² Robin Bush, “Regional ‘Sharia’ Regulations: Anomaly or Symptom?” in *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia*, Greg Fealy and Sally White, eds. (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), pp. 3-4, 11, <https://bit.ly/2CWw0Yo>.

¹³ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁴ Liow, "Southeast Asia," *Rethinking Political Islam*, p. 185.

¹⁵ For more on the religious dimensions of the campaign, see Jon Emont, "Does the Quran forbid electing Christians?" *The Atlantic*, April 18, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2DO87L9>.

¹⁶ Michael Cook, *Ancient Religions, Modern Politics: The Islamic Case in Historical Perspective* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 98.

¹⁷ Péter Krekó and Zsolt Enyedi, "Orbán's Laboratory of Illiberalism," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (2018): pp. 39-51, <https://bit.ly/2LYVuxX>.

MIDDLE EAST SECTARIANISM: A SYMPTOM TO A CAUSE

Marwan J. Kabalan

Sectarianism and sectarian conflict in the Middle East are often presented as centuries-old religious and theological phenomena. Those who subscribe to such thinking believe sectarianism runs so deep that it cannot be addressed or resolved. This view is widespread in the media, policy circles, and in some academic quarters as well. People high in the echelons of power, such as former President Barack Obama, have also embraced this view. In fact, in his 2016 State of the Union address, Obama said, “The Middle East is going through a transformation that will play out for a generation, rooted in conflicts that date back millennia”.¹

In reality, however, Sunni-Shia sectarian conflict is a modern revisionist phenomenon that largely constitutes a reaction to specific modern-day events and socioeconomic problems. Its roots can be traced back to the 1979 Iranian revolution rather than seventh-century religious and political divisions within Islam. It has been exacerbated by a set of subsequent external and domestic events; chief among them is the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, the 2011 Syrian revolution, the war in Yemen, and other running conflicts in the region. In fact, sectarianism signifies the failure of state building in the Middle East, which points, in turn, to foreign intervention.

Roots of Modern Sectarianism

The 1979 Iranian revolution brought to power the first religiously oriented regime in the modern history of the Middle East. Before the Islamic revolution in Iran, secular regimes reigned across the region, including in Iran itself. Although present in public life, religion had not been a key

factor in Middle Eastern politics before 1979. Indeed, Bernard Lewis drew attention to the rise of Islam a few years before as a result of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.² Although that war did indeed contribute to the rise of Islamism as a result of the failure and collapse of pan-Arabism, movements that advanced political Islam were not close to gaining power anywhere in the Middle East before the Iranian revolution. Iran did not only bring to power turbaned mullahs in a pivotal Middle Eastern power but also stirred sectarian tension across the region. Shia Iran's endeavors to export its revolution to neighboring Sunni Arab countries led to a backlash: Iraq decided to act preemptively, declaring war on Iran in 1980.

As part of its revolutionary rhetoric, Iran also called on Shia communities in the Arab Gulf states to rise against their own rulers. Sunni Arab Gulf states hence supported Iraq in the eight-year war against Iran, pouring billions of dollars into Iraq's economy. Before the Iranian revolution, Sunni-ruled Iraq was seen by the smaller and weaker Arab Gulf states as the major security threat. Its radical, pro-Soviet policies and its support for leftist and Marxist groups in the Gulf were matters of concern for the GCC countries.³ Iran interpreted the Gulf states' support for Iraq as an act of hostility, unleashing a series of destabilizing activities against them, particularly Kuwait. To counteract Iran's threat, Arab Gulf leaders met in Riyadh in May 1981 and announced the establishment of the GCC. Iran viewed the bloc as an antagonistic Sunni club.

Contained and humbled by the failure to export its revolution or win over Shia communities in the Sunni-majority Arab Gulf states, Iran turned inward. The 2003 US invasion of Iraq, which removed a key bastion against Iranian expansionism, opened a new window for Tehran to resume its efforts to establish a Shia crescent, stretching through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon on the shores of the Mediterranean.⁴

The Shia revival, and the surge in sectarian politics in Iraq and later in Syria within the context of the Arab Spring, caused grave concern among the Sunni-majority Arab countries. It also led to the rise of the so-called Islamic State (IS) and other radical Sunni groups. IS presented itself as the champion of Sunni Islam against the rise of Shia power and Iran's expansionist policies. To counteract IS and what it perceived as Sunni rebellions in Syria and in Iraq, Iran established Shia militias. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states supported Sunni groups and a war by proxy ensued between

the two sides, with Syria serving as the main battleground. Shia and Sunni militias wreaked havoc across the region. They were the ultimate expression of the failure of state building in the Arab region.

State Failure

Armed non-state sectarian actors emerged as a reaction to a set of domestic and external conditions, all of which are related to the failure of state building in the Middle East. In particular, they also reflect the state's inability to perform its key functions, such as warding off external threats, providing adequate public services, and protecting the civil rights of its citizens.

The dismantling of the Iraqi state coupled with the disbanding of the Iraqi army by the Coalition Provisional Authority of Iraq—and the failure to replace it with a state based on the rule of law and neutral in its relations with its citizens—were instrumental in the rise of sectarianism in Iraq. In fact, the post-US invasion political system in Iraq was built to reflect and consolidate sectarian cleavages. Key posts in the country were divided along sectarian and ethnic divisions, reflecting the shifting balance of power between winners (Shia Arabs and Kurds) and losers (Sunni Arabs). The sectarian policies of Hizb al-Daawa, especially under former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, ruined any possibility of establishing a state for all of its citizens. In Syria, the use of massive force by Bashar al-Assad's regime to suppress the 2011 protest movement, and Iranian and Iraqi support for these drastic measures, led to the emergence of regional sectarian axes.

During these turbulent times, the state in the Arab East moved from being a weak one—wherein a government could provide poor quality public services to its citizens but still function as a sovereign entity in regional and world politics, while exercising a monopoly on violence within its territories—to a failed or collapsed state. Failed states hardly supply any public services, lack security, and discriminate against different groups of citizens.⁵ A collapsed state loses control over huge parts of its territories and the provision of security becomes private. Within these conditions, sectarian armed militias emerge and thrive.

Marginalized and vulnerable communities seek protection and solace from private groups, such as militias, because the state can no longer

provide security and public services. The state also loses legitimacy and cannot function as an arbiter between different social forces. Trapped in a vicious circle and pitted against each other, sectarian groups seek support from external sources. Here the lines between local and regional conflicts become blurred. The borders between failed or collapsed states are also compromised, wherein communities from the same sect support each other with little respect to national borders. This leads to the rise of transnational sectarian identities wherein Iraqi Shia, for example, see themselves closer to Iranian Shia than to Iraqi Sunnis, and vice versa. National identities crack as a result: people cease to identify themselves as Syrians or Iraqis, but as Sunni and Shia. They no longer pay allegiance and loyalty to the state but to a higher transnational authority. Historical forces here work in a retrospect or in a reverse mode, regressing from nation-states to religious empires.

Remedies

If the Middle East region is to overcome the sectarian dilemma, it is imperative that we cease to characterize sectarianism in religious or ideological terms or to refer it back to the early days of Islam. We must instead understand it in its correct modern context as a political, economic, and geostrategic conflict that can be resolved. It behooves us to address its manifestations as conflicts for wealth and power, though these are concealed in sectarian terms used by the elite to manipulate and mobilize the masses. We must also deal with the sectarianism that resulted from other problems in the region such as the Palestinian struggle and foreign interference, including that by Iran.

A clarification also needs to be made between Sunnis and IS, which is a Sunni extremist organization. The 2017-2018 Arab Opinion Index survey⁶ conducted by the Doha-based Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies shows that an overwhelming majority (92 percent) of the Arab public, the majority of which is Sunni, has a negative view of IS, with only 5 percent expressing “positive” or “positive to some extent” views. Crucially, favorable views of IS were not correlated with religion: respondents who identified themselves as “not religious” were just as likely to have favorable views of the organization as those who identified themselves as “very religious.” Similarly, no relationship could be found between respondents’

opinions of IS and their views on the role of religion in the public sphere. In other words, public attitudes toward the organization are defined by present-day political considerations and not motivated by religion.

This distinction between religiosity and political considerations reflects the complicated nature of Arabs' ideational positions. As the survey shows, there was parity in the opinions about the Islamic State between those who agree on separating religion from the state and those who reject the separation. While only 5 percent of those who agree with the separation have varying positive views of IS, only 4 percent of those who reject the separation do. In other words, 95 and 96 percent of the two categories have negative views of the organization.

Equally important, the Arab public offers a diverse set of remedies when asked to suggest the best means by which to combat the Islamic State. When given the chance to define their first and second preferences for the means to tackle IS in particular, and terrorist groups more broadly, direct military action was the most widely selected first choice by 18 percent of respondents; an end to foreign intervention in Arab countries was selected as the first choice by 17 percent of respondents; and 13 percent proposed resolution of the Palestinian struggle as their remedy of choice. (See Table 1 on page 136.)

Rebuilding a strong national state is also key to resolving sectarian conflict in the Arab Middle East. A strong national state does not mean a repressive state, which was responsible for this sectarian mess in the first place, but a state that respects human rights and the rule of law. However, for that to take place the state must be strong enough to retain its monopoly over the means of violence. No militias or armed groups can hence be allowed to challenge the state, which must reign supreme in this regard. Rebuilding the state should therefore focus on the centralization and institutionalization of power. Centralization of power means disarming militias and disallowing parallel authorities. Institutionalization of power means establishing checks and balances so that the state does not again become a tool of control in the hands of the few. It must rather become a neutral arbiter between the different social forces.

**Table 1. Proposed remedies to IS/terrorism more broadly,
first choice made by respondents.**

Remedies offered to defeat IS	First most significant	Second most significant	Average score
Intensify military efforts	18	12	15
End foreign intervention	17	18	17
Resolve the Palestinian cause	13	7	10
Support the Arab democratic transition	12	6	9
Resolve economic questions: unemployment, poverty, and price inflation	9	15	12
Resolve the Syrian conflict in a manner that responds to the aspirations of the Syrian people	7	7	7
Purge extremist interpretations of Islam	7	11	9
End the sectarian policies of some Arab states	4	6	5
Spread a culture of religious tolerance	3	7	5
End the Libyan crisis in a manner that meets the aspirations of the Libyan people	1	2	1
Other reasons	1	0	1
Do not know/declined to answer	8	—	4
No second answer given	—	8	4
Total	100	100	100

Rebuilding the state, empowering it, regaining public confidence in it, and enabling it to perform its key functions go a long way toward weakening sectarian militias. As long as the state is weak, people will rely on militias for protection, security, and social services.

For a strong national state to be built, a Westphalian peace must be established in the Middle East wherein no country can be allowed to interfere in other countries' internal affairs. Citizen loyalty must only be expressed toward a national state and not for any other transnational authority, be that of a religious or secular nature. Loyalty to the state can be made easier if national governments become more representative and reflect the will of their own people. Democratic regimes are more amenable to resolving conflicts and building collective security regimes. This would allow more resources to be allocated for economic development, without which democracy cannot survive and conflict cannot be ended.

Alternatively, if the state in the Middle East continues to fail and its power continues to diminish, sectarian non-state actors will grow in power while their violent acts will also increase.

Notes

¹ The Obama White House, “President Obama’s 2016 State of the Union Address,” Medium, January 12, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2DWr8bP>

² Bernard Lewis, “The Return of Islam,” *Commentary*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (January 1974): pp. 39-49.

³ At the time when Iraq was supporting the Marxist rebels in the province of Dhofar, Oman, Iran under the shah supported the pro-West Sultan’s Armed Forces. The shah sent an Iranian army brigade numbering 1,200, with its own helicopters, to assist the British-led Sultan’s Armed Forces in 1973. In 1974, the Iranian contribution was expanded into the Imperial Iranian Task Force, numbering 4,000. This support led eventually to the final defeat of the rebels in 1975.

⁴ This term was originally used by King Abdullah II of Jordan following the US invasion of Iraq. See Robin Wright and Peter Baker, “Iraq, Jordan See Threat to Election from Iran,” *The Washington Post*, December 8, 2004, <https://wapo.st/2zOqP3s>.

⁵ Robert I. Rotberg, *State Failure and State Weakness in a Time of Terror* (Washington, DC: World Peace Foundation/Brookings Institution Press, 2003), pp. 5-10.

⁶ All results, charts, and tables can be found in the 2017-2018 Arab Opinion Index, <https://bit.ly/2s1fVTm>.

IDENTITY POLITICS 2.0: CYBER GEOPOLITICS AND THE WEAPONIZATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Tamara Kharroub

In the months leading up to the attacks against the Rohingya Muslim minority in Myanmar, the country's military received training in Russia and was responsible for setting up troll factories with fake accounts and a large-scale disinformation campaign on Facebook. The purpose was to spread anti-Rohingya propaganda including incendiary comments, falsehoods, and incitement, accusing them of being terrorists and illegal immigrants and circulating fake photos purportedly of Buddhists massacred by the Rohingya. The psychological digital warfare went even further with the military accounts spreading false news among both the Rohingya and the Buddhists about nonexistent mutual attacks, thus heightening fear and urgency of action.¹ The United Nations concluded that Facebook had played a "determining role" in the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya in Myanmar,² which the organization called a genocide.³

Such hateful disinformation has become endemic around the globe. The intersection of identity politics and social media provides a potential for devastating consequences, especially in relation to human rights and democracy. In the Arab world, identity-based securitization and ethnic sectarianization have played a major role in fueling or justifying conflict and injustice. With the rapid growth of social media use among Arabs and the absence of the rule of law and inclusive social and state institutions, the future looks bleak. From hate speech to disinformation campaigns and targeted attacks, the geography of warfare is shifting. Social media's unique designs and business models as well as technological advancements

provide the potential to intensify conflict, rapidly escalate tensions, enable human rights violations, and incite further identity-based violence.

Identity Politics: The Double-Edged Sword

The election of Donald Trump as the president of the United States has intensified identity politics and polarization. These have flooded media and political conversations not only in the United States but around the world. On the one hand, with identity playing a major part in the grievances of marginalized communities and with unequal power structures continuing to affect minorities, identity politics becomes a platform to confront, recognize, and address disparities. On the other hand, shifts brought on by globalization have increased identity politics on the right, especially among middle-class white populations, leading to resentments over perceived lost economic opportunities, affronted dignities, and threats to status, lifestyle, and even existence. The resulting global rise of populist nationalism and the shift from multiethnic democracies and multilateralism to internally focused narrow identities that vilify minorities have caused many to question the utility of identity politics and to view it as detrimental to liberal democracy.⁴ The impact of this discourse was evident in increased extreme-right attacks, most recently on the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania synagogue and the Christchurch, New Zealand mosques.

But identity has long been at the center of violence and politics especially in authoritarian contexts, where human rights protections, inclusive citizenship, and rule of law are absent. In Arab countries, identity-based conflict continues to reemerge and be reshaped by shifting geopolitical agendas. For example, the rise of the so-called Islamic State (IS) was primarily a result of the marginalization of Sunnis in Iraq after the US invasion and the rise of dominant Shia groups. IS has used this narrative of “saving Sunni brothers and sisters” and restoring the dignity of Muslims globally to recruit fighters from all over the world. Additionally, the popular uprisings that swept the region in 2011 were born out of political and economic marginalization and social inequality as well as brutal crackdowns on opposition movements. Injustice makes the marginalized identities more salient and invokes anger, polarization, and political action—peaceful or otherwise.

The processes by which group identity instigates conflict can be attributed to group-based marginalization, whether real or perceived.⁵ When members of ethnic, religious, or socioeconomic groups feel threatened, they retreat to tribalism. Similarly, powerful political elites have used identity delineations to deny rights and control populations and resources. Social psychology research has shown the thin line between identity politics and genocide;⁶ through a gradual process of inter-group dynamics, the demonization of the out-group as a threat to the in-group can lead to the dehumanization of out-group members and the belief that violence against them is a virtue and a moral obligation to protect the in-group. Some of the most atrocious crimes and genocides in history started with hateful disinformation about a community.

But identity politics in itself is not the problem. Perhaps the most useful classification of identity politics is that of Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, who propose two versions. The first is an inclusive identity politics where the collective community is united but yet recognizes the injustices experienced by certain groups within it and the need for political processes to resolve them. The second version is based on politics of fear with a binary, zero-sum, “us vs. them” perspective.⁷ The problem lies in the upsurge of the latter rather than the former.

In the Arab world today, the zero-sum exclusionary identity politics is prevalent. Much of the region’s conflict is based on inter-group competition, group-based marginalization, ethnic tensions, and fear of an existential threat, all of which create a self-perpetuating cycle of violence and counter-violence. While identity has long been a fixture of political discourse, the explosion of social media tools has intensified division and expanded the domain of conflict to the digital sphere. Due to the role of identity in instigating conflict, its manifestations and dynamics on social media are of vital importance when addressing conflict and strife.

The New Battlefield: A Typology of Identity-Based Conflict in Cyberspace

In the 21st century, one cannot address conflict without discussing its manifestations in the cyber sphere. With 164 million internet users in the Middle East⁸ and Facebook as the most popular news source among young Arabs,⁹ social media domains are increasingly becoming central

spaces for political discourse and participation in the Arab world, presenting a new realm of politics, identity dynamics, rights abuses, and conflict.

Initially, new communication tools were celebrated as “liberation technologies” for their ability to connect people and support political mobilization. The Arab Spring has revealed the positive role communication technologies and social media can play in the political process, namely in enabling the public sphere and aiding revolutions and activists in the process toward democratization.¹⁰ The aftermath of the Arab Spring, however, has exposed the limitations and dangers of social media in this arena. In the last decade, both state and non-state actors, including repressive regimes and violent groups, have established strategies, acquired cyber capabilities, and invested resources to advance their geopolitical agendas through these new media platforms.

In the last few years, social media introduced new spaces for identity politics, hate speech, and conflict. Perhaps the most prominent example of this is IS recruitment efforts starting in 2014. Much of its recruitment (and arguably its existence) can be credited to the internet, drawing more than 40,000 foreign fighters from 110 countries¹¹ through employing sophisticated social media strategies and capturing the digital sphere. Today, although the Islamic State’s feat has drastically diminished, the digital battleground it uncovered is in its early phases and this new information ecosystem will surely affect democracy and human rights in the Arab world.

Certain characteristics of social media platforms allow them to more readily enable inflammatory identity-based conflict. While propaganda and regime control over information and communication tools are not new phenomena, what makes social media tools alarmingly susceptible to being used as weapons of wars and identity conflict are several of their unique features.

1. Mass Disinformation Warfare

Disinformation campaigns are widespread on social media, with potentially serious and harmful consequences. As prejudice is the first step on the path of perpetrating genocide, hateful disinformation about members of certain groups can easily influence politics, trigger violence,

and even lead to war crimes. In fact, online manipulation and disinformation tactics influenced elections in at least 18 countries in 2017.¹²

Perhaps the most known example of this is Russia's disinformation campaigns during the 2016 US presidential elections. Led by Russia's Internet Research Agency, paid Russian troll armies posed as angry American supporters of the two candidates, created Facebook groups, posted false news and inflammatory content against the other candidate, and spread polarized and divisive discourse. Social media platforms were named by the US Justice Department as playing a critical role in Russian interference in the elections, with 150 million Americans targeted.¹³ But well before that, Russia led similar online disinformation campaigns in Crimea and eastern Ukraine,¹⁴ provoking Russian ethnic minorities and instigating ethnic tensions with the purpose of instituting pro-Russian and friendly politicians. What Russia has managed to do through social media is to mobilize other countries' own citizens to sow division and chaos and undermine the very notion of truth: to destabilize its adversaries from the inside. Ultimately, social media helped pave the way for Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the breakout of war in eastern Ukraine.

Similar systematic campaigns and dedicated state resources have started to develop in the Arab world. The Gulf crisis of June 2016, for example, was sparked by the UAE hacking of the Qatar News Agency and publishing propaganda and false comments attributed to the emir of Qatar, which served as a pretext for conflict. In fact, in the weeks leading up to the onset of the crisis, Qatar's adversaries created a targeted online campaign with thousands of Twitter bots tweeting coordinated propaganda against Qatar.¹⁵ In this case, disinformation campaigns and social media played a vital role in generating an international diplomatic crisis, which almost led to war. More recently, in the wake of the Khashoggi murder in October 2018, Saudi Arabia employed a network of Twitter bots pushing pro-Saudi talking points and propagating false information about Jamal Khashoggi and his murder; these tactics were meant to shut down critics and justify and legitimize the murder.¹⁶

To be sure, propaganda and disinformation for political ends are not new phenomena. What is novel here is the scale of campaigns that social media enables and the apparent authenticity of information sources. With festering ethnic tensions in the Middle East and the power of social media

in disseminating political disinformation and targeting identity, the consequences are potentially devastating. A repetition of the Myanmar scenario is not implausible.

2. Homophily

The social media sphere is characterized by homophily, or the tendency of people to seek out those similar to themselves. Research shows that people seek news sources that confirm their views and beliefs,¹⁷ resulting in digital “echo chambers” and identity-based silos. Additionally, false rumors tend to travel faster than the truth,¹⁸ most likely due to their often-sensational nature and extremist claims. Thus, identity-based messages and disinformation, in particular, are spread further and faster on social media. Notably, the business models of social media platforms greatly perpetuate this problem through two interlinked features. First, as an advertising-based business model that relies heavily on user engagement (e.g., likes, clicks, shares), the algorithms elevate posts that garner more engagements in the news feed to create more revenue. Second, in order to multiply this effect, the algorithms feed their users content with which they are more likely to engage, i.e. messages they agree with.

The combination between human nature (desire for like-minded content) and the social media business models ensures a hyper-partisan environment, which does not help in “connecting people” as Facebook’s mission statement had posited. Instead, such platforms act as confirmation bias machines. This characteristic of social media domains is particularly important because identity markers have very strong mobilizing power, where images of group-based injustice trigger anger, which is in turn an action-inducing emotion. The anonymity feature also adds a level of protection, enabling the most vicious and partisan messages. This is of great significance for the Arab world as it provides swift fodder for political polarization and ethnic conflict, which can ultimately lead to group-based violence and war.

3. Discrediting the Notion of Truth

Given the overarching profit focus of social media companies, the value of information on their platforms lies not in their truth or accuracy, but in their ability to confirm preexisting beliefs and to gain engagements. The resulting ideological segregation leads to perpetuating biased

narratives and mutual mistrust. The combination of disinformation and homophily presents a dangerous dynamic, one where facts are no longer objective or—even worse yet—relevant.

To add fuel to the fire, accessibility has made it easier for anyone to create and disseminate content. Social media has given malicious actors and previously fringe views a mass communication platform. With relatively cheap tools and minimum skills required, almost any user can create content and manipulate images. They can even produce doctored videos, known as “deepfakes.” It is now easier than ever to lead disinformation campaigns and post inflammatory content, regardless of its truth, and sow discord and chaos. When anyone can have the power to produce “information” without gatekeeping in this post-truth world, conflict is expected to be on the rise.

In many countries in the Arab world where freedoms of speech and expression are constrained, the cyber space has become the new public sphere. However, the large scale of troll posts inflates certain perspectives and distorts public opinion, where bots can manipulate trends and engineer public sentiment. During the Gulf crisis, bots were used to create an illusion of internal opposition to the regime in Qatar;¹⁹ thus, social media can spur coup rhetoric and silence those who may think their views are in the minority. Arab governments’ monopoly over resources and authority has given them the upper hand in the cyber battlefield. These autocratic and repressive regimes have reclaimed the power to determine truth and manufacture public opinion, undermining the prospect of liberation that communication technologies had promised.

4. Cyber Espionage and Targeted Attacks

Governments across the world have become effective at developing and implementing digital tools to advance their political agendas. Israel has spearheaded these efforts with its Ministry of Strategic Affairs, which recruits pro-Israel organizations to spy on US citizens²⁰ and attacks Israeli critics online. One Israeli intelligence firm, Psy Group, conducted surveillance of Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) activists in the United States under Project Butterfly, which was tasked with creating defamation campaigns against movement activists using fake social media accounts.²¹ From accusations of terrorism and alleged ties to Hamas, to using criminal

background records and private information, the name-and-shame techniques have been effective in intimidating some activists into silence.

The Israeli espionage industry has in fact sold cyber capabilities to authoritarian regimes around the world, which in turn used them to target human rights activists, persecute LGBTQ individuals, and silence critics.²² Saudi Arabia was among the countries that enlisted the services of Israeli firms to spy on its citizens and target critics with smear campaigns on social media. In fact, the company NSO Group was behind the hacking of the private messages of Saudi dissident Omar Abdulaziz and his communication with Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi criticizing the Saudi crown prince. Khashoggi was brutally murdered two months later at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. "The hacking of my phone played a major role in what happened to Jamal," Abdulaziz said.²³

Similarly, the UAE created Project Raven to hack smartphones of rivals and critics using a program developed by US intelligence veterans called Karama, which allows hackers to access any iPhone by simply inputting the phone number or associated email address into the software. By employing US government-trained hackers, the UAE carried out cyber attacks against hundreds of individuals and governments in the Arab world, Europe, and the United States including journalists, scholars, human rights activists, and media personalities it deemed associated with Qatar.²⁴ The Egyptian regime has also used surveillance of activists, phishing attacks, hacking, and employing tens of thousands of bots to orchestrate attacks and character assassinations against dissidents.²⁵ Cyber technologies have enabled further violations of privacy, freedom of the press, and human rights as well as the targeting of journalists, thus expanding grievances and escalating conflict.

This new cyber arms race is only getting started. Authoritarian regimes and violent groups have now greater tools at their disposal and new opportunities presented by social media for surveillance, control, intimidation and silencing critics, fanning ethnic tension, disinformation, hate speech, industrial scale propaganda, and genocide. In the Middle East, with the presence of existing strife and vast regional agendas, cyber geopolitics can manifest intensely and rapidly. With low economic and political costs, coupled with high damaging potential, cyber capabilities are increasingly being used in geopolitical competition in the Arab world to

initiate, accelerate, and escalate conflict. The dangers of social media are real, especially in autocratic settings like in the Arab world, and they must be addressed with serious comprehensive efforts.

The Case for Civic Education and Digital Literacy

As we aim to move beyond conflict in the Arab world, social media and identity politics must be part of the solution. In order to remedy the negative and damaging effects of social media in fanning the flames of division and conflict, the roots of the problem must be addressed.

First, the technological features that intensify the negative facets of identity politics should be revised. Social media companies, especially Facebook, have come under intense scrutiny in the last few years for their role in amplifying political divisions, fake news, privacy violations, and violent conflict. In response to demands from the United States and the European Union, Facebook and Twitter began implementing minor measures to protect privacy, monitor content, and delete fake news and fake accounts and messages that incite violence. However, there are 2.32 billion Facebook users around the world and this number is growing; these users are posting in hundreds of languages, rendering these efforts unsustainable, at best. More importantly, granting these corporations the power to police speech is very dangerous. While instituting some accountability among social media firms is important, making them the sole gatekeepers of information remains problematic. In essence, the immense power of information and determining truth cannot be highly concentrated in the hands of a few large corporations, whose priorities are more monetary than moral.

It must be recognized that these corporations are business entities, and the structure of such global monopolies leaves little space for human rights and democratic accountability; on the contrary, their business interests lie with powerful, often autocratic, governments. For example, Facebook deleted accounts of Palestinians and pro-Palestine activists at the direction of the Israeli government and its flawed definitions of incitement,²⁶ virtually allowing repressive regimes to censor and silence the narratives of marginalized, oppressed, and powerless communities. Furthermore, unless social media companies change their business models that rely on algorithms that perpetuate hate speech, which is unlikely,

the problem will persist. With the added concern of market dominance and lack of choice (for example, Facebook also owns Instagram and WhatsApp), official pressure is necessary. Therefore, regulation might be essential to force tech firms to implement real changes in the foundational structure of their businesses.

In the wake of the Christchurch massacre and its livestreaming on Facebook, Australia moved to pass laws that hold social media executives accountable for content on their sites. The United Kingdom has also proposed regulations that would allow the government to fine companies for hosting harmful content and false information. However, such regulations can endanger free speech and grant governments sweeping powers over online information, which would be especially damaging in the Middle East. The very governments currently committing the greatest cyber abuses in the Arab world are more concerned with their political control than protecting human rights online.

As such, an international multilateral cyber body akin to UN human rights and war crimes agencies would best serve the interests of human rights and protection of individuals in the cyber sphere. Moreover, the transnational nature of the medium lends itself to such transnational measures. As this domain is increasingly becoming a preferred tool of war, international and multilateral regulation of cyber space is required to combat misuse and prevent harmful abuses by all entities responsible including states, organizations, and individuals, in addition to tech companies and executives.

The second part of the solution must be at the societal level. Principally, Arab governments must be pressured to resolve inequalities and group-based marginalization that fuel conflict online and offline. But until then, civil society organizations and educational institutions in the Arab world should be involved, supported, and required to design and implement digital literacy campaigns and civic education programs. Media and digital literacy programs can raise awareness about human biases and the role of social media algorithms in perpetuating them, as well as help identify disinformation and evaluate the credibility of news sources online, among other things. In addition, there needs to be a serious international and domestic effort to advocate for pluralist societies through civic education programs and a push for the institutionalization of the concept and

practice of inclusive citizenship in the legal, political, and educational systems of Arab countries.

As the internet becomes more entrenched as a vital component of the public sphere, the future of democratization in Arab states will depend on it significantly. Social media platforms have played a central role in the rise of disinformation and hate speech, division, and group-based violence. With the imminent advancement in innovative technologies, especially artificial intelligence, the world will have to confront a new set of challenges on the path toward human rights, democracy, and conflict prevention. Only a comprehensive and multifaceted approach, one rooted in civic education, can ensure that technology is being used for good.

Notes

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