

# POLITICS, GOVERNANCE, AND STATE-SOCIETY RELATIONS

CONVENER

TAMARA COFMAN WITTES

The Brookings Institution

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## REAL SECURITY: THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF GOVERNANCE AND STABILITY IN THE ARAB WORLD

CONVENER

TAMARA COFMAN WITTES

The Brookings Institution

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## FOREWORD

The Middle East is seeing a century-old political order unravel, an unprecedented struggle for power within and between states, and the rise of extremist elements that have already exacted a devastating human and economic toll that the world cannot continue to bear. That is why we, in partnership with the Atlantic Council, have undertaken a bipartisan effort to advance the public discussion in the direction of a global strategy for addressing these and other, longer-term challenges confronting the region.

To that end, we convened in February 2015 a Middle East Strategy Task Force to examine the underlying issues of state failure and political legitimacy that contribute to extremist violence, and to suggest ways that the international community can work in true partnership with the people of the region to address these challenges. As Co-Chairs for this project, our emphasis is on developing a positive agenda that focuses not just on the problems of the region, but recognizes and seeks to harness its vast potential and empower its people.

We have undertaken this effort together with a diverse and high-level group of senior advisers from the United States, Europe, and the Middle East, underscoring the truly international approach that is necessary to address this global problem and the need, first and foremost, to listen to responsible voices from the region. We approach this project with great humility, since the challenges facing the region are some of the most difficult that either of us has ever seen.

Engaging some of the brightest minds in the region and beyond, we organized five working groups to examine the broad topical issues that we see as essential to unlocking a more peaceful and prosperous Middle East. These issues include:

- Security and Public Order
- Religion, Identity, and Countering Violent Extremism
- Rebuilding Societies: Refugees, Recovery, and Reconciliation in times of Conflict
- Politics, Governance, and State-Society Relations
- Economic Recovery and Revitalization

Over the course of 2015, each of these working groups discussed key aspects of the topic as they saw it, culminating in each case in a paper outlining the individual working group convener's conclusions and recommendations based on these discussions. This paper is the outcome of the working group on Politics, Governance, and State-Society Relations, convened by Tamara Cofman Wittes, Director of the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. We are extremely grateful to Tammy for the time and dedication she offered to this project.

This paper represents Dr. Wittes's personal conclusions. While these conclusions were greatly informed by the debates within the working group, this paper is not a consensus document and does not necessarily represent the views of each individual working group member. Nor does it necessarily represent our views as Co-Chairs, or those of the Senior Advisers to the project. Instead, this paper is intended as a think piece to spur further discussions of these matters.

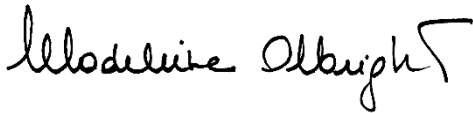
We greatly appreciated Dr. Wittes's exhaustive effort to drill into the complex matter of how the social contract in the Middle East is being redefined in a post-Arab Spring world. We found particularly astute her reminder that reform is also critically important for those states not currently visited by civil war. Her calls for inclusivity in governing—across divides on gender, age, sect, ethnicity, or other factors—are enormously important to setting the Middle East on a sustainable path. Furthermore, her examination of case studies such as that of

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Tunisia provide evidence that better governance in the Middle East is neither a foreign concept nor an unrealistic expectation.

We have considered closely Dr. Wittes's ideas in the process of preparing our Co-Chairs' final report, which will appear in November 2016. It is our hope that this concluding report, when it is released, will represent a constructive, considered, and, above all, solutions-oriented approach to a region that we see as vital to American interests, global security, and human prosperity. We hope that the broad, collaborative approach we have emphasized throughout this project can serve as a model for future problem-solving on issues of the Middle East. We also hope that our final report will not be an end point, but instead will be the first part of an ongoing conversation amongst the global network of stakeholders that we have assembled for this Task Force.

The situation in the Middle East is difficult but progress is not impossible. It is our desire that this Task Force might serve as the first step toward better international cooperation with the people of the Middle East to set the region on a more positive trajectory, and to realize its incredible potential.



**Madeleine K. Albright**  
Co-Chair



**Stephen J. Hadley**  
Co-Chair

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The upending of the Middle Eastern order since 2011 came about primarily because of failures of governance. We must properly understand the why and how of this Middle Eastern breakdown if we are to recognize and commit to the work that is truly necessary to build a new, secure, and durable regional order. Investing in sustainable governance is important for the world and for the rising generation of young Arabs, who can either become a force for tremendous progress or a generation lost to violence and despair.

### How and Why the System Collapsed, and What It Means

The regional collapse since 2011 is the outcome of a long-standing crisis in state-society relations in the Arab world—one that took several decades to germinate. Regional governments failed to adequately address this brewing crisis, and indeed some of them undertook policies that only exacerbated the problem. When popular uprisings burst into the open in 2011, many leaders responded poorly, deepening societal divisions, weakening institutions, and enabling the growth of violent extremist movements. Several states have now collapsed into civil war, but more remain vulnerable to instability. The drivers of change exist all across the region, in every environment. No state is immune from the imperative to reform governance into a more sustainable form. The manner in which the regional order broke down and the past five years of turmoil and disappointed expectations have generated a crisis of order and a crisis of authority. The lack of trust between citizens, political leaders, and governments is perhaps the most daunting obstacle to the restoration of regional stability.

Understanding how and why the Arab state system collapsed in 2011 reveals that the capacity of Arab

states to address local and regional security threats depends in large part on structuring their political institutions and repairing the breach between states and society. The failure to revise governance, by contrast, will invite escalating security challenges. The future of the region will largely be determined by the quality of governance, not its mere existence. Governance that will last, and that positions states to be effective and reliable partners in maintaining regional stability, will have four key characteristics: it will be more inclusive, more transparent, more effective, and more accountable. Liberal democracy is far more likely than any other regime type to exhibit these characteristics, and the hunger for democratic self-government endures today. But the path to democratic government is neither swift nor linear.

Three models contend for dominance in today's Middle East: fragile democracy (Tunisia); order through savagery (ISIS); and renewed authoritarianism (Egypt under Sisi).

### Existing Models for Governance

Five years after the Arab uprisings, and with the failure of all but one effort at governance transformation, we look across the Arab world and see several failed or failing states, new authoritarian models, and a number of recalcitrant autocracies holding on through a combination of heavy spending, increased coercion, and the soft bigotry of low expectations generated by fear both at home and abroad (“At least we’re/they’re not ISIS”). Three models contend for dominance in today’s Middle East: fragile democracy (Tunisia); order through savagery (ISIS); and renewed authoritarianism (Egypt under Sisi). The latter two models do not offer a stable or successful path for the future of Middle Eastern states.

Given the level of violence suffusing the region, the fear and mistrust that suffuse local populations, and the ugly “race to the bottom” underway where extremism and authoritarianism compete as alternative models for Arab governance, it

is no surprise that many—publics, elites, and external powers—express a degree of “buyer’s remorse” about the Arab uprisings of 2011. But the breakdown of social trust, particularly in societies now enmeshed in conflict, makes it hard to imagine how a new social contract could be negotiated, established, and implemented. Imposing a new social contract from the top down is unlikely to produce a stable positive outcome.

### How to Build Sustainable Governance?

Because of the twin crises of order and authority generated by the regional breakdown, Middle Eastern states will simply not succeed in reestablishing an effective social contract and generating sustainable governance using the same (top-down, exclusionary) model as before. To begin repairing trust between citizens and government, and reestablishing the authority of state institutions through consent, governments in the region must focus on several priority areas:

- Ending civil wars is paramount—but so is fixing governance in existing states.
- Inclusive governance and the avoidance of violence demand respect for human rights.
- Prioritize the justice sector.
- Build opportunities for youth participation.
- Cultivate platforms and skills for dialogue and conflict resolution.
- Nurture and elevate civil society.

### Recommendations for US Policy

Over the past five years, US policy toward questions of domestic governance in the Middle East has swung dramatically between over-involvement and under-involvement—and at both ends of this pendulum, officials have found themselves frustrated at the results. While the United States certainly cannot determine outcomes in the region, its presence and influence is still sizeable, indeed unmatched for an actor outside the region. At the same time, Americans have a particular case of whiplash about governance in the Middle East: all the optimism they experienced at popular pro-democracy mobilization in 2011 has turned to dismay and worry at the metastasizing violence that characterizes the region today.

Given this recent history, and the legacy of the Iraq War, many American policy makers today observe

the existential challenges facing the region’s governments and conclude that American leverage to shape the region’s trajectory is limited. But it is not zero. More than anything, the United States’ global and regional leadership enable it to shape the environment within which Middle Eastern actors make decisions about how to behave. The question for American policy makers is how their country can play its limited role in a way that maximally supports progress toward sustainable governance—and therefore toward stability—in the region.

US officials must keep firmly in mind that the underlying vulnerabilities that produced this upheaval and gave space for ISIS and al-Qaeda still exist across the region. Without addressing these underlying problems, those urgent security threats will simply keep popping up in different places and ways. The competition to establish new norms for governance in the Middle East is, in fact, the conflict that will determine the future of the region—it is the ground on which geopolitical, sectarian, and other conflicts are playing out. Actors pursuing paths other than effective and accountable governance may succeed for a time, but at the cost of great violence and, ultimately, at the price of regional stability. The United States cannot remain neutral with respect to this competition—and right now, it appears to be pushing in the wrong direction. Some lessons emerge from recent experience that should inform future US efforts to advance more sustainable governance in the Middle East:

- Rebuilding regional stability requires a sustained investment in improved governance.
- US officials should enunciate clear principles for what it will take to restore regional stability, and consistently evaluate regional development through the lens of what will and will not advance durable governance in the region.
- US policy makers should prioritize increasing and intensifying all forms of engagement and exchange between Americans and the peoples of the Middle East.
- American and international planning for ending the region’s civil wars and for post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction must integrate the lessons in this analysis regarding sustainable Arab governance.
- US policy makers should avoid creating moral hazards in bilateral relations with regional



governments, particularly by over-securitizing bilateral relationships.

- The United States should devote greater support to governments that are using political compromise instead of violence to resolve disputes.

Ultimately, building societies that are resilient in the face of sectarian conflict and terrorist violence requires more effective, responsive institutions that can win citizens' trust and loyalty, and more fair and functional systems that can offer the region's

majority, its young people, meaningful opportunities to achieve their ambitions for themselves and their communities. The project must give young men and women reason to invest in their hopes for this world, instead of hastening their progress toward the next one. Sustainable governance in the Middle East is an imperative for the security of the region and the world—urgent, and worthy of thoughtful, persistent investment by regional and global leaders. There are no more alternatives to experiment with, and no more time to waste.

## INTRODUCTION

The Middle East is disordered, more so than at any time since the 1950s, when the Suez War; revolutions in Egypt, Iraq, and Syria; and Yemen's civil war were reshaping the region into the Arab state system we knew before 2011. Today's disorder came about primarily because of failures of governance—because the forces that sustained the autocratic states of the old Middle East crumbled in the face of local and global socioeconomic trends that slowly eroded the social contract (the basic bargain between citizens and state) that had given governments the ability to maintain support from and control over their societies.

The crumbling of that old social contract, and leaders' failed responses to this collapse, produced widespread discontent that burst into the open in late 2010, toppled four governments and shook several others, and opened the door to a historic upending of the Middle East. We must properly understand the how and why of this Middle East breakdown if we are to recognize and commit to the work that is truly necessary to build a new, secure, and durable regional order.

Investing in sustainable governance in the Middle East is important for the world, because the Middle East's fate affects the rest of the world in the myriad ways discussed in this project's other papers. And it matters because, despite appearances, the Middle East is full of promise. Half of the region's population is under thirty, and these young citizens are by and large the healthiest, best educated, most connected generation the Arab world has ever seen. Yet it is clear that their aspirations for themselves and their communities do not match the realities all around them. This rising generation can be a force for tremendous development and progress, just like young entrepreneurs and social activists we see elsewhere: in Africa, in Southeast Asia, and across the United States. But without an encouraging environment and the right opportunities, these young people could easily become a generation

lost to violence and despair, with far-reaching consequences for the Middle East and the world. With so much at stake, it is crucial to understand not just what happened and why, but also how the breakdown of the last five years has affected the peoples of the Middle East, and how much of what kinds of effort it will take to put the region back together. Only then can those concerned with regional stability and development marshal the will and resources to commit to the work ahead.

### The Road from Failed Governance to Civil War and Extremism

To recognize that the region's collapse is rooted in failures of domestic governance is not to say that the Arab uprisings of 2011 caused the turmoil and violence we are witnessing now. As this paper details, the disorder we are witnessing today is, rather, the outcome of a long-standing crisis in state-society relations in the Arab world, one that took several decades to germinate and that regional governments failed to address adequately. This long-brewing crisis generated popular uprisings to which many leaders responded poorly, exacerbating societal divisions, further weakening and in some cases collapsing state institutions, hardening intercommunal grievances, and enabling the growth of radical, violent movements. In at least three countries—Libya, Syria, and Yemen (and possibly Iraq)—these uprisings have morphed into outright civil war.

Those same conditions also had dangerous effects in those Arab states that were left standing after 2011. The uprisings dealt a blow to the authority of centralized governments, leaving vacuums that non-state actors have been working to exploit. Also, Arab citizens, betrayed by the broken hopes of the past five years, are deeply suspicious of existing political leaders, parties, institutions of governance, and other sources of political authority. As a result, they are willing to turn more to ethnic or sectarian identity or to rigid ideology to identify friends and foes. At the same time, publics fearful of the violence

... [D]espite appearances, the Middle East is full of promise.

spreading from within and without are embracing whomever they believe can provide order and security—even at the cost of accountability, human development, or basic human rights.

The collapse of security and the collapse of authority in the Middle East since 2011 are the twin forces now driving the region, leaving both its population and outside actors to choose between a future governed by renewed authoritarianism or by violent extremism. Those advocating for one of these options argue that the fact, or the amount, of governance is more important than its quality. However, neither of these options offers a stable solution for a disordered region, and neither offers a prospect of a more promising future for the region's beleaguered people. The seemingly dichotomous choice between these two dysfunctional options highlights the imperative for those concerned with Middle Eastern stability to delineate, enable, and then drive toward a more durable and authentic form of governance for the future of the Middle East. This report is a contribution toward understanding and meeting that challenge.

This paper will demonstrate why the *quality* of governance, not its mere existence, is crucial to the ability of Arab states to address their daunting local and regional security challenges. The roots of the region's upending can be found in the underlying failures of governance, in the context of a breakdown in the social contract. *Understanding how and why the Arab state system collapsed in 2011 reveals that security and accountable governance are interdependent in today's Arab world: the capacity of Arab states to address local and regional security threats depends in part on restructuring their political institutions and on repairing the breach between states and society. The failure to revise governance, by contrast, will invite escalating security challenges.*

This analysis also suggests that renewed security and authority cannot be constructed and imposed from the top down and be successful, but must be built from the bottom up, in ways that citizens trust and accept. That is, renewed governance must be local governance first and foremost.

Papers prepared by other leaders of this task force are tackling the challenges of ending the region's civil wars, addressing the urgent and overwhelming human needs that these wars have produced, mobilizing religion on behalf of conflict resolution, and envisioning a future of economic empowerment for the region. This report focuses on the end

state that all those efforts should aim toward, if the region is to emerge from the current disorder into an order that is more durable, that does not generate new security threats for the world, and that offers a prospect of human progress for the region's three hundred million citizens. As such, the timeframe for this paper's recommendations is ten to twenty years longer than the others. Repairing governance, an inescapable necessity for returning stability to the Middle East, will demand patient, consistent investment by actors both within and outside the region, sustained in the face of shorter-term imperatives and disruptions. The question for those concerned with regional stability is whether they are prepared to build and sustain the will for this kind of investment—nothing less will suffice.

Our working group examined the underlying conditions of politics, governance, and state-society relations that both enabled and generated instability in Arab states over the past decade, before and after the uprisings of 2011. A few key insights anchored our work:

- The general and specific deficits of governance in the region are well known and have been publicly discussed for well over a decade both in the region and in the West. These deficits went largely unaddressed, not because they were unrecognized, but because the existing institutional and procedural frameworks for decision-making in Arab states were too narrow, too exclusive, and ultimately too brittle to enable the bold decisions and sustain the courageous implementation required to address these problems. Some states managed to survive the 2011 turmoil through a combination of limited reforms and mobilization of resources to ease public demands, but these strategies, too, face hard limits in the years ahead. *Writing a new and more durable social contract will require more inclusive decision-making.*
- The various attempts in the pre-2011 era to address mounting problems, and the failure of most, suggest that no governing elite in the Middle East has a monopoly on either the wisdom or the capabilities necessary to address their peoples' needs, heal the region's ills, and produce a more hopeful future. *Regional governments will need not just the support, but the active assistance, of civil society and the private sector to achieve political, social, and economic progress for their citizens. But, as some governments have already discovered, they cannot expect that assistance to come*

*without transparency, participation, and accountability.*

- The interests and capabilities of regional actors—both state and non-state—in the effort to establish sustainable governance are far greater than those of the United States, Europe, and other external actors. External actors can provide ideas, incentives, and support for necessary reforms—but the sustained will to set an agenda for change, advance it, and create accountability for it must come from those in the region. One key insight is that, after many failed attempts at top-down reform and a region-wide series of popular uprisings, *the vector for change in the years to come will continue to be from below—local communities and civil society groups will create solutions and drive change, rather than state institutions that have largely lost public trust. How to generate and maintain the will for positive change among those in power is a key challenge for sustainable governance in the Middle East.*
- The various states of the Middle East find themselves in very different circumstances, and build on different political, cultural, and social legacies that inform (and in certain ways constrain) the negotiation of a new social contract as well as the nature of the contract that results. Describing the components of sustainable and successful governance is simple, but does not address the reasons why such components did not emerge in the region prior to 2011. This report highlights core characteristics necessary for sustainable governance in all these cases, but recognizes that the way these characteristics may be manifest in any given case depends on localized and particular solutions. *Arab citizens and leaders must grapple with the realities they face today, and with the obstacles to change within their own societies, and must arrive at their own means of overcoming the challenges that made effective reform impossible in past years and that present obstacles to reform today. Efforts at the national level to control, squelch, or curtail such debate will only deepen the crisis of governance and retard durable solutions.*

Given the above premises, this report eschews efforts to lay out a recipe of specific reforms to achieve sustainable governance (e.g., prescribing certain types of procedures or institutions for governance), although many such recipes are available. Instead, the report focuses on core

principles and priorities in advancing the goal of sustainable governance—that is, governance that will last and that positions states to be effective and reliable partners with the United States and other international actors in maintaining regional security and stability. Based on the working group’s discussions and analysis, there are a few essential ways of doing business that will be required to make future governance in the Arab world more durable and reliable than in the past:

1. Sustainable governance in the region will be more **inclusive**: A major failing of pre-2011 governance, an error that is being compounded in many ways in the post-2011 environment, is exclusionary decision-making. Half the region’s population is under thirty years of age, and its female half is largely marginalized in social, economic, and political decision-making. However, governance by a narrow set of largely older and largely male elites is a recipe for grievance and instability—a fact made manifest by the 2011 uprisings. In societies riven by conflict, where government must rebuild public trust, inclusion is even more important as a primary means to avoid exacerbating social divisions and to sustain peace. Moreover, recent scholarship emphasizes the centrality of inclusive governance to successful development.<sup>1</sup> Much of the violence in the Arab world since 2011 has been a manifestation of a winner-take-all approach to politics. But the region’s demographics and the complexity of the twenty-first-century world make such zero-sum approaches inviable for sustainable governance. Today’s social, economic, and political realities mean that, to be sustainable and successful, government authority must rest on a wider base of social support and government decisions must reflect consultation with a wider range of interest groups and achieve a wider degree of societal consensus.
2. Durable governance in the region will be more **transparent**: Another failing of Middle Eastern governance has been opacity—affected or interested groups, and the public at large, have had little access to information about government plans, decisions, and actions. Attempts by media or civil society to share information about government behavior with the public have been opposed by regional governments keen to prevent critics from

<sup>1</sup> Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2012).





First of May protest in Tunis, Tunisia, 2012. Photo credit: Scossargilbert/Flickr.

finding fodder for damaging accusations, or to prevent political opponents from gaining a foothold. Such constraints on information hold back social trust and progress in general, but are even more pernicious in the current disordered environment. Government opacity breeds suspicion and cynicism about government behavior, exacerbating the problems of order and authority that are already challenging governance. Sustainable governance requires regimes to adjust to the reality of an information environment they cannot control, listen to public demands for participation, and abide by the demand for accountability. Durable governments will proactively open themselves to public scrutiny, as well as to public input and assessment of their performance; while this may increase complaints and demands, it also spurs more responsive and effective policies and practices.

3. Durable governance in the region will be more **effective**: In their early decades, Arab states made great strides in basic development, reducing maternal and child mortality,

improving basic educational rates, and building public infrastructure. However, the last decades of the twentieth century saw stagnation and decline in state effectiveness, as top-heavy state institutions became mired in bureaucracy and corruption and challenged by reduced state budgets and the pressure of a large youthful population. Material deprivation alone did not drive the 2011 uprisings, but dissatisfaction with government performance, and the perception of partiality and corruption as obstacles to government serving citizens adequately, clearly contributed to popular grievances.<sup>2</sup> The newly mobilized populations of the Arab states mean that governments—regardless of their political basis or regime type—must get better at delivering results for citizens if they want to survive.

4. Durable governance in the region will be more **accountable**: In the post-2011 era, all regional governments are more sensitive to public opinion, fearing to provoke a mass mobilization

<sup>2</sup> Hafez Ghanem, *The Arab Spring Five Years Later: Toward Greater Inclusiveness* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 2015).

like those that suffused Tunisia and Egypt. Yet, sensitivity to public opinion is not the same as public accountability. Indeed, autocratic governments have an unfortunate tendency to cultivate positive public opinion without accountability through methods—magnifying threats, taking on foreign adventures, enacting populist economic policies, and other steps—that are likely to destabilize a struggling nation in a disordered region. The legacy of such tactics is deep cynicism about government information and behavior, and a lack of trust in government proposals. Securing public support in a manner that stabilizes states and the region will require governments to persuade the public to overcome the skepticism and fear resulting from the past four years of instability and invest their governments with meaningful authority to implement far-reaching changes. While we will discuss rebuilding social trust below, we can say here that citizens will be unlikely to trust without a sense that they can correct their government’s direction if they do not like it, or even reject it entirely should circumstances warrant.

Even a superficial analysis suggests that liberal democracy—that is, representative government anchored in pluralism, individual rights, and legal equality—is far more likely than any other regime type to exhibit the above characteristics of sustainable governance in a meaningful and reliable manner. And, indeed, the hunger for democratic self-government in the Middle East endures today, despite all the developments since December 2010 that make democracy seem both harder and farther away than ever.<sup>3</sup> *The more that Arab states*

*move toward political systems that enshrine the principles, practices, procedures, and protections of democratic self-government, the more stable and successful they will be over time.*

The years since 2011 also make clear to all what scholars of political transition already knew—the path to democratic government is neither swift nor linear. Faced with such daunting challenges and violent disorder, readers of this report might find a prescription for democratic government Pollyannaish or perhaps wholly unrealistic. I have no doubts about the necessity of the four qualities outlined above for Arab governance to move from disorder to stability. But given the length and uncertainty of the path toward democracy, this paper will offer some priority areas of focus for internal and external efforts, priorities that will help structure the ongoing efforts within Arab societies to move toward effective, transparent, accountable, and inclusive government by making their own compromises and avoiding the pitfalls of the past.

As an initial matter, though, we must understand how and why the region got to its current state, to see how that breakdown shapes the conditions under which a stable regional order can re-emerge. Even those states of the Middle East that have not experienced uprisings, violence, or state collapse since 2011 remain beset by governance challenges and are vulnerable to internal and external shocks that could produce further instability. Equally important, we must understand the roots of the regional disorder to realize what kinds of seeming solutions will not, in fact, deliver lasting peace and stability. And so, with a clear eye on the horizon, we must mark a path that leads us immediately ahead between the Scylla of violent extremism and the Charybdis of coercive authoritarianism.

<sup>3</sup> For example, 80 percent of the populations in Arab countries overall would prefer to live in a democratic country, according to Mark Tessler, “Mapping (and Explaining) Attitudes toward Political Islam among Ordinary Citizens in the Middle East and North Africa: Selected Findings from the Arab Barometer,” *Arab Democracy Barometer* (Fall 2014) <http://www.arabbarometer.org/sites/default/files/Mark%20Tessler%20USIP%20Presentation.pdf>.

## I. THE COLLAPSE OF THE MIDDLE EASTERN STATE SYSTEM: WHY IT HAPPENED, HOW IT HAPPENED, AND WHAT IT MEANS

The Middle East we see today represents the collapse of a regional order that prevailed for a half-century, as well as the collapse of several regional states into civil violence. The conflicts in today's Middle East are not really about borders or territory, as much as they are about states and the type of governance they provide—what form they take, how they function, whom they privilege, and how they interact.<sup>4</sup> Some political forces seek to control existing state institutions, while others seek to supplant them and establish their own.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, existing states in the region, feeling deep anxiety in the face of the post-2011 disorder, struggle with one another for regional

power and influence. Saudi Arabia leads one pole of this power struggle, Iran the other, and the battle is fought in both failed and existing states across the region. This regional power struggle poses its own challenges to the goal of establishing effective, sustainable governance in the Middle East.

### The Roots of Regional Disorder: Why Arab Autocracy Failed

Between roughly 1960 and 2011, the existing system of Arab states appeared to most observers as remarkably stable. Indeed, scholars of the region were largely occupied with explaining the durability of Arab authoritarianism in the face of the “third wave” of democratization that encompassed political transformation in regions as diverse as Central and Eastern Europe, Central and Southeast Asia, and Latin America.<sup>6</sup>

For nearly a half-century, Arab states relied on a model of governance that political science labels “corporatist.” They sought to make the state itself the central arena, overseer, and arbiter of most political, social, and economic activity. Interest groups like workers, religious institutions, and other societal groups were organized under the state's umbrella and were expected to show loyalty in return for having their interests met by state action.<sup>7</sup> Civic action and organization outside the bounds set by the state were seen as threats to state authority, and were either co-opted and made subservient to the state, or suppressed. Arab governments maintained support by binding their populations to them through an effective mix of communal (ethnic, religious, or tribal) identity and political ideology; income from rents (that is, nontax income from natural resources or foreign assistance) that they distributed through state patronage; and effective security forces to both deter and suppress any prospect of domestic dissent.

4 Some observers suggest that the breakdown in state-society relations, the emergence of failed states, and the increasing challenges to state authority region-wide are occurring because the states of the Middle East were artificial creations to begin with and never enjoyed the coherence of European nation-states. Renewing regional stability, such voices argue, demands a fundamental rethink of the nation-state system in the Middle East and a redrawing of so-called “Sykes-Picot” borders in the region to accommodate ethnic or sectarian differences that have been flashpoints for violence these past few years. See, for example, Tarek Osman, “Why border lines drawn with a ruler in WW1 still rock the Middle East,” *BBC News*, December 14, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-25299553>; Bernhard Zand, “Century of Violence: What World War I Did to the Middle East,” *Der Spiegel*, January 31, 2014, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/world-war-i-led-to-a-century-of-violence-in-the-middle-east-a-946052.html>; Michael Williams, “Sykes-Picot drew lines in the Middle East's sand that blood is washing away,” *Reuters*, October 24, 2014, <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2014/10/24/sykes-picot-drew-lines-in-the-middle-east-sand-that-blood-is-washing-away/>. But the notion that nation-states have “natural” borders defined by homogenous ethno-national communities is rooted more in nineteenth-century European romanticism than in historical or political reality, and this notion itself produced some of the bloodiest conflicts of the twentieth century. There is no reason to believe that changing state borders would be a magic bullet for resolving the inter-communal conflicts in Iraq or Syria. The fate of South Sudan, in which separation from the north simply unleashed a new conflict that had previously been subsumed in the north-south fight, is a good reminder that new fences do not necessarily make good neighbors. At the same time, the Kingdom of Jordan is multiethnic and multi-religious, and its borders are classically “artificial” creations of Sykes-Picot—but it has nonetheless developed an impressive degree of social cohesion and so far successfully resisted the centripetal forces pulling the rest of the region apart.

5 Yaroslav Trofimov, “Would New Borders Mean Less Conflict in the Middle East?” *Wall Street Journal*, April 10, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/would-new-borders-mean-less-conflict-in-the-middle-east-1428680793>.

6 Lisa Anderson, “Arab Democracy: Dismal Prospects,” *World Policy Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Fall 2001) 53-60; Oliver Schlumberger, ed., *Debating Arab Authoritarianism: Dynamics and Durability in Nondemocratic Regimes* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

7 Howard J. Wiarda, *Corporatism and Comparative Politics: The Other Great Ism* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1997) 22-3.





Protestors filled Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt on April 8, 2011. *Photo credit: Jonathan Rashad/Flickr.*

The corporatist systems of Arab autocracy, sustained by rents, ideology, and occasional coercion, were challenged at the end of the twentieth century by the emergence of three major forces: a massive demographic bulge of young people on the cusp of adulthood; the push and pull of local economic stagnation and global economic integration; and a radically new information environment generated first by satellite television and then by the Internet and mobile technology. These forces, in combination, fatally undermined the ability of the region's governments to deploy ideology, rent-based patronage, and selective coercion to maintain consent for their rule.

- The large numbers of young people needing education, health care, and jobs challenged already-creaking state services and forced an end to the expectation (touted by some governments but often more theoretical than real) that university graduates would earn lifetime employment in the public sector.
- The forces of economic globalization challenged (and increased the costs of) the subsidies on food, fuel, and other staples that many regional

governments used to sustain public support and mitigate economic inequality, while the onset of the global recession in 2008 reduced state revenues, especially to non-oil economies like Egypt's.<sup>8</sup> Thus, as Hafez Ghanem illustrates

8 Challenges to state sovereignty and state effectiveness due to globalization are a constant feature of twenty-first-century global politics. Economic globalization, the expansion of international norms on internal governance and individual rights, the rise of non-state actors with policy influence from multinational corporations to nongovernmental organizations, the revolution in information technology—all these and other global forces have eroded the ability of twenty-first-century states to govern their domestic affairs independently. But the implications of these forces for the Middle East have been uniquely destabilizing, because the states of the Middle East were ill-prepared to absorb the forces of globalization, and because the impact of these global factors were compounded by additional, region-specific challenges to state governance that made it hard for states to adjust without upsetting their own domestic political order. Globalization's impacts on state-society relations are especially challenging for autocratic regimes. States in the twenty-first-century world, and perhaps especially in the twenty-first-century Middle East, have a dwindling ability to impose order on their societies. Yet, citizens expect order and state effectiveness, and increasingly they demand that it be provided with a degree of transparency and fairness. In an era of empowered individuals and non-state actors, and disempowered but still essential states, it seems that stability and economic success require a more complex, inclusive, and



well, Arab states like Egypt, which had been on a developmental par with states like South Korea or Malaysia, stagnated or even slipped backward in economic terms while Asian states zoomed ahead.<sup>9</sup>

- Finally, the rise of satellite television stations, the World Wide Web, and social media (“Web 2.0”) broke the state’s monopoly on news, cultivated stronger cross-regional Muslim and Arab identities, allowed young Arabs to see how other parts of the developing world had advanced while their own countries remained stagnant, and enabled new forms of social organization and political mobilization.

In sum, the platform that long sustained Arab autocracy was undermined by the rise of a massive, educated, and largely under- or unemployed generation of youth whose expectations for themselves and their societies far exceeded the opportunities they could obtain given the opaque, nepotistic, repressive, and stagnated systems of governance that characterized the pre-revolutionary Arab states.<sup>10</sup> The region’s young people faced real costs from these governance failures: persistent unemployment meant they could not easily marry or move out of their parents’ homes, leaving them stuck in a perpetual state of “waithood”; calcified systems, nepotism, and state repression of independent social organization frustrated their entrepreneurial aspirations for change; and coercive state security targeted them with impunity.<sup>11</sup> Holding ineffective tools for social control, Arab governments dithered on necessary reforms (see next section), but ultimately faced increased expressions of dissent from youth and interest groups, such as labor unions, rights activists, and political opposition groups, and fell back on increased coercion to suppress them.

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This cycle of unmet expectations, dissent, and coercion has manifested in every single state in the Middle East over the past decade. Indeed, the socioeconomic trends that undermined the old social contract—the youth bulge, an economy stagnated by corruption and vulnerable to external forces, and new forms of information empowerment—exist all across the Middle East. They exist in rich states and poor, large states and small, in Iran as well as the Arab world, in states with more homogenous populations and those with diverse populations. Thus, there is no country in the Middle East that is free from the pressures for change that these trends have generated, or from the threat of instability that emerges from a failure to adjust to these forces. The pressures may manifest differently, and leaders may respond in different ways, with differing resources, and over different timelines—but no place is immune from the imperative for reform.

This reality forces the conclusion on everyone concerned to advance stability and sustainable governance in this volatile region: even as the headlines focus on arenas of intense violence, stemming the regional collapse and marginalizing extremist movements like the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and al-Qaeda, stabilizing the Middle East demands attention to the *other* states across the region as well. *The Middle East can ill afford any more state failures; and yet, without a change in course, more state failures are likely—perhaps most likely in places that, like Tunisia and Egypt before 2011, also have aging leaders and no clear succession plan in place. Policy makers must devote attention to those areas where governing institutions are still functioning (even if they are not severely challenged at the moment) and must focus in particular on helping government institutions listen to, include, and serve the marginalized majority of the region: its young people.*

### Knowing Is Not Enough: Failed Attempts at Autocratic Reform

A second important starting point for understanding and addressing failed governance in the region is recognizing that none of the challenges facing Arab states and undermining the old, corporatist social contract were secrets in the years before the uprisings. Ironically, some of the limited changes

consultative model of state-society relations than either the traditional patronage model of the early Arab state system or the corporatist autocratic model of the last half-century.

9 Ghanem, *The Arab Spring Five Years Later*.

10 For more on the crumbling of the political order in the Arab world before 2011, see “Chapter Three: The Vanishing Status Quo,” in Tamara Cofman Wittes, *Freedom’s Unsteady March: America’s Role in Building Arab Democracy* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 2008) 30-55.

11 Navtej Dhillon and Tarik M. Yousef, eds., *Generation in Waiting: The Unfulfilled Promise of Young People in the Middle East* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 2009).

undertaken by Arab leaders in an effort to address these challenges may even have exacerbated emerging grievances and hastened the uprisings of 2011.

As noted earlier, the social contract that governed most Arab societies in the post-World War II period relied on a top-down, state-centered model of rents dispensed through patronage networks; ideological affinities with roots in Arab nationalism, tribal ties, and/or religious identity to attract citizens' loyalty; and coercive capability used in limited ways not just to maintain citizen security but to contain challenges to the state's leadership, whether militant or simply in the form of vocal dissent or extra-systemic political organization.

This patronage-based social contract was not always efficient, and by design it retarded rather than encouraged innovation and entrepreneurialism, whether in economics or politics.<sup>12</sup> But it was not under threat until recent decades, when it began to be eroded by the forces of economic globalization, the rise of a massive youth demographic, and the breaking of the state's information monopoly.

In the 1980s and 1990s, a number of Arab governments sought to adjust to these challenges by revising political and economic dimensions of the social contract. At the political level, many states either introduced or renovated systems for the election of parliaments or consultative councils, although both electoral systems and the powers of these representative bodies were carefully managed by strong executives and their able security agencies. One goal of such reforms was to provide an avenue for public expression while keeping public grievances and political disagreements from targeting the rulers themselves. The space expanded for expression and participation, but not for actual decision-making. And when the results from more open political competition went too far, political reforms were abruptly reversed. In Egypt, for example, the unprecedentedly open 2005 parliamentary elections—made so in part by government decisions and in part by strengthened judicial and citizen monitoring—produced a lower house in which “independent” representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood held 20 percent of the seats. In 2010's elections, the government largely

banned both domestic and international observers and manipulated the process and results so that not a single Brotherhood member won a seat in parliament. Over the course of the 2000s, as citizens voted for institutions that had no real ability to change policy, these experiments in managed political liberalization tended to undermine public faith in political institutions generally.<sup>13</sup> There is little doubt, for example, that frustration over the overt manipulation of the 2010 parliamentary elections in Egypt contributed to the uprisings two months later.

The landmark Arab Human Development Report in 2002, which included extensive data analysis, and follow-up reports in the years following painted a stark picture of three primary “deficits” that retarded progress in the Arab states: those of freedom, women's inclusion and empowerment, and knowledge. These three deficits correspond well to three key dimensions of the 2011 uprisings: the demand for dignity and equality from the state, the prominent role of women (both as activists and as targets for violence), and the mass mobilization of educated, aspiring middle-class youth.<sup>14</sup>

The Arab Human Development Report, and a host of similar studies by Arab scholars and international organizations in the 2000s, spotlighted many specific challenges that were evidence of the weakening corporatist social contract: official corruption, weak rule of law for contracts, calcified labor laws, education-labor market mismatches, and the like. Similarly, many analysts and officials suggested specific reforms to address these challenges: reforming the civil service, formalizing the informal sector, increasing access to banking, restructuring tax laws, streamlining business procedures, and so on.<sup>15</sup> At the broadest level, these reforms amounted to reducing the state's role in the economy, decentralizing and increasing the transparency of government authority, enhancing the reliable and impartial rule of law, and expanding basic civil liberties.

12 Paul Salem, “The Arab State: Assisting or Obstructing Development?” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, No. 21 (April 2010), [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/arab\\_state\\_devt.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/arab_state_devt.pdf); Alessandro Romagnoli and Luisa Mengoni, *The Economic Development Process in the Middle East and North Africa* (New York: Routledge, 2014) 93.

13 Michael McFaul and Tamara Cofman Wittes, “The Limits of Limited Reforms,” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (January 2008) 19-33.

14 *Arab Human Development Report 2002: Creating Opportunities for Future Generations* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2002) vii, <http://www.arab-hdr.org/publications/other/ahdr/ahdr2002e.pdf>.

15 *MENA Development Report: Unlocking the Employment Potential in the Middle East and North Africa: Toward a New Social Contract* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2004), [http://www-wds.worldbank.org/servlet/WDSContentServer?WDSPIB/2004/06/03/000012009\\_20040603143832/Rendered/PDF/288150PAPERUnlocking0employment.pdf](http://www-wds.worldbank.org/servlet/WDSContentServer?WDSPIB/2004/06/03/000012009_20040603143832/Rendered/PDF/288150PAPERUnlocking0employment.pdf).

Western governments with an interest in regional stability embraced these issues as well and sought to partner with regional governments and civil society in encouraging gradual reforms to address social, political, and economic needs and to re-forge a functional social contract for Arab states and societies. The European Union's European Neighbourhood Policy and the Group of Eight's Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative are primary exemplars of this approach. Both provided platforms for government-civil society dialogue on reform priorities and offered regional actors positive incentives, financial aid, and technical support to advance necessary reforms.

All these studies and meetings produced long lists of priorities for reform, often endorsed by regional governments and supported by outside donors and technical advisers. Despite all this, however, most governments did not respond to the historic challenge facing them either adroitly or effectively. Some, like the smaller Gulf states of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, relied on an overwhelmingly large ratio of rent to citizenry to sustain consent. By providing public goods and private patronage and solving problems with quiet dialogue and money, they were able to manage without relying overmuch on coercive tools. With small populations; still-strong tribal and familial networks; and large, state-led programs for social development, modernization, and service delivery, these governments were able to sustain popular support and manage local grievances without facing fundamental challenge. When they did face opposition, as in the case of a Qatari poet who criticized the emir or a small group of Emiratis who wrote a joint letter calling for constitutional government, the state authorities simply arrested them and shut down the criticism. Other dissenters quickly got the message.

Some regional governments that lacked the advantages of the above-mentioned states took the challenge of rewriting the social contract more seriously, but political will faltered in the face of opposition from entrenched beneficiaries of the status quo, and implementation was incomplete at best. King Abdullah II of Jordan, for example, endorsed a comprehensive roadmap for reforms

called the National Agenda that was drafted after wide consultation across Jordanian society. The king announced his intention to implement the National Agenda through extensive legislative and regulatory changes. But the effort stalled when it met resistance from security agencies and tribal elites who feared that steps like reduced subsidies and fewer government jobs would disadvantage their constituents relative to other Jordanians, especially Palestinians, who were more urban and would benefit more from private sector growth.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa of Bahrain instituted a new constitution in 2004, shortly after taking power. His announced reform program was endorsed in a national referendum and was meant to empower a freely elected parliament that brought together representatives from Shia and Sunni communities (along with nationalists, Islamists, and even a Jew) on the island. It was

the king's halt to his own reform program in 2009, and his government's subsequent marginalization and persecution of Shia political leaders, that spurred Shia activists to hit the streets in February 2011.

At the economic level, many Arab states tried to adjust expectations and conserve state resources by reducing the state's role in the economy: liberalizing currency controls, shrinking subsidies, reducing state employment, privatizing state-owned land and enterprises, and

taking other similar steps. Many of these shifts were encouraged and incentivized by external donors like the World Bank, the European Union, and the United States. The administration of President Bill Clinton, for example, launched the [AI] Gore-[Hosni] Mubarak Partnership to develop dialogue on and objectives for economic liberalization in Egypt; this effort was later bolstered by President George W. Bush through a 2004 agreement that offered Egypt cash budget support in exchange for hitting benchmarks in financial sector reform. Egypt also undertook obligations to reform its economic system in exchange for multiple packages of support from the International Monetary Fund

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<sup>16</sup> See Marwan Muasher, *The Arab Center: The Promise of Moderation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), esp. chapter nine.

(IMF) in the 1980s and 1990s, totaling some \$1.7 billion.<sup>17</sup>

These economic reforms promised long-term improvements in economic growth and employment, but also carried short-term adjustment costs that were largely borne by the poor (in the case of subsidy reductions, for example) or the middle class (in the case of government employment). To pursue such reforms, governments relied on the support of those who would benefit—wealthy elites with the resources or connections to win government contracts, purchase government land for development, or bring in foreign investment under new rules.

The elite nature of these bargains resulted in perverse effects: instead of mobilizing the rising generation of educated and ambitious Arabs on behalf of economic reform, it denied them the sinecure jobs that successful university graduates had been raised to expect, while not offering a practical road to jobs in the private sector (employment for which their educations had not prepared them). Lower-class workers in what had previously been state-owned industries found that many labor protections vanished along with state employment, and sometimes jobs vanished as well. At the same time, the weak performance of state institutions was mounting, as health and education services were challenged by reduced resources and the youth bulge at the same time. The result of these tentative efforts at structural economic reform in many Arab states was a further decline in state effectiveness, alongside heightened economic inequality and increased popular grievance at the betrayal of both the old expectations from the old social contract and the new expectations generated by the marketing of very limited and partial government reforms.<sup>18</sup>

Instead of spreading wealth, privatization and liberalization projects ended up exacerbating inequality, as private businessmen with the right connections to purchase state property or clinch state contracts became even wealthier. Over time, these reforms also facilitated the capture of some state institutions by private elites who sought to maximize the profits of their newly acquired or newly empowered businesses. Thus, business

magnates who had benefited from Egypt's liberalization program in the early 2000s joined the ruling National Democratic Party, and threw their support to Gamal Mubarak, the president's son and himself a champion of liberalization, to succeed his father in office. This succession plan challenged the military, which traditionally dominated Egypt's executive office, and was likewise panned by democracy activists and other protestors who began mobilizing in 2005 under the banner "Kefaya" or "Enough," meaning enough Mubarak rule. The joining of ruling party elites with business elites to advance an agenda of economic liberalization and family succession in the presidency exacerbated perceptions among the Egyptian public that the state had been captured by corrupt interests and was stacked against them. The relatively healthy and well-educated children from middle-class families, who could not access the opportunities promised to them, had higher aspirations for themselves and their communities, and were no longer willing to wait and trust the state to provide. Ultimately, they became the backbone of the January 25, 2011 revolution.

The demands of the 2011 protestors, of course, were not just for economic opportunity, but for freedom and justice as well. The political mobilization sparked by the police murder of a young Egyptian man, Khaled Said, in Alexandria in June 2010 was at least as important to the Egyptian revolution as the rise in food prices and youth unemployment—after all, the revolution began with a set of rallies organized to protest official torture on Egypt's annual Police Day. Indeed, demands by the region's young population for justice and dignity expressed aspirations to not only change the material aspects of governance—especially the distribution of state largesse—but also achieve government respect for the individual as a citizen rather than a subject.

The lesson of the decade prior to 2011, then, is that partial, top-down reform proved insufficient to meet brewing public demands, and the exclusionary nature and effects of many of those reforms produced additional backlash.

### The Collapse of Regimes and the Rise of Non-State Violence

The final element to complete the portrait of what happened to the Arab autocratic state is to understand what happened when the uprisings came in 2010 and 2011, and the ways in which the aftermath has conditioned the requisites for re-establishing regional stability today.

17 Rebecca M. Nelson and Jeremy M. Sharp, *Egypt and the IMF: Overview and Issues for Congress* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, April 2013) 10, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R43053.pdf>.

18 Eberhard Kienle, *A Grand Delusion: Democracy and Economic Reform in Egypt* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001).





Satellite dishes on building roofs in Cairo, Egypt provided new access to information, December 27, 2007.  
*Photo credit: Paul Keller/Wikimedia.*

Perhaps it was inevitable that in this context of limited political and economic reforms determined by, and largely benefiting, a narrow slice of the society, the Arab world would see the emergence of new forms of bottom-up formal and informal political mobilization in the form of grassroots protest movements, new labor unions and wildcat labor actions, and new political parties, as well as new mobilization within and recruitment to long-standing non-state movements like the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi groups.

When these forces began to challenge state authority—both through formal political processes like elections and through nonviolent civil resistance like strikes and street protests—governments quickly found that the decades of declining state effectiveness meant that their non-coercive tools for reestablishing control were of limited value. This problem was compounded by the global recession of 2008, which raised inflation, raised food prices, and reduced the rents for non-oil-producing states; thus, public coffers were light when resources for co-optation were needed. In addition, the ideology of Arab nationalism trumpeted by leaders like Saddam Hussein had lost much of its luster in

the wake of the two Iraq wars, both because of Hussein's brutality toward his own people and because of the intra-Arab sectarian violence that emerged after 2003. So states increasingly turned to renewed attempts at coercion and manipulation of the political system. Increased state coercion produced the ultimate backlash in the form of mass popular mobilization against governments across much of the region. Where the army defected—as in Egypt and Tunisia—regime change was the result. But where leaders met popular protest with violence, they provoked civil conflict and created openings for violent non-state actors as well.

It is no accident that the parts of the region that are most disordered today—Libya and Syria—are those where leaders, having failed to act in a manner that could have prevented uprisings, sought to repress popular dissent through the use of force. Instead of restoring order, these brutal, power-hungry, and shortsighted men broke their crumbling states to bits and drove their societies to civil war.

As the state apparatus turned against its own citizens, those citizens turned elsewhere for protection—toward sectarian militias and extremist

groups, often with horrific agendas. And, as institutions of basic governance and community order failed, those with guns to impose their will gained power. More than anything else, the terrible choices of leaders like Muammar al-Qaddafi and Bashar al-Assad created the openings that al-Qaeda, ISIS, and sectarian killers across the region now exploit for their own purposes, including to threaten regional and international security.

Of the states that experienced mass uprisings in 2011—Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Bahrain, Morocco, and Jordan—only Tunisia has achieved a transition to democratic governance. In Egypt, polarization and exclusion both before and after the democratic election of a president ultimately produced a new round of mass demonstrations, a military coup, and a renewed authoritarian regime that has jailed its political opponents along with peaceful civic activists and journalists, imposed severe restrictions on basic rights, and established rules for parliamentary elections so disadvantageous to opposition groups that many political parties declined to participate and voter turnout appears to have been around 10 percent. In Bahrain, the Gulf Cooperation Council supported the Bahraini government in putting down demonstrations with force; the country still faces regular unrest, and its government continues to escalate the persecution of its political opposition as well as human rights activists and others who challenge its behavior. Leaders in Morocco and Jordan, where political reform had gone somewhat further before 2011, saw smaller demonstrations and responded with less force. These leaders also sought to get ahead of protestors with swift constitutional changes and new rounds of parliamentary elections. Whether these new packages of limited reform will suffice remains to be seen. And, of course, Syria and Libya are mired in brutal civil conflict, with various fighting factions receiving support from governments elsewhere in the region and beyond.

The limited positive outcomes from the 2011 uprisings, and especially the violence in Syria and Libya and the rise of ISIS terrorism, have endangered the prospects for sustainable governance in the region by producing crises in authority and order.

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First, the cycle of inadequate reform, repression, revolution, and failed post-revolutionary change means that **many Arab citizens have simply lost faith in the state** as an institution that can solve their problems or help them achieve their goals. In different quarters and contexts, the state may be variously viewed as bumbling, partisan, coercive, absent, or simply irrelevant—but in any of these scenarios, the citizen is left without effective recourse to the state and seeks other platforms and mechanisms to achieve even the basics of what states are meant to do. In this sense, Lebanon’s 2015 “garbage protests” sprang from the same source as support for militias among Iraq’s various communities—and both show the same underlying challenge to reestablishing sustainable governance in the region.

Relatedly, cycles in which Middle Eastern governments alternately co-opted and coerced societal institutions, and alternately reformed and retrenched government institutions, left many citizens cynical about other sources of societal authority, both state and non-state. People do not trust government-sponsored news channels, but neither do they trust channels owned by business tycoons, religious authorities appointed and paid by the state, or political parties who alternately boycott elections and seek to join institutions dominated by the

ruling power.

By the time of the uprisings, then, not only had the social contract broken down, but social trust had been deeply eroded. Autocratic governments had eviscerated independent civic associations that might have helped manage social relations or facilitate peaceful dialogue and political compromise. In some ways, the biggest challenge to rebuilding regional stability is the breakdown of social trust within these societies—a consequence both of the way they were governed and of the way those governments fell.

In addition, the horrific violence of the region’s civil wars and the expansion of terrorism **have created new public constituencies for “order,” who support state coercion** as a means of combating very real threats, and of holding back the chaos

they see around them in the region. Fear drives a readiness to trade off many other things—civil liberties, individual choice, economic liberty, etc.—for security, order, and predictability of basic justice. These constituencies’ convictions may be hard to shake even when perceived security threats become less urgent. In the current environment of uncertainty and violence, even a state’s failures at using coercion against extremist forces may simply generate arguments for more coercion, producing a vicious spiral away from the requisites of sustainable governance. For their part, external powers with a stake in the stability of the Middle East may prioritize state-imposed “order” even more highly than regional publics, since external actors do not directly bear the costs of this authoritarian bargain.

The erosion of political and social authority and the breakdown of social trust also strongly suggest that the time for top-down solutions in the Middle East is over. Dictates from existing power centers are unlikely to win the allegiance of skeptical citizens. Citizens already mistrustful

of government are unlikely to give their allegiance to a centralized bureaucracy in a far-off capital. And citizens emerging from sectarian warfare who barely trust their next-door neighbors will only trust an authority that places their own sectarian identity above others (and will therefore continue the violence), or one that involves compromises that they themselves construct and buy into.

Thus, in both post-conflict and surviving Arab states, durable solutions to pressing problems of governance and society will have to emerge from bottom-up dialogue and the patient construction of societal consensus. This may be especially important for societies emerging from violent civil conflict, where, as an initial matter, citizens must be persuaded that the state is something that can deliver and is worth investing in with their participation and loyalty. But across the region, rebuilding social trust is a key challenge that must be met to construct a sustainable basis for governance in the Middle East in years to come.

### BOX 1: SECTARIANISM AND CONFLICT IN TODAY’S MIDDLE EAST

In today’s Middle East, sectarian tensions and violence present a challenge to basic order, to states that comprise multiple religious and ethnic communities, and to citizens’ sense of justice and fairness. But “ancient tribal hatreds” are not a given in the Middle East, nor is sectarian violence simply a “natural” outgrowth of state breakdown. As was true in other multiethnic societies, such as Yugoslavia in the 1980s, religious differences in places like Baghdad over many years did not prevent peaceful coexistence, cooperation, or even high rates of intermarriage. Nevertheless, sectarian differences were exploited by political leaders in Iraq and elsewhere to advance their own agendas. The same holds true today.

The sectarian violence we see in Iraq and the Levant today is also an outgrowth of the American invasion to topple Saddam Hussein. The removal of a minority Sunni leader who had massacred Shia, and his replacement by a Shia-led government, provoked fear and anxieties on both sides of that sectarian divide. The American occupation, and the American withdrawal, each in turn facilitated conditions for a sectarian bloodbath, and lent both space and motivation to extremist Islamists who built a terrifyingly dark vision of their desired future and set about to realize it. That said, the invasion and occupation of Iraq did not destabilize the existing state system in the Middle East and create the Arab Spring, or the chaos and violence we see in Syria, Libya, and Yemen today. It did not create jihadist violence, although it certainly gave it new forms. The Iraq war also did not even create sectarian violence in Iraq, although it made that violence possible on a horrific scale. More broadly, in Iraq and beyond, Sunni-Shia divisions in today’s Middle East overlay a wider division of interests and preferences between traditional Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia, and a coalition of state and non-state actors, led by Iran. Sectarian divisions in the Middle East have thus become a convenient proxy for, and are driven in part by, a more traditional power struggle.

In confronting the Arab uprisings, governments on both sides of the Sunni-Shia divide found a sectarian narrative useful in rallying their populations and in justifying their actions. For its part, Iran sought first to claim credit for the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt based on its own revolutionary ideology. When rebuffed, it concentrated on winning Shia loyalties among the aggrieved protestors in Bahrain and ►

the eastern province of Saudi Arabia (both of which were met with force by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia). The Bahraini and Saudi media worked in perverse tandem with these Iranian efforts to recruit, as they matched their governments' violent crackdown with a vicious anti-Shia media campaign to label those protesting as agents of the apostate enemy across the Gulf, rather than equal citizens with a legitimate grievance. This sectarian narrative also fit well with events in Iraq, where Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki was escalating his purge of Sunni politicians and military officers, and in Syria, where Bashar al-Assad, with help from Iran, was brutally suppressing mainly Sunni protesters. The sectarian narrative thus helped both sides of the larger regional power struggle mobilize support and also helped governments with sectarian minorities deter, isolate, and punish any domestic dissent.

The problem with governments self-interestedly wielding that sectarian narrative is that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, and it actually increases the incentive on both sides of the sectarian divide to escalate their real power competition, both directly and through proxies. Today, that narrative of sectarian conflict is far more than rhetoric for too many in Iraq and Syria, where a true intercommunal conflict is underway. The state-led cultivation of sectarian tension has also been exploited by extremists to advance their own goals and win recruits, as when ISIS attacks Shia mosques in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

Whatever may have motivated the Saudi-led military intervention into Yemen in 2015, the sectarian dynamic in the region has led to two additional consequences. First, it has hardened and extended this narrative of sectarian conflict to yet another part of the region—one where political differences between Houthis, the north, and the south have turned into sectarian struggles, in a country where, until very recently, Sunni and Shia prayed side by side. Second, the Saudi war in Yemen has aligned most of the region's Sunni governments into a coalition that has defined its enemy in sectarian terms (and is enjoying American support for one side in what is now viewed as a region-wide sectarian war).

The overlapping of sectarian divisions and the regional power struggle thus have the effect of exacerbating regional conflict. And by rooting conflict in "primordial" differences, the sectarian dynamic makes diplomatic conflict resolution and the reestablishment of multiethnic or multi-sectarian states when the wars end far more difficult. The Middle East is crisscrossed with different tribes, sects, and ethnic communities, and has been for centuries—meaning that polities that mark membership on the basis of exclusive ethnic or sectarian identity are a very poor recipe for enduring peace in the region. And yet, throughout its modern history, the Middle East has seen colonial powers and local ones wield ethnic differences as part of a divide-and-rule strategy, often with disastrous results. *The lesson is clear: to be stable, the states of the Middle East need to embrace the pluralism and equality of their citizenry.*



## II. THE STATES WE ARE IN: EXISTING MODELS FOR GOVERNANCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Nearly five years after the Arab uprisings, and with the failure of all but one effort at governance transformation, we look across the Arab world and see several failed or failing states, new authoritarian models, and a number of recalcitrant autocracies holding on through a combination of heavy spending, increased coercion, and the soft bigotry of low expectations generated by fear both at home and abroad (“At least we’re/they’re not ISIS”). The “black holes” of Syria, Yemen, Libya, and increasingly Iraq threaten to engulf more of the region, and the consequences of these failed states for regional governance will be profound and long term. In the face of this challenge, what alternative models for governance are competing for dominance in the Middle East today?

### Fragile Democracy: Tunisia

The “sole survivor” of the Arab Spring has now approved a democratic constitution and has held two sets of free and fair national elections. It has an elected president and a coalition government that includes the main Islamist and main secularist parties. Tunisia has thus marked tremendous achievements in consolidating its democratic transition, and it has overcome significant obstacles in doing so.

A few factors unique to Tunisia’s pathway help explain its success. First, key political factions agreed on core principles relating to religion and state years before the revolution—setting a standard, even if not a binding precedent, to guide them when the regime of Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali fell.<sup>19</sup> Second, the Muslim Brotherhood-linked Ennahda sought to avoid sole responsibility for the political transition, and thus rejected the

winner-take-all approach to politics favored by other large parties in other post-revolutionary contexts. Instead, Ennahda restrained itself from seeking to dominate all political institutions despite its plurality support after the first elections, and shared coalition government with secular parties. Third, neither Islamist nor secular parties gave in to the more extreme voices within their respective factions, and pushed back against polarization even

in the face of violent attacks by Salafi groups against tourist sites and two political assassinations. Fourth, Tunisia’s transition plan prioritized constitution writing over political competition, forcing parties to agree on rules for the political game while they were still unsure of their own political strength and still faced the heightened expectations and scrutiny of a highly mobilized public. Fifth, Tunisia’s civil society organizations played a crucial role in mediating political conflict: they insisted on open dialogue on constitutional issues that, in the end, gave society resilience in the face of divisions, and they pressured politicians

past disagreement to a successful conclusion of the constitution-drafting process. Fortunately, Tunisia’s second set of elections, often a danger point for new democracies, also generated results that did not allow for exclusionary governance, and thus produced another coalition that included both Islamist and secular parties.

Tunisia also managed to escape, to a certain degree, some of the influences that hampered other attempted transitions after the Arab Spring: it experienced relative neglect from regional actors, who were working to advance their preferred political outcomes in other places (namely, Libya, Egypt, and Syria) but who played wait-and-see with Tunisia’s coalition government. This gave Tunisians the space they needed to make their own bargains. Tunisian political leaders also sought to insulate

Tunisia’s civil society organizations played a crucial role in mediating political conflict: they insisted on open dialogue on constitutional issues that. . . gave society resilience in the face of divisions. . .

<sup>19</sup> Alfred Stepan, “Tunisia’s Transition and the Twin Tolerations,” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (April 2012), 89-103.



At the invitation of the Tunisian interim government, the European Union established an Election Observation Mission to monitor the elections for a Constituent Assembly, October 23, 2011. *Photo credit:* European Parliament/Flickr.

their country from too much external interference by rejecting any role as a “model” for other Arab states, instead insisting on their own specificity. Tunisia’s military was not a political force under Ben Ali, and unlike Egypt’s military, it has embraced civilian control. Finally, while Tunisia has suffered some significant assassinations and terrorist attacks, it has not thus far become a concerted focus for regional jihadist efforts (although for reasons not fully understood, Tunisia has produced a disproportionately large number of ISIS recruits going to Syria).

This decidedly idiosyncratic set of factors, along with Tunisia’s small size and relatively marginal position within the region, limits the impact Tunisia’s political trajectory is likely to have on the rest of the Middle East. That said, Tunisia’s main significance to the rest of the region may be symbolic—simply by surviving as a liberal democracy, it defies the notion on both sides of the polarized argument that dominates the rest of the region: that the only paths forward are radical Islamism or renewed authoritarianism.

For this reason alone, the continued survival of Tunisia’s fragile democratic experiment is of great importance to the region and the world. Despite its remarkable achievements, today, Tunisia’s new democracy rests on very shaky ground. A series of horrific terrorist attacks in 2015 and the ongoing spillover of Libya’s civil war are generating a stronger constituency within the country for order, stalling efforts at security-sector reform, and producing new counterterrorism policies that undermine fragile new institutions and strengthen the ability of unreformed institutions to undercut democracy. And unless Tunisia’s government can correct the disparities in national policy between the coast and the interior, and generate more equitable economic growth, this fragile experiment in democracy may fail to win the trust of Tunisian citizens. Those concerned about sustaining a brighter alternative to the region’s dark reality should increase their support for and engagement with Tunisia’s unique and endangered democracy.

## Order through Savagery: The Islamic State

In the midst of the Iraqi and Syrian civil wars, ISIS emerged from what was previously al-Qaeda in Iraq. As William McCants of the Brookings Institution relates at length in his book, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, ISIS is not merely a terrorist group, but a movement that aspires to govern—and its model of governance must be taken seriously as a challenge to confront.<sup>20</sup> ISIS's interpretation of religious scripture leads it to argue that the End Times are fast approaching, and the new Islamic Caliphate must be established to aid the Mahdi (messiah) in his final struggle against evil. Like the Taliban who swept through Afghanistan in the late 1990s, ISIS takes advantage of populations brutalized by ongoing war, securing their acquiescence if not their loyalty by providing order and swift, clear justice. Rules of behavior are unambiguous and are immediately and mercilessly enforced. The brutality of ISIS's actions—its murder, rape, and enslavement of non-Sunnis, its videotaped beheading of hostages, and its harsh punishments—are not designed to win the hearts and minds of the masses of Muslims globally. Whereas al-Qaeda counseled gradual persuasion and coalition-building before moving toward the establishment of a caliphate, ISIS does not care about being popular. Its brutality is designed to compel swift compliance from local populations, gain rapid control over territory and resources for their state, and give the group's adherents a sense of divinely aided progress toward their ideological goal of establishing the caliphate and laying the groundwork for the apocalypse.<sup>21</sup> ISIS has sought to provide basic services to those under its yoke: postal services, banking, health care, and the harshest sort of justice. ISIS is not a model most sentient human beings would freely choose to live under, but it does offer a form of order (predictable rather than arbitrary coercion) and some degree of public services (rough justice with *hudud* punishments, education, etc.), and it markets itself aggressively as a successful model of governance, imposing its vision of God's order on a region in chaos.

ISIS is not just an accelerant of chaos, but is also a symptom of the underlying regional disorder—not the cause and not the disease. ISIS, like its

predecessor al-Qaeda in Iraq, gained strength on the back of Iraqi Sunnis' disenchantment with a Shia-led Iraqi government that seems committed to the marginalization of its community's leaders, and that enabled and even encouraged Shia militias that committed abuses against Sunnis with impunity. American officials leading the international coalition against ISIS have said repeatedly that military force alone will not defeat ISIS, but that more inclusive and reliable governance arrangements will be crucial to sapping the grievances and alienation that give ISIS local sympathy and room for maneuver.<sup>22</sup>

There is no reason to believe this security imperative for inclusive and impartial governance in Iraq and Syria is not equally relevant in Libya, or in other less-than-well-governed countries of the Middle East. Where leaders have the will and capacity to rule without violence, where citizens are active participants in public life, and where state institutions respond to citizens' needs and are accountable to the public, terrorism may still exist—but it will be a marginalized phenomenon instead of an existential threat to the social and political order.

## Renewed Authoritarianism: Egypt under Sisi

Alongside fragile democracy and brutal jihadist rule, a third model has emerged in the post-2011 Middle East: renewed authoritarianism. Whereas the pre-2011 Arab states had been corporatist entities that tried to use co-optation more than coercion and that (especially in later years) experimented with democratic forms and limited political participation, the renewed authoritarian model seeks to reestablish the preeminence of state power and to avoid any unpredictability in political affairs. It rests on the view that opening up politics is evidently dangerous and that there is no room for experimentation; attempts at political opening in the Arab world have empowered Islamist radicals and produced threats to public security and state survival. Thus, the priority must be security and the restoration of a predictable order in which the state's authority, even if weakened, still goes unchallenged.

20 William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015).

21 William McCants, "How ISIL Out-Terrorized Bin Laden," *Politico*, August 19, 2015, [http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/08/isis-jihad-121525\\_Page2.html#ixzz3jPEvIZt9](http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/08/isis-jihad-121525_Page2.html#ixzz3jPEvIZt9).

22 For example, General John Allen said in October 2015 that "Where there is weak governance, where there is no hope for large segments of the population, where the prospects for a future are dim, it is a location on the globe and it is a segment of the population that is ripe for radicalization." "Allen: Global Coalition Making Progress in 5 Lines of Effort Against ISIS," by Megan Eckstein, October 14, 2015 <https://news.usni.org/2015/10/14/allen-global-coalition-making-progress-in-5-lines-of-effort-against-isis>.



Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's leadership of the military coup against Egypt's first freely elected president (however illiberal and ultimately undemocratic he and his Muslim Brotherhood movement showed themselves to be) and his elevation to presidency promised weary and fearful Egyptians a respite from regional disorder in the form of a classic authoritarian bargain:<sup>23</sup> all they needed to do was toe the line, and the state would take care of them. Culturally, it is a return to the paternalism of early Arab state politics; economically, it is a rejection of the Washington-consensus-driven liberalization of the 1980s and 1990s (which helped unleash the social forces that produced the uprisings) in favor of a state-driven economic model, compounded by the military's unchallenged control over a significant portion of the economy; politically, it is straight-up autocracy, with some procedural window dressing in the form of a tame parliament elected under such constraints that it contains no meaningful opposition.

Judging from Sisi's speeches and interviews, he seems to believe that the mistake of the Arab leaders deposed in 2011 is that they were too indecisive in confronting their internal challenges; that his society can be governed only by a strong hand; and that he has a winning formula for restoring order and promoting development through closely managed and relentlessly enforced top-down control over politics, economics, and society.<sup>24</sup> The rise of regional terrorism has helped Egypt's government make the case, both internally and externally, that this model of renewed authoritarianism is necessary and, relatively speaking, just (after all, it beats getting beheaded or raped by ISIS). Terrorism has also helped Egypt (and other regional governments) justify the acquisition and deployment, often with Western cooperation, of new tools for surveillance, coercion, and repression.

Even when state authorities act in concert rather than competition, their fear of the forces challenging them can lead them to overreach. . .

But Egypt's renewed authoritarianism is not nearly as unitary or as effective as it is repressive.<sup>25</sup> Bureaucratic actors, state institutions, and elite interest groups have spent the five years since the revolution focused on preserving their existing privileges and power, and are today more entrenched and autonomous than they were in the pre-2011 period, when at least they were part of a coherent political order that served their interests and that they could collectively defend. Today, as Egyptian human rights defender Khaled Mansour has written, "Cairo seems to no longer have corridors of power but separate islands which rarely communicate, each primarily busy, not with discharging its nominal functions, but rather with protecting itself and grandstanding the others."<sup>26</sup>

When state institutions are, variously, contestants and arenas in an existential battle for political survival, then the state action they produce can only be partisan, both in intent and in effect. This inevitably prevents real government responsiveness to public needs, and just as surely, it further undermines the public's trust in the government as a reliable, impartial actor in their lives.

Even when state authorities act in concert rather than competition, their fear of the forces challenging them can lead them to overreach: the fear of anti-state extremist violence, the fear of reawakening the monster of public dissent, and the lack of institutional checks might easily lead state entities to act rashly and/or to overstate their claims—as, for example, when the presidency touted government redevelopment of the Suez Canal as the engine for a wholesale revitalization of the Egyptian economy. This creates additional vulnerability, as such expectations can never be fulfilled. Moreover, Sisi's tight constraints on politics and manipulation of the parliamentary elections resulted in a body with no credibility either internally or internationally. Now, when the public is disappointed in government performance, Sisi's monopolization of the political system means

23 Anders Olofsgård, Raj M. Desai, and Tarik Yousef, "The Logic of Authoritarian Bargains," *Economics & Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (March 2009), 93-125.

24 CBS News, "Charlie Rose interviews Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi," *YouTube*, September 23, 2014. Full interview available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dwbc\\_Rai4UA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dwbc_Rai4UA); PBS NewsHour "El-Sissi: Egypt a 'beacon of moderate Islam,'" *YouTube*, September 24, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3GZjzV\\_dx4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3GZjzV_dx4).

25 Nathan J. Brown and Katie Bentivoglio, "Egypt's Resurgent Authoritarianism," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 9, 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/10/09/egypt-s-resurgent-authoritarianism-it-s-way-of-life>.

26 Khaled Mansour, "A Disgrace We Should Not Embrace," *Mada Masr*, August 18, 2015, <http://www.madamasr.com/opinion/disgrace-we-should-not-embrace>.

that there is nowhere to divert public blame. It is a dangerous game.<sup>27</sup>

If Egypt's unrelenting authoritarianism were able to achieve success at managing political, economic, and security affairs, then all of the above might not prevent Sisi's new regime from offering a model of sustainable governance for realists or cynics to consider. But it is failing. Politically, polarization and a lack of inclusion drove nearly a dozen political parties to boycott the parliamentary elections, and the turnout rate was a mere 28 percent.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, intense repression, forced disappearances,<sup>29</sup> and restriction of political rights have crowded Egypt's prisons with tens of thousands of political prisoners—a signal of failure in itself, but also a factor increasing the risk of radicalization.<sup>30</sup> Economically, generous financial aid from the Gulf states has not prevented a brewing macroeconomic crisis that has now forced the government to accept an IMF aid package that will require destabilizing economic reforms. Gulf impatience with Egypt's economic mismanagement has slowed (but not stopped) the flow of financial aid. Terrorism has driven tourism numbers down, eviscerating a key sector of the economy. Meager gains in foreign investment have been woefully insufficient to address unemployment, and the 4 percent growth generated last year by the massive, state-driven Suez Canal construction project will not be matched again, nor has it apparently increased canal revenues.<sup>31</sup> In security terms, the Egyptian government is facing challenges combating a brewing insurgency in the Sinai, which is likely fueled more than retarded by the government's ham-handed tactics and by its

decision to raze Egyptian villages along the Sinai border near Gaza and Israel, which has displaced thousands. Meanwhile, Egyptian officials complain of uncontrolled smuggling along their border with Libya, and have little response to ongoing violence against police and Coptic communities.<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, the compounding political, security, and economic challenges in Egypt make clear that, given the forces at work in the region, renewed authoritarianism is both unsuitable to restoring stability and increasingly unsustainable even on its own terms.

In extremis, some Western dismay at the distressing reality of today's Middle East has evolved into a strange romanticization of the pre-2011 Arab political order, and a futile wish for the status quo ante.<sup>33</sup> In general, Western governments are now inclined to seek smooth relations with the remaining governments in the region regardless of their character and to set aside concerns over human rights, much less political or economic liberalization, in favor of short-term security cooperation.

Moreover, for many Western policy makers, the lesson of the Arab Spring's failures seems to be that popular uprisings cannot be trusted to produce desirable outcomes. Even setting aside the places mired in violence, the overthrow of Ben Ali, Mubarak, and Qaddafi also brought intense nationalism bordering on xenophobia that often targeted US interests, economic populism that hampered pro-market reforms and other boons for Western trade and investment, and the rise of Islamist leaders whose commitments to liberal democracy and sympathy to Western interests seemed (and in some cases proved) suspect. And then, of course, the hopes for democratic transition were dashed everywhere but in Tunisia, civil conflict threatened state collapse in more than one place, and ISIS emerged as a long-term threat. Faced with an apparent choice among failed states, ISIS, and authoritarianism as defining features for the Middle East's future, a return to autocracy might appear to

27 Nathan J. Brown and Katie Bentivoglio, "Who is running the Egyptian state?" *Washington Post*, July 31, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/07/31/who-is-running-the-egyptian-state/>.

28 International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, "Voter Turnout Data For Egypt," <http://www.idea.int/vt/countryview.cfm?id=69>; Ahram Online, "Egypt's parliamentary elections produce 21.7% turnout in first round run-offs," October 30, 2015, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/164/162247/Egypt/Egypt-Elections-/Egypt-parliamentary-elections-produce--turnout-in.aspx>.

29 Statement by National Security Advisor Susan E. Rice on the International Day for the Victims of Enforced Disappearances, August 30, 2016, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/08/30/statement-national-security-advisor-susan-e-rice-international-day>.

30 The Egyptian Center for Social and Economic Rights estimated that 41,163 political arrests had been carried out by the Egyptian state in the period between July 2013 and May 2014. Its research was released at <https://goo.gl/Trf9Cf>.

31 Ahmed Feteha, "Egypt Shows Off \$8 Billion Suez Canal Expansion That the World May Not Need," *Bloomberg Business*, August 4, 2015, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-08-04/egypt-shows-off-8-billion-suez-canal-gift-world-may-not-need>.

32 "Egypt Security Watch: Quarterly Report, April-June 2016," Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, <http://timep.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/ESW-QR-2016-Q2-REPORT.pdf>.

33 A self-consciously humorous tweet from Sultan al-Qassemi (@SultanAlQassemi) says: "I miss the 'good' old days of when the Arab world's problems were unemployment, graft, lack of democracy, corruption et al. #ISIS #AlQaeda," Twitter, August 23, 2015, <https://twitter.com/sultanalqassemi/status/635464212341354498>. But this author has heard similar sentiments expressed, with less self-conscious irony, by officials and opinion leaders both in the West and the region.



Propaganda for then-President Muammar al-Qaddafi in Derj, Libya, April 14, 2009. Photo credit: Carsten ten Brink/Flickr.

outside actors as the best available means to shore up the region.

But a return to the days of authoritarian stability is a fantasy, and a dangerous one at that. Here is a partial list of the dangers inherent in renewed authoritarianism for those interested in restoring security and stability in the Middle East:

1. Trying to eliminate or control political competition does not reduce or remove public grievances—it just leaves them to fester and erupt, sometimes in violence. In cases where coercion succeeds for a time in excluding undesirable political forces and suppressing dissent, it can easily create a backlash: extreme repression that leaves no outlet for peaceful politics or even self-expression that can drive citizens to support extreme, extra-systemic movements rather than governments, political parties, or other movements or institutions.<sup>34</sup> In

34 Daniel Byman and Tamara Cofman Wittes, “Now that the Muslim Brotherhood is declared a terrorist group, it just might become one,” *Washington Post*, January 10, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/now-that-the-muslim-brotherhood-is-declared-a-terrorist-group-it-just-might-become->

Egypt, firsthand accounts by arrested dissenters suggest that the widespread arrests, prison overcrowding, and constant abuses are driving radicalization of political prisoners.<sup>35</sup>

2. If one clear lesson many authorities have taken from the Arab experience since 2011 is that revolutionary change is risky (and that Arab societies were poorly prepared for it), then it

one/2014/01/10/268977d2-77d6-11e3-af7f-13bf0e9965f6\_story.html; Shadi Hamid, “Sisi’s Regime Is a Gift to ISIS,” *Foreign Policy*, August 6, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/08/06/sisi-is-the-best-gift-the-islamic-state-ever-got/>.

35 Imprisoned blogger and activist Alaa Abdel Fattah told *Mada Masr*, for example, “Since way before the January 25 revolution, prison was the place where the Salafi Jihadis proselytized and mobilized. I don’t know if that’s on the increase or not. But what’s certain is that prisons are an incubator of violence because of what happens inside them.” Ahdaf Soueif, “Imprisoned activist Alaa Abd El Fattah speaks from Tora: On prisons as sites of violations, extremism and boredom,” *Mada Masr*, August 21, 2015, <http://www.madamasr.com/sections/politics/imprisoned-activist-alaa-abd-el-fattah-speaks-tora>. See also the account of former prisoner Mohammed Soltan in David D. Kirkpatrick, “U.S. Citizen, Once Held in Egypt’s Crackdown, Becomes Voice for Inmates,” *New York Times*, August 28, 2015, A4, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/29/world/middleeast/us-citizen-once-held-in-egypts-crackdown-becomes-voice-for-inmates.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/29/world/middleeast/us-citizen-once-held-in-egypts-crackdown-becomes-voice-for-inmates.html?_r=0).



seems obvious to suggest that gradual political transformation is preferable to discontinuous change. But authoritarian retrenchment à la Sisi's Egypt closes off precisely this option. By suppressing and persecuting those pursuing reforms to the existing order, renewed authoritarianism increases exclusionary governance and destroys gradual reform as a pathway, leaving revolution as the only possibility for those who seek to alter the status quo. The authoritarian response to the crisis of governance in today's Middle East is exacerbating the risk of chaotic, violent change.

3. To the extent that authoritarian regimes rely on the classic authoritarian bargain, providing security and/or economic performance to sustain public consent for their rule, failure at either or both could easily undermine the regime's base of support and spur challenges to its authority that could produce destabilizing effects. A coercive state's inability to deliver security is particularly dangerous, since state coercion creates demand among targeted parts of the public for protection from state forces, pushing those populations to support non-state violent actors, and thus toward civil war. On the economic side, the challenge of failure is also severe: the underlying socioeconomic and global pressures that produced the Arab uprisings are still there, and the deficits that produced the 2011 crisis are still unfilled. The exclusionary basis of renewed authoritarian governance in Egypt—which rests on an even narrower base than the corporatist regime it replaced—actually contains the seeds of its own destruction, since it replicates or even exacerbates the systemic problems that contributed to the uprisings of 2011.

4. Finally, one irreversible outcome of the 2011 uprisings is that Arab citizens demonstrated that they can overthrow their rulers. As a result, even resurgent authoritarian governments in the Middle East today are sensitive, and vulnerable, to public sentiment. Without accountability for state performance, regimes might seek to mollify public sentiment in other ways—through self-defeating economic populism, ugly Jacobinism, and/or foreign threats or adventures. The populist nationalism and xenophobia cultivated in a number of Arab states since 2011 has not advanced regional stability, and in many cases it has exacerbated existing instability and conflict. Accountability is thus a key requisite for stable governance—and accountability requires that public sentiment leads to changes in the way government does business.

Given the level of violence suffusing the region, the fear and mistrust that suffuse local populations, and the ugly “race to the bottom” underway where extremism and authoritarianism compete as alternative models for Arab governance, it is no surprise that many—publics, elites, and external powers—express a degree of “buyer's remorse” about the Arab uprisings of 2011. Although the extra-systemic mobilization finally broke open stagnated Arab political systems and injected new possibilities, many look on the results with deep despair. The breakdown of social trust, particularly in societies now enmeshed in conflict, makes it hard to imagine how a new social contract could be negotiated, established, and implemented. But, as the above analysis shows, imposing a new contract from the top down is unlikely to produce a stable, positive outcome.

### III. SKETCHING THE PATH AHEAD: HOW TO BUILD SUSTAINABLE GOVERNANCE?

Earlier, this paper outlined four requisites for sustainable governance in the Middle East: **inclusion, transparency, effectiveness, and accountability**. These are ambitious goals for any society—but particularly challenging in the context of the collapse of order and authority and breakdown of social trust, as outlined above. A pathway to building and sustaining more inclusive, transparent, accountable, and effective governance in the Middle East will require time, consistency, persistence, and intensive and ongoing societal engagement and dialogue.

#### Sustainable Governance: Establishing Basic Principles

Because of the twin crises of order and authority described at the outset of this paper, Middle Eastern states will simply not succeed in reestablishing an effective social contract and generating sustainable governance using the same (top-down, exclusionary) model as before. *To begin repairing trust between citizens and government, and reestablishing the authority of state institutions through consent, governments in the region must focus on a few key tasks:*

1. Governments must remove coercion from their toolkit for managing day-to-day politics, and instead use the coercive tools of the state to provide reliable, equitable security to citizens. As we have seen in spades in the past five years, state coercion in the Middle East drives demand for non-state violence, and there are far too many actors already competing to fill that demand. Likewise, if states simply withdraw from some or all of their citizens and fail to provide reliable, equitable security, citizens will look to non-state actors—whether ideological or criminal—to provide security.
2. Governments must begin the work of inclusion and accountability at the local level. Social trust cannot be rebuilt from the top down, but only from the local level up. In societies emerging from conflict, this may mean extremely local—neighbor to neighbor, village by village. But regardless of the diplomatic bargains or battlefield victories that ultimately bring these civil wars to an end, communities in these places must establish their own local community trust if they are to prevent violence from reemerging, and be resilient in the face of appeals by extremists. In all states of the region, though, the priority of rebuilding social trust suggests the wisdom of decentralizing governance, and shifting power and resources to more local forms of government. Accountability, inclusion, responsiveness, and effectiveness are all easier to cultivate at smaller units of governance, and governments can more easily demonstrate at the local level that they are providing services in an evenhanded and effective way. Indeed, some governments in the region have already concluded that decentralization is in their interest; this trend can be encouraged through demonstration, support, and positive incentives.
3. Governments must encourage and embrace policy solutions and political bargains that come from outside government and elite channels. This requires recognizing civil society and the private sector as policy-relevant actors, and as partners rather than threats to state security. This paper has shown how earlier attempts to renegotiate the social contract through elite-driven processes not only failed, but produced destabilizing results themselves. A more durable social contract will only result from government officials embracing inclusion and engaging robustly with the diverse voices and groups within their country's civil society.
4. Obviously, fulfilling the previous item demands that Arab governments shift their fundamental attitudes toward civil society and embrace the internationally guaranteed right of free association. Observers of the region have long remarked on the problem of Arab states that appears simultaneously “strong” and “weak”—that is, they have capable and effective militaries and security and intelligence services, but they are weak because they do not rest on a wide base, and are therefore vulnerable to external shocks and internal dissent. Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany,



and Paul Noble observed back in the 1990s that as the all-encompassing corporatist Arab state of the 1970s began to shrink and withdraw from various social, political, and economic domains, it left disorder behind because of the relative weakness of Arab civil society.<sup>36</sup> Clearly, building sustainable governance—inclusive, effective, transparent, and accountable governance—is not something state institutions can do alone. In addition to offering innovative policy ideas, civil society groups can organize citizen interests to ensure they are included in deliberations (and in a relatively efficient manner); educate the public on how to exercise their rights and take advantage of government services; share information with citizens about government operations and decisions; and monitor and report, and so hold governments accountable to citizens for the work they are doing. Civil society, as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in 2010, is an essential partner to governments in the work of national development and an essential foundation, along with government and the private sector, of any successful society.<sup>37</sup> Thus, fixing governance should begin with elevating and nurturing civil society and associational freedom.

... [A] state's fealty to individual rights and its ability to manage pluralism peacefully go hand in hand.

Below are some more specific prescriptions for a way forward; we will then turn to the role of outside actors, especially the United States.

### Ending civil wars is paramount—but so is fixing governance in existing states.

The violence of the conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Libya has pernicious effects on neighbors and on the opportunities for extremist growth and spread, and it is clear that a comprehensive effort to end these conflicts and rebuild order in these societies must be an urgent priority in any plan to restore regional stability. However, an exclusive or overwhelming focus on these problems could easily lead policy

makers to overlook or mask the vulnerabilities of other states across the region, where continued governance challenges could easily burst into crisis due to internal or external shocks (for example, the death of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika in Algeria, a further sharp drop in oil prices in Saudi Arabia, or a contested succession when Mahmoud Abbas steps down from his simultaneous leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization and Palestinian Authority). One thing the region cannot afford is more failed states—and preventing this outcome demands that policy makers devote swift and focused attention to the remaining areas of weakness.

### Inclusive governance and the avoidance of violence demand respect for human rights.

Respect for the equality and rights of all citizens—a respect that is manifested and enforced by government, and inculcated by society—is an essential foundation for the kind of inclusive and intensive societal dialogue that is necessary to address the urgent challenges facing governance in the region: to prevent the resurgence of violence in societies emerging from conflict, to overcome political polarization or sectarianism, to restore social trust in governing institutions, and to manage pluralism. Indeed, a government's evident commitment to human rights

and equal treatment of its citizens is a key means to overcoming fears among disadvantaged groups of partial treatment by the state that drive them toward extra-systemic conflict. In this sense, a state's fealty to individual rights and its ability to manage pluralism peacefully go hand in hand.

Inclusive politics has likewise been shown to be a central foundation of economic success.<sup>38</sup> As noted earlier, the inability of Arab autocrats to adjust the social contract through reform in the years before 2011 was due to their narrow, exclusive base of decision-making, producing reforms that exacerbated instead of resolved societal grievances. Popular grievances in the Arab world before 2011 resulted not just from material deprivation or conflicts over resource allocation, but from the exclusionary and partisan manner in which government decision-making occurred and still occurs in many places. Moreover, as fellow

36 Saad Eddin Ibrahim, "Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World: An Overview," in Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany, and Paul Noble, eds., *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World*, Volume 1: Theoretical Perspectives (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1995) 37.

37 Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Civil Society: Supporting Democracy in the 21st Century," remarks at the Community of Democracies, July 3, 2010, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/07/143952.htm>.

38 Acemoglu and Robinson, *Why Nations Fail*.

Middle East Strategy Task Force author Christopher Schroeder notes in his paper for this project, new information technology has helped to generate a “participation revolution” in the Middle East and around the world.<sup>39</sup> As a result, citizens’ expectations have shifted fundamentally, and governmental rules and institutions must now catch up to this new social reality. The Arab Spring protestors’ chant was for “bread, freedom, and social justice”—and without addressing the freedom component, governments will find it difficult to enact a new social contract that wins sufficient popular acceptance to survive.

### Prioritize the justice sector.

As noted earlier, the loss of security in parts of the region profoundly affects individuals and communities, and has generated demands for order that have driven citizens to embrace militias, jihadists, and autocrats—all of whom undermine the prospects for sustainable governance. Security requires a degree of predictability, reliability, and fairness in the exercise of power. If power is exercised in a partisan or an arbitrary way, it may win compliance for a time, but it does not win consent. Thus, sustainable governance requires the fair, reliable, and predictable exercise of power through the establishment of transparent rules (laws) and effective and impartial police and courts.

It follows that reform of the justice and security sectors of Middle Eastern states that used coercion as a governance backstop must be urgent priorities, even in the face of threats posed by terrorists and other violent extremists. If these sectors cannot behave in a manner that is impartial, accountable, and reliable for citizens, they will never have the public allegiance they need to combat terrorism effectively.

A rich array of technical assistance to achieve this goal is available to states that wish to avail themselves of it. The difficulty is not as much in the knowing how, as in deciding that such reforms are of positive value for those in power. Security sector reform, like all major institutional reforms of a state, upsets established relationships and interests—in this case, involving men with guns. But if political leaders fail to reform the security sector for fear of upsetting these interests, they could far more easily become, one day, the prisoner or the victim of those same interests. Ultimately, for example, the Egyptian military decided to end the terms in office of both President Hosni Mubarak and President

Mohammed Morsi. It is entirely conceivable that the military could do the same to Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Leaders must choose whether to rest their leadership on the foundation of agreed-upon rules and demonstrations of popular consent for their governance, or on the shakier ground of special interests. The underlying challenge for leaders with power in the region is to establish and maintain the political will to reform their modes of governance in the direction laid out here.

### Build opportunities for youth participation.

The pre-2011 Arab political order rested on its ability to contain public participation in political affairs into narrow, managed channels: controlled electoral competition between a select group of parties, for example. The exclusion of the rising generation was perhaps the most egregious and visible form of exclusion in the pre-2011 era: it was not unusual for the “minister for youth” in an Arab government to be a senior citizen.

For young people in today’s Middle East, the failures of governance that have denied them adequate education, opportunity, dignity, and voice have had a profound impact. These young people are, on the whole, healthier and better educated than any generation of Arabs before them. Because of the information revolution, they are more connected to the world around them and more aware of the progress made and opportunities available elsewhere. Their expectations for themselves are higher, and so is their sense of what they can accomplish through their own initiative and effort. In many ways, this rising generation of young Arabs presents a real cognitive shift from the generations that came before. Whereas their parents embraced, and benefited from, the top-down, patronage-based corporatist states of the last century, today’s youth are primed to be the actors and agents in their own stories. Yet, despite these advantages, they have faced a massive gap between their aspirations for themselves and their communities, and the realities all around them.

Young people can be a source of tremendous dynamism and growth in a society, if they are well integrated. But it is true around the world that having a lot of unemployed or underemployed young men in a society is a ripe indicator for social instability.<sup>40</sup> For too many young people across the Middle East, inadequate opportunities for

39 Sherif Kamel and Christopher M. Schroeder, *Economic Recovery and Revitalization*, Atlantic Council, 2016.

40 Valerie M. Hudson and Andrea M. den Boer, *Bare Branches: The Security Implications of Asia’s Surplus Male Population* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004).

work also mean delaying or denying opportunities for marriage, family formation, and the ability to shape their own future—creating what Brookings scholars in the mid-2000s called a “generation in waiting.”<sup>41</sup> To overcome this challenge requires far more than creating new jobs or enabling youth to start small businesses. It requires recognizing the transformation in mentality that young people in the Middle East have undergone over the past generation, and enabling young Arabs to be the authors of their own stories, defining and realizing their own visions for themselves and for their communities. If governments fail to do this, they should not be surprised when extremist actors that do offer young people a sense of agency find success in recruiting.

Harnessing this powerful potential on behalf of the community requires integrating young people into every dimension of community life—the economy, but also civil society and government. There are formal ways to do this—for example, establishing quotas for youth in parliaments or parties—and less formal ways, such as embracing youth-focused civil society engagement. The United Arab Emirates has gone so far as to appoint a minister for youth who is herself only twenty-two years old. The symbolism is valuable; even more so will be seeing her exercise authority and resources on behalf of her mandate. As with all these recommendations, the specifics of implementation are best left to local negotiation and agreement. The imperative is to take the need for youth inclusion seriously as an essential prerequisite for effective governance.

#### Cultivate platforms and skills for dialogue and conflict resolution.

The Tunisian constitution might never have been concluded if it had been left entirely to the politicians. Throughout the period of constitution drafting, tensions between secular and religious parties were growing, inside parliament and out, exacerbated by violent attacks by extremists that included two political assassinations. More than once, the constituent assembly seemed

at loggerheads on key issues. Ultimately, these obstacles were overcome not in the negotiating room but in two other key locales: in the assembly’s cafeteria, where representatives often met for informal conversation, and in dialogues and town-hall meetings organized by local civic groups. As the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize to the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet attests, these civic spaces for dialogue and open debate on constitutional issues helped urge representatives toward a successful conclusion and improve mutual understanding sufficiently to enable compromise.<sup>42</sup>

By contrast, in Egypt, both the Muslim Brotherhood and its opponents engaged in zero-sum politics, acting in the apparent belief that electoral victory granted the right to rule unconstrained, and that any given contest’s outcome spelled ultimate victory or defeat (this latter view, given that Egypt’s transition plan prioritized elections over constitution writing, was not irrational). The polarization in Egypt today, whereby political opposition is essentially criminalized and opponents deem the government entirely illegitimate, is an outgrowth of this earlier period of zero-sum politics.

The societies of the Arab world must resolve fundamental issues: whom does government represent, and how? What should be the role of religion in politics? What role should the state have in the economy? What should be the relationship between civilian leaders and the military? Without arenas and skills to debate and resolve these questions, stable and consensual governance simply cannot emerge from such a polarized environment. This is even more the case in states emerging from conflict, where citizens are negotiating new rules for governance. In states with new, fragile political institutions, it is crucial that societies have places where divergent views can be aired and exchanged peacefully. In a region where extremists seek to exploit fractures within societies, to recruit adherents, to carry out violence, and to undermine existing states, it is important for all societies to build their resilience against extremism by building their capacity for peaceful resolution

The imperative is to take the need for youth inclusion seriously as an essential prerequisite for effective governance.

41 Navtej Dhillon and Tarik Yousef, *Generation in Waiting: The Unfulfilled Promise of Young People in the Middle East* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 2009).

42 “The Nobel Peace Prize for 2015,” *Nobelprize.org*, October 10, 2015, [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/2015/press.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2015/press.html).

of conflict. And, if those concerned with regional stability want states to rely on consent rather than coercion to govern, they must help societies and states develop and model the capacity to manage differences without violence.

Where can one find, or seek to establish, such arenas for dialogue and conflict-resolution skills? Just about anywhere. Efforts can begin even today, in refugee camps and school rooms. Today, the Jordanian government and United Nations agencies running Syrian refugee camps in Jordan seek to head off political discussions in the camps, fearing the results might frustrate camp residents or import the conflict into the camps. Instead, they should use the camps' protected and carefully managed environment as a place to help refugees develop the skills they will need on their eventual return home to sustain social peace, manage differences, and avoid the renewal of violence.<sup>43</sup>

This recommendation also reinforces the value of focusing early attention on local governance—because the skills of dialogue and conflict resolution can most easily be built and practiced at the local level, where practical, everyday governance needs add urgency and realism to the issues under debate.

### Nurture and elevate civil society.

In a developed democracy, political institutions themselves become arenas for dialogue, debate, and compromise: parties have open primaries, parliaments represent public constituencies, which have real engagement with that body's decision-making and oversight, and so on. But the Middle East comprises recalcitrant autocracies alongside fragile states in political transition and some states mired in (and hopefully soon emerging from) conflict. Even with intense commitment of political will, building new institutions or changing old ones takes time.

In the interim, Arab societies need platforms where differences can be aired and managed, to prevent polarization, demonization of political opponents, and a slippery slope to coercion and civil conflict. Civil society can help fill this gap by providing such platforms and by modeling civil discourse, as well as by putting pressure on media and politicians to commit to civil discourse.

As states emerge from conflict, or as governments transition to new modes of engagement and decision-making, civil society can be a key avenue for communication between government and the public. As it did in Tunisia, civil society can help aggregate public interests, bridge gaps between different constituency groups, convey information about government performance, encourage civic participation, and hold governments accountable for the promises they have made and for their responsiveness to citizen concerns.

Civil society also provides a key feedback mechanism to ensure and enhance government accountability. There is some concern that, in fragile states or societies emerging from conflict, civil society demands can overwhelm state capacity and undermine governance<sup>44</sup>—but the error in the Middle East has been far too much in the other direction.

One consequence of globalization's impact on societies worldwide—and the concomitant constraints on the dominance of state institutions—is that today, civil society organizations are essential partners with governments in advancing political, economic, and social development. It is true for the United States, where civil society has always played a central role and is a core element of American civic culture—but it is no less true now for the widely mistrusted and ineffective governments of the Middle East.

<sup>43</sup> For example, in Salahaddin Province in Iraq, the US Institute of Peace worked with tribal leaders to prepare communities for the peaceful return of internally-displaced Iraqis to their homes. See USIP's Work In Iraq, 18 July 2016, at <http://www.usip.org/publications/the-current-situation-in-iraq>.

<sup>44</sup> Omar Encarnacion, *The Myth of Civil Society: Social Capital and Democratic Consolidation in Spain and Brazil* (London: Palgrave, 2003).

## IV. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR US POLICY

Over the past four years, US policy toward questions of domestic governance in the Middle East has swung dramatically between over-involvement and under-involvement—and at both ends of this policy pendulum, officials have found themselves frustrated at the results. The administration of Barack Obama entered office determined to learn the lessons of the Iraq War and avoid overestimating the United States' ability to shape, or rebuild, society and politics in far-off lands. And yet, the administration has perhaps learned this lesson too well, as it now declaims any ability to influence outcomes of the wrenching political change underway in the Middle East.

While the United States certainly cannot determine outcomes in the region, its presence and influence is still sizeable, indeed unmatched for an actor outside the region. The United States is still the largest financial donor to Middle Eastern governments, for both economic and military purposes. It is still the dominant military power in the region. Its globally dominant economic power shapes the markets in which Arab economies compete, as well as the products and services and cultural content Arabs consume. Indeed, from the perspective of Arab citizens living in Cairo or Amman, the notion that the United States lacks influence over their lives is laughable—American policy, economics, and culture are constant, ever-present forces in their daily experience and in their governments' choices.

At the same time, Americans have a particular case of whiplash about governance in the Middle East: all the optimism they experienced at popular pro-democracy mobilization in 2011 has turned to dismay and worry at the metastasizing violence that characterizes the region today. Successive US administrations relied on Arab autocrats for security and diplomatic cooperation over many decades; today, the Obama administration is hard pressed to find interlocutors with the capacity and shared priorities to help Washington combat urgent security threats, stem regional violence, and stabilize regional affairs. And there is also a large gap between American and Arab policies—disagreements over how the regional order

collapsed and how best to rebuild it. Western governments are fixated on ISIS and other jihadist movements across the region, and the terrorist threat they present to Western targets. Arab governments, for the most part, are focused on their own power competition with Iran, and on efforts to establish a political order in the area that will protect their interests and preferences. Regional governments are not prioritizing the ISIS threat, and their sectarian appeals may even be exacerbating it.

Given all of this, in addition to the legacy of the Iraq War, many American policy makers today observe the existential challenges facing the region's governments and conclude that American leverage to shape the region's trajectory is limited. It is, indeed, limited—external influence always is, after all—but it is not zero. More than anything, the United States' global and regional leadership enable it to shape the environment within which Middle Eastern actors make decisions about how to behave. The question for American policy makers is how the country can play its limited role in a way that maximally supports progress toward sustainable governance—and therefore toward stability—in the region.

While perhaps slow to react to the Arab uprisings, President Obama in May 2011 laid out a bold vision that political and economic reform was the only path to renewed stability in the region, and that set democratic change across the region as a top priority for American policy.<sup>45</sup> After September 2012, when a vicious attack on the US diplomatic mission in Benghazi led to the deaths of four Americans, the administration began to turn away from those commitments, declaring that it could not determine outcomes, and resigning itself to limiting its exposure and protecting narrow, short-term interests: limiting engagement with Libya's post-Qaddafi government, avoiding any involvement in Syria's civil conflict, and restoring

45 "Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa," May 19, 2011, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa>.



military aid and full bilateral cooperation with a reestablished, military-dominated government in Egypt. This new reticence was most evident in 2013, when the administration declined to take military action against the Syrian government even though the regime had used chemical weapons against civilians, and the cancer of ISIS was metastasizing across Syria and back into Iraq, threatening Obama's tentative success in withdrawing forces from Baghdad. Indeed, just one year later, the fall of Mosul to ISIS compelled the president to announce the reinsertion of American forces into combat in the Middle East. Today, American military officials speak of the war against ISIS and its regional allies as a battle that will last for years.<sup>46</sup>

In the years prior to the Arab uprisings, the United States and other outside parties sought to encourage liberalizing political, economic, and social reforms that they believed would move regional governments toward more responsive and effective governance and stave off crisis. The incentives offered were insufficient to overcome the fear of change, the vested interests, and the other forces driving regional leaders and the elites who supported them away from the necessary path. Perhaps no external incentives would have been sufficient given the state of governance in the region and the obstacles to change, but the incentives provided were limited, and the expectations set forth were inconsistent and often muddled or overridden by other, often short-term, interests that pushed Western governments toward robust support for existing governments despite their weaknesses.

After the crisis of 2011, the United States proclaimed support for democratic transitions, but amidst budget battles with Congress, competing aid priorities, and a preference for burden sharing with Europe, it provided little material support for those transitions. It proposed a major new aid program to advance positive reforms (the MENA Incentive Fund, worth \$770 million), but did not lobby Congress to appropriate funds for its implementation. Washington also quickly found that fearful autocrats

facing new challenges were not especially drawn to embrace limited American incentives for democratic change; they prioritized their own survival, and made clear their displeasure when American preferences for political outcomes diverged from their own. Some major US partners in the region made clear their determination to invest in opposing American preferences in specific cases like Egypt, Libya, and Bahrain. Faced with the steely counterrevolutionary determination among key regional partners, the Obama administration saw little to be gained in confronting its traditional friends over domestic governance when it needed their cooperation on the Iranian nuclear negotiations, energy policy, the Middle East peace process, and the urgent security challenge from ISIS.

At the end of the day, the United States was willing to accept democratization in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region, but saw no compelling reason to fight for it. This was, at the least, shortsighted. And yet, in rhetorical declarations and also in private conversations, Obama administration officials still hold to their analytical judgment from May 2011 that stability in the Middle East requires democratic reform and the empowerment of individuals both politically and economically. Administration officials express no optimism about the outcomes of Sisi's authoritarian experiment; indeed, they are increasingly alarmed at the degradation of the Egyptian state, even as they are resigned to their inability to do anything about it.

In my assessment, the United States found itself with limited influence over the political trajectory of the region after 2011 for three reasons: 1) it did not consistently back its announced preference for democratic reform with resources (either carrots or sticks) or consistent policy focus, instead leaping from crisis to crisis and taking a "wait and see" attitude; 2) it held back from engaging in some arenas (especially Iraq) where it could have influenced domestic governance, from the belief that it could not or should not play a larger role or from a desire to avoid responsibility for potential negative outcomes; and 3) it found itself increasingly at odds with its main regional partners regarding the sources of the regional upheaval, the drivers of ongoing instability, and the necessary pathway to return the region to a stable order. As

... [T]he United States found itself with limited influence over the political trajectory of the region after 2011. . .

<sup>46</sup> Tamara Cofman Wittes, "The Slipperiest Slope of Them All," *The Atlantic*, March 12, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/03/obama-doctrine-goldberg-inaction/473520/>.



Students at the Second Bourj Hammoud Public School listen to their teacher while in class in Beirut, Lebanon on March 23, 2016. *Photo credit: World Bank/Flickr.*

renewed authoritarianism took hold, the United States largely acquiesced.

At the end of the day, American—and international—interests in the Middle East are best protected by a stable region, in which societies are resilient against both terrorism and political subversion. This requires states with effective, inclusive, and accountable governments, in which citizens feel secure, fairly treated, and reasonably well-served by the government that represents and rules over them. These US interests are fairly clear and durable: securing Americans against threats (mainly terrorism) emanating from the region; preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction; preserving the free flow of energy to global markets; and ensuring the security of friends and allies who share those goals. The analysis in this paper should thus reinforce the determination within the US government to advance more sustainable forms of governance in the region.

**This is not an impossible task, and the United States, despite its missteps, is not doomed to irrelevance—indeed, it remains the extra-regional actor with the largest and most powerful role to**

**play in the region.** The United States has tools, resources, and know-how to apply against all of the priorities outlined in the previous section. Its greatest challenge in holding to this determination has been that near-term concerns (often related to security in the narrower sense of immediate threats) often push decision makers to subsume uncertain and longer-term interests that link American security to improved governance. This latter problem was what ultimately doomed US efforts to cultivate governance reforms prior to 2011,<sup>47</sup> and it threatens to do the same now.

US officials must keep firmly in mind that the underlying vulnerabilities that produced this upheaval and gave space for ISIS and al-Qaeda still exist across the region, and without addressing these underlying problems, those urgent security threats will simply keep popping up in different places and ways.

But there is another reason why the United States' role is crucial in pushing the region forward to

<sup>47</sup> Tamara Cofman Wittes, *Freedom's Unsteady March* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 2008).

more sustainable governance and enhanced stability—there are forces, mainly inside the region but also outside it, that are actively opposing this necessary transition to more accountable, effective, participatory governance. As outlined earlier, some of those actors are the very extremists the administration has defined as the most urgent and dire security threats facing the United States.

*The competition to establish new norms for governance in the Middle East is, in fact, the conflict that will determine the future of the region—it is the ground on which geopolitical, sectarian, and other conflicts are playing out. This paper has argued strenuously that the actors pursuing paths other than effective and accountable governance may succeed for a time, but at the cost of great violence and, ultimately, at the price of regional stability.*

The current policy stance of the United States is not neutral with respect to this competition—indeed, it is pushing in the wrong direction.

At the moment, the United States is seen as embracing renewed authoritarianism in the form of Egypt's Sisi, tolerating Putin, Assad and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in their destruction and domination of Syria, and enabling Saudi Arabia's war on Yemen, which is empowering both Houthi and al-Qaeda extremists. Right now, then, the United States appears (against its own rhetorical declarations) to be on the side of the problem in the crisis of Middle East governance, and it is clearly not on the side of the solution. That needs to change.

Some lessons emerge from recent experience that should inform future US efforts to advance more sustainable governance in the Middle East:

**First, as this paper has shown, rebuilding regional stability requires a sustained investment in improved governance.** There simply is no alternative pathway from the current chaos to a better region—no return to the status quo ante, no unexpected savior, no shortcuts. After nearly two decades of peripatetic policies on governance in the Middle East that have included efforts to induce reform, impose regime change, and support indigenous revolutions, interspersed with more prosaic policy choices like prioritizing counterterrorism and supporting autocratic allies, the United States has earned a reputation as a fair-weather friend among

precisely those whom it should wish to see triumph: Middle Eastern publics, civic activists, and political leaders seeking to build more inclusive governance. First and foremost, the United States must adopt an approach to the Middle East that advances stability and rebuilds American credibility—and that means one that is far-sighted, consistent, and persistent in the face of what will undoubtedly continue to be a dynamic and sometimes disheartening reality.

To rebuild policy credibility, as well as to enhance its impact, **US officials should work to enunciate a clear set of guiding principles for what it will take to restore regional stability and be consistent in evaluating regional developments through the lens of what will and will not advance durable governance in the region.** Some work toward this end has been done: for example, in November 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton outlined a three-part test for political movements seeking to participate in democratic elections in the Arab

world after the 2011 uprisings.<sup>48</sup>

The Obama administration, beset by multiple crises across the region, took a case-by-case approach and did not do enough to clarify—for itself or for interlocutors in the region—its own views and preferences regarding the political outcomes necessary to advance American interests in a post-2011 Middle East. With the benefit of hindsight from the last five

years of turmoil, guiding principles for sustainable governance have become easier to identify, and this paper has sought to delineate them further.

**To rebuild trust, US policy makers should also prioritize increasing and intensifying all forms of engagement and exchange between Americans and the peoples of the Middle East.** Professional diplomats and many experts have long highlighted the role that educational and exchange programs play in advancing American interests abroad. In the specific context of governance, the US government has developed a rich array of programs to engage youth, parliamentarians, women, judges, and so on. These programs acknowledge the fallacy of exporting an American political model, but also seek to help participants gain an understanding

... [R]ebuilding regional stability requires a sustained investment in improved governance.

48 Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Remarks at National Democratic Institute Annual Democracy Awards Dinner," November 7, 2011, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/11/176750.htm>.



of the basic principles and values underlying both American and non-American traditions of inclusive governance. American exchange programs can also highlight those dimensions of US society that are most admired and sought after in the Arab world—especially education, innovation, science, and technology. Importantly, exchange programs also offer participants an opportunity to engage directly with ordinary Americans and to address and correct misconceptions about the United States, about American democracy and society, and about the United States’ role in the Middle East. The amount of money and the number of participants in civilian exchange programs is dwarfed many times over by military training and exchange programs—a fact that illustrates how, for decades, American policy has overinvested in tactical elements rather than lasting strategies to achieve its security interests. Civilian exchange programs are not a magic bullet, but they are a wise, relatively modest, and farsighted investment in strengthening relations with and building the capacities of the people who will determine the future of the Middle East, for good or ill.

**American and international planning for ending the region’s civil wars and for post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction must integrate the lessons outlined above in the section directed at Arab governments.** Specifically, efforts to rebuild social trust and local governance must be integrated into support plans and programs as top priorities, with adequate funding and sustained investment. Many countries outside the region have valuable lessons to share regarding both these issues, and their expertise can be mobilized for this purpose. In addition, the international community has learned a great deal in the post-Cold War period about effective post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction, and should seek to apply those lessons here.

The US government must drive diplomatic and programmatic engagement with the region in a consistent manner. Political development rarely proceeds in a linear manner—especially in divided societies or societies emerging from conflict. **It is crucial that American policy makers avoid overreaction to every local development, and avoid revisiting and revising diplomatic messaging and programmatic engagement in light of events like the arrival of a new ministerial counterpart, a breakdown in political dialogue, or the emergence of a new social protest.** Sometimes such changes are manifestations of deeper alterations in the

local governance environment, but sometimes they are not. Establishing a clear framework of principles for evaluating political change relative to the objectives and priorities laid out in this paper will be key to maintaining policy consistency and having meaningful impact over time.

Consistency will be both easier to maintain, and less costly for the United States, if these principles and objectives can attract the support of other actors outside the region, and can be implemented through **a long-term, multilateral mechanism to support positive regional change.** Constructing that mechanism, recruiting participants from among governments and non-government actors, and funding the effort over time should be a high priority for the next US administration.

**Another key lesson is to avoid creating moral hazards in bilateral relations with regional governments, particularly by over-securitizing bilateral relationships.** A consistent policy approach designed for impact over a longer time horizon also demands attention to path dependency in American policy. Successive US administrations have sought to encourage reform while supporting autocratic governments. Excessive US investment in helping local governments address their perceived local security challenges (through, for example, provision of weapons and training, support for new terrorism rules and procedures, and local basing of US forces) has, historically, increased rather than mitigated the challenge presented by future internal crises, because this kind of support relieves pressures on recipient governments to head off domestic problems through improved governance instead of through intimidation, surveillance, legal repression, and outright coercion.

In addition, US professions of commitment to defend these states against threats is often interpreted by regional interlocutors as including defense against threats to regime security. On this point, President Obama has been remarkably and helpfully frank.<sup>49</sup> Instead, the United States should share the lessons it has learned from fifteen years of counterinsurgency efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the similar lessons from Colombia and other countries: defeating non-state violent actors requires forging meaningful, inclusive, and effective governance in ungoverned spaces, like the Sinai. Providing lasting security for citizens in such

49 Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

**BOX 2: THE PRICE OF US DOMESTIC GRIDLOCK**

The analysis in this paper makes clear that achieving sustainable governance in the Middle East is a long-term project—the work must begin immediately, but it must also be sustained over years of effort, and sustained in the face of apparent setbacks and challenges. Throughout the United States’ history as a global power, Congress has often played a positive role in overcoming short-termism in the executive branch by enshrining key principles (like fealty to human rights and democracy) in authorizing and appropriating legislation.

More broadly, the work entailed in the United States’ necessary contribution to regional stability in the Middle East needs a degree of consensus support across the two major US political parties if it is to be implemented successfully. Recent years have seen a precipitous erosion of the old rule that politics stops at the water’s edge; and the current election campaign has demonstrated that a trend away from internationalism exists within both political parties. And yet, calls to put “America First” do not address the inescapable interdependence of the twenty-first-century world, and thus cannot advance US national security.

To give just one example, American “energy independence” may be a worthy policy goal for many reasons, but has little relevance for US interests in Middle Eastern stability. As long as energy remains a global market, and as long as major US trading partners in Europe and Asia rely on Middle Eastern energy supplies, the United States’ economic health will remain linked to a stable flow of Middle Eastern energy to global markets, and securing that flow will remain a vital US interest. Likewise, American friends in the region may indeed remain capable and crucial partners in regional stabilization, but that does not mean that more arms sales or bilateral government to government assistance is always the best way to support their security. It is time for Democrats and Republicans to engage in serious dialogue about the role of the Middle East in US national security, and to build greater consensus on how to respond appropriately to the historic changes still underway in this strategic region.

More prosaically, it is well-nigh impossible for the United States to make a sustained investment in improving regional governance when it cannot carry out the basics of reliable governance at home. The dysfunctionality of the budget and appropriations process, in particular, harms the ability of the United States government to conduct consistent diplomacy and carry out consistent programs to achieve American goals abroad. In the midst of the Arab Spring uprisings, for example, the US government nearly faced a total shutdown due to a partisan deadlock over basic appropriations laws. The annual standoff over the national budget, the constant lurching from one continuing resolution to another, the late-night omnibus bills littered with last-minute earmarks, and other markers of the United States’ political dysfunction severely impede the ability of policy makers to plan and execute consistent support for improved governance in the Middle East (or for any other national purpose). And, of course, this dysfunction also serves as a negative model for those struggling to establish more inclusive, accountable governance in their own countries, and gives cover to the arguments of autocrats that inclusive governance cannot deliver concrete results. The US political system must do better, for the sake of Americans and for the country’s policy impact.

environments requires attention to governance and development, not simply military operations.

**The United States must devote greater attention to supporting governments that are using political compromise instead of violence to resolve disputes, like that in Tunisia. In addition, through exchanges, public diplomacy, private “jawboning,” and programmatic assistance, the United States**

**should encourage communities in the Middle East to build and exercise their own capacity for peaceful dialogue and conflict resolution.** Given the state of governance at the national level, and the challenges of order and authority, such efforts might first concentrate on local communities and on inculcating conflict resolution skills within civil society.

## CONCLUSION

Addressing local and regional security threats, it is clear, requires work to repair the breach between states and societies in the region. This is no small task, but this paper has demonstrated that there are no shortcuts in this painstaking effort. High-level diplomatic bargaining without local conflict resolution will not extinguish the region's civil wars. Military pushback without reliable and equitable local governance will not rid the region of the scourge of ISIS. Most notably, governance reforms that do not meaningfully reflect or create greater inclusion, transparency, effectiveness, and accountability will not win the allegiance of Arabs, particularly not young, skeptical populations living in a connected, complex world where non-state forces compete with states for allegiance. ISIS may be a dead end for the region's citizens, suffering from violence and chaos—but it is equally true that renewed authoritarianism does not offer reliable security or stability for a region in crisis.

This paper sketched an alternative pathway that can produce more stable and sustainable governance for the region. It laid out some priorities for how to move toward that goal. At the most fundamental level, functional states provide basic internal and external security, public services and goods such as education and physical infrastructure, and an expression of collective identity. But how states provide those things matters very much. By attending to the analysis and recommendations above, leaders and policy makers can begin to ameliorate the current fear and mistrust between citizens and states in the region, address basic needs, and enable consensual and effective decision-making about everything else. With these components in place, governments should be able to develop and maintain sufficient basis for their

legitimate exercise of authority, and thus provide the basis for a sustainable political order.

Stabilizing the Middle East is thus primarily an indigenous project. But it is also a project that affects the world as a whole, and is deeply in the United States' interests—even more so now than when the United States first took on the mantle of regional leadership in 1956. Achieving that goal requires persistent, patient, long-term investment—not just military force to push back extremism, but work with local partners to replace extremist rule with law and order, reliable and equal justice, participation, and development. This is the real war against ISIS, and it is indeed generational. It is the fight facing that rising generation of young Arabs, who might raise the region up with their energy, or fall along with it if those energies are not harnessed in the right way. They deserve all the help they can get.

**This is the real war against ISIS, and it is indeed generational.**

Ultimately, building societies that are resilient in the face of sectarian conflict and terrorist violence requires more effective, responsive institutions that can win citizens' trust and loyalty, and more fair and functional systems that can offer the region's majority, its young people, meaningful opportunities to achieve their ambitions for themselves and their communities. The project must give young men and women reason to invest in their hopes for this world, instead of hastening their progress toward the next one. Sustainable governance in the Middle East is an imperative for the security of the region and the world—urgent, and worthy of thoughtful, persistent investment by regional and global leaders. There are no more alternatives to experiment with, and no more time to waste.

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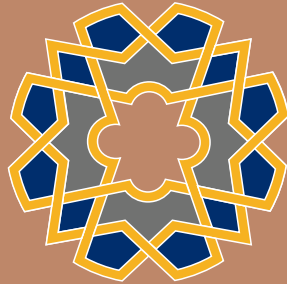
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