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Disruptions and Dynamism in the Arab World

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Introduction

Frederic Wehrey

An alluring narrative has arisen about the Arab world's recent evolution that goes something like this.

The dislocations of the 2011 Arab uprisings, which dominated headlines and rippled across the region in the shape of crackdowns, civil wars, and so-called proxy conflicts, have largely subsided. Violent extremist groups that once held sway over vast tracts of territory and conducted spectacularly lethal attacks against local and foreign targets have been reduced to a shadow of their former selves. Fierce debates among and within Arab states about political order—often centered around the role of Islamists and, more fundamentally, about participatory governance and democratization—have also faded to the margins. Old foes are now talking to one another, previously sacrosanct redlines have been breached, and pariahs have been welcomed back to the fold.

The winners of this contest, the argument continues, are the region's autocratic rulers, led by the confident dynasties of the oil-rich Gulf, who spearheaded the counterrevolutionary wave with money, media, and military interventions and who have blocked the emergence of another moment like the one at Tahrir Square, using increasingly sophisticated forms of monitoring and social control. Cowed by this repression, activists, dissidents, and oppositionists have all but abandoned the streets: some have fled into exile or cast their lot with the rulers they once challenged, while many languish in prison or have been executed with impunity.

Across the Arab world, a model of governance and economic development is said to be spreading, one that advertises itself as not only survivable but also adaptive and worthy of being emulated. Originating in the Gulf, it incorporates a purported reframing of the timeworn ruling bargain that engages new constituencies through dialogues and other forums, promising both well-being and social tolerance. In tandem, the vanguards of this emergent Arab order are enjoying newfound assertiveness and maneuverability on the global stage amid the apparent retreat of a chastened and distracted America from the Middle East, skillfully playing the great powers off against one another. These Arab rulers are also basking in the nationalist glow of climate summitry and the hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

Like many storylines with a linear arc and satisfying ending, this one too is beguiling in its simplicity and clarity. It is also misleading and inaccurate.

Arab States Beyond the Veneer of Stasis and Stability

To begin with, the political and socioeconomic grievances that fueled the Arab protests and revolutions of 2011 still remain and, in many instances, have only gotten worse. In fragile, conflict-scarred, and economically distressed states across the region, the livelihoods and human security of many citizens has sunk. Populations have swelled, inequalities have deepened, middle classes are increasingly squeezed, and unemployment is high, especially for youth and women. Arab educational institutions are still struggling to prepare young people to compete in the interconnected global economy. Corruption is a grinding part of daily life for many people, while social safety nets are meager and fragmented. Private sectors are underdeveloped, and plans to restructure rent-based economies are fledgling. Though some Gulf countries have shown signs of improvement in this area, they remain heavily dependent on hydrocarbon export rents, which continue to be central in their economic and energy diversification plans.

In varying degrees, these deficiencies fueled the protests that rocked four Arab states from 2018 to 2019 and ousted the regimes in two of them, Sudan and Algeria. They underscore in stark terms that Arab citizens—especially jobless, discontented youth—have hardly reconciled themselves to the authoritarian order and are still pushing for more accountable governance and better economic opportunities, adjusting their tactics to new realities. And the maladies that drove these citizens into the streets have only been amplified by more recent shocks to the region.

At the forefront of these crises was the COVID-19 pandemic and its far-reaching socioeconomic fallout, which in the Arab world included diminished trade, tourism, remittances, and investment. Among those particularly affected were already vulnerable inhabitants, including youth, women, migrants, refugees, and those working in the informal labor sector. The pandemic also impacted state-society relations in ways that are still being felt—for instance, giving Arab autocrats new means of social control via digital technologies that were initially fielded for public health management.

Recovery from this ordeal has been uneven: the wealthier, oil-rich Gulf states led the way in terms of vaccine rollout and containment measures, benefiting as well from a surge in post-lockdown energy demand. Meanwhile, poorer, fractured, and post-conflict countries have unsurprisingly lagged behind. And while some Arab regimes may have won a supposed reprieve from criticism for their expedient handling of the crisis, the underlying vulnerabilities and problems of governance remain entrenched in many countries.

Then came the unexpected blow of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, a disruption that has had far-reaching effects on the global order. Here again, the impact on the Middle East has been uneven.

Among hydrocarbon-exporting states, particularly Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, the resulting rise in global oil and gas prices has proved a boon, shrinking if not erasing their budget deficits. It has also enabled them to embark on public spending sprees and so-called megaprojects, allowing them to expand clean energy exports and badge themselves as leaders of greener and more diversified economies while providing opportunities for their citizens. But in less-endowed countries, the spike in food, commodity, and energy prices produced by the war and the attendant rise in inflation has had deeply injurious effects on citizens. Governments in these states are being pressured to enact more social spending while simultaneously confronting already-high levels of public debt and rising costs of capital as a result of tightening monetary policy by central banks. The result, in many cases, is an attenuation of state capacity and the deliberate devolution of some governance functions to substate actors, especially those in peripheral regions and in borderlands.

In many respects, the shocks of the pandemic and the Ukraine war serve as a portent of the Arab world's darkening horizon. Despite the recent surge in energy revenues, a future of diminishing global demand for hydrocarbons—the resource upon which much of the modern Arab order, for better or for worse, has been erected—is likely inescapable. With less demand for hydrocarbons, Arab regimes face dire consequences for the timeworn ruling bargain, in which autocratic governments maintain citizen quiescence through oil-funded welfare systems, repressive security sectors, and military support from foreign patrons.

The imperatives of mitigating global warming through decarbonization and the green transition are thrusting more challenges upon both oil-exporting Arab states and those that depend indirectly on hydrocarbon revenues. Arab governments have long been slow to appreciate the threats from climate change, even though their countries are among the most exposed to deleterious climate effects such as water shortages, rising temperatures and sea levels, and extended droughts and sandstorms, to name a few. In many instances, these effects will sharpen preexisting vulnerabilities and inequalities that arose through years of uneven development, exclusionary governance, corruption, war, and displacement.

Here, however, it is important to avoid an overly deterministic, monocausal frame in linking climate change to violent conflict or protests. Ignoring the intervening variables between a climate change and the outbreak of serious unrest—factors like governance and economic policies—could lead to a securitization of climate policy while also absolving Arab regimes of their own culpability in contributing to instability.

Many oil-rich states have made ambitious net-zero pledges, renewable energy targets, and plans for carbon capture, carbon reduction, and clean hydrogen exports, along with promises to slash household subsidies. Even many oil-importing states have set such goals. But these projects have been hobbled by the fact that the incentive structures in many export-driven, rent-dependent Arab economies remain unchanged. This status quo underscores the urgent need for more holistic economic, regulatory, and political reforms to make the green transition more feasible.

More importantly, though, inclusive socioeconomic policies for climate adaptation across the Arab world lag behind technical mitigation plans. Grassroots actors, such as civil society groups and municipalities, with both the will and capacity to promote climate resilience are in many cases cut out of the climate conversation because of the preference of Arab rulers for excessively centralized administration. To rectify this, governments will need to involve a broader swath of their citizenry in climate action and prioritize reforms that protect acutely vulnerable communities.

A Shaky New Regional Order

Beyond their repercussions within Arab countries on societies, economies, and politics, the aftermaths of the three shocks—the pandemic, the Ukraine invasion, and the already felt threat of climate change—are also rippling across the region's geopolitics, reshaping relations *between* Arab states. They are affecting how these states position themselves toward other Middle Eastern powers and within the broader global order—an order that itself is shifting toward multipolarity.

Most notably, longtime rivalries and disputes have been shelved, if not settled. The motives for this bridging of differences are varied: exhaustion from wasteful and fruitless military adventures, economic constraints imposed by the pandemic's fallout, and the perception of American capriciousness and lack of protection from Iran are the factors most commonly cited. Less noticeable, but perhaps more significant, is the newfound confidence Arab rulers have enjoyed since surmounting the internal political challenges of the 2011 uprisings and their aftermath—a confidence that makes these leaders less likely to project their insecurities onto regional rivals and more inclined to find common cause with like-minded autocrats. Such assuredness seems particularly evident in the recent halt to the famously personal and ideological discord between Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE, on the one side, and Qatar and Türkiye, on the other. The split manifested itself in a harmful economic blockade and a low-level surrogate war. More recently, Saudi Arabia and Iran agreed in March 2023 to restore diplomatic relations and reopen their respective embassies, shuttered since 2016, in a deal that was brokered by China and that built upon previous mediation by Iraq and Oman. And, following similar moves by Abu Dhabi and other Gulf capitals, Riyadh also began talks on normalizing relations with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad—talks that were facilitated by Russia, illustrating Moscow's continued clout in the Middle East, despite the battering it has suffered because of its war on Ukraine.

Still, the exuberant proclamations that accompanied these de-escalation moves—and the expectation of a new era of calm in the region—need to be tempered by a dose of reality. This is shown most recently and starkly by the April 2023 eruption of fighting in Sudan, where other Arab states have long had interests and influence and where two key players, the UAE and Egypt, find themselves on opposite sides of the factional divide.

The seemingly transformative Saudi-Iran accord also needs to be heavily caveated, since it hinges upon both powers fulfilling pledges of noninterference and is unlikely to completely resolve the rivalry between them. Nor has it addressed the two other axes of Iran's confrontation in the Middle East: First, its shadow war with Israel could very well escalate. And second, its conflict with the United States, which Tehran clearly compartmentalized from its pact with Riyadh, has continued as Iranian-backed drone and rocket strikes in Syria in March 2023 killed a U.S. contractor and injured other U.S. personnel and elicited an immediate American retaliation.

The deal certainly signals Beijing's desire to expand its influence in the Middle East from relationships based on trade, energy, and technology—where it has outpaced the West—to more robust political and security ties. That said, it is unlikely that China's nascent activism in this direction—which some commentators inside and outside the region have lauded as a refreshing change from the militarized, interventionist approach of the United States—will offer a path toward lasting stability. Like other great powers that have ventured into the Middle East, Beijing too will confront the challenge of balancing its relations with competing poles and interests. And it will likely discover that it is far easier to broker settlements than to institutionalize them and make them stick.

The Saudi-Iran agreement, then, is hardly the harbinger of a post-American moment in the Middle East that some breathless commentaries portray it. Measured by foreign aid, arms sales, and its downsized-but-still-present military forces, Washington still commands significant influence. It remains the security patron of choice in many areas for many Arab governments, some of which have perfected the game of courting other powers to extract concessions and more lenient deals from the United States. For its part, U.S. President Joe Biden's administration, in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, was drawn back into the Middle East, a region it had pledged to exit, as it sought to persuade Saudi Arabia to boost oil output and lower prices. The failure of that appeal, along with Riyadh's decision to join with Moscow in cutting oil production, confronted the administration with the reality of growing agency and autonomy by its Arab partners—a trend that the Ukraine war did not create but rather clarified.

Looking ahead, it still not clear that the recent wave of moves toward reconciliation among Middle Eastern rivals or the region's growing multipolarity will produce an enduring peace or sustainable domestic orders. Ultimately, these intraregional accords are a form of authoritarian consolidation by ever-repressive dynasties, dictators, and theocrats with little to no input from their societies. Even the much-touted Abraham Accords and other Arab-Israel agreements accelerated a boost to Arab autocrats in the shape of surveillance technology transfer and other security assistance by Tel Aviv. Meanwhile, Israel's democracy is itself fraying and its politics are lurching further to the right, which has had devastating consequences for Palestinians and is also prompting criticism from the Arab signatories of the Abraham Accords, whose citizens, according to polls, increasingly oppose the agreement. Still, these Arab regimes are unlikely curtail their burgeoning defense, trade, and energy ties with Israel.

Similarly, Gulf Arab outreach to China and Russia is not simply about pragmatic security considerations, hedging, and diversification. It is rooted in a shared illiberalism and common worldview which, for Arab states, translates into little-to-no conditions placed on sales and transfers—a welcome relief from the scrutiny on human rights that some U.S. presidential administrations and Congress have applied to U.S. interactions with Arab partners (albeit unevenly). China has long exerted a particular appeal for Arab regimes: the clichéd and often vaguely defined "China model" promises economic growth and prosperity without meaningful reforms to existing ruling arrangements. But such a template, however applied, will be insufficient to meet the challenges many Arab governments face at home, including the long-standing problems of poor governance and socioeconomic exclusion that sparked the Arab uprisings, along with the effects from climate change and the difficulties of the transition to the post-oil era.

Left unaddressed, these impending challenges could very well flare up in the not-too-distant future, especially in weaker Arab states and as the traditional financial bailouts from wealthier Arab states and international donors become more constrained and subjected to stricter conditions. This, in turn, could jeopardize and possibly upset the current stability of the regional order—a stability that seems mostly bonded by the brittle mortar of authoritarian solidarity.

Clearer Views of the Arab World

Upon closer inspection, the shifting and complex tableau of Arab polities and societies defies simple narratives and comfortable tropes. Some of the Middle East's headline-grabbing conflicts may have subsided, but this is a region still in the throes of great change, emanating from within and without. Capturing the contours and implications of this dynamism requires a lens that is at once granular, panoramic, and attuned to both local specificities and worldwide trends.

The authors of the ten essays in this collection do just that. Drawing from a range of disciplines and marshaling an array of sources, they analyze the forces that are reshaping the region, including shifts in the global economy, the transition away from hydrocarbons, climate change, advances in digital technologies and artificial intelligence, and great power rivalries. The authors home in on the local Arab actors that are both affected by and contributing to this transformation: regimes, security institutions, publics, civil society actors and Islamists, and increasingly imperiled populations like refugees and migrants, among others. The essays offer no easy solutions or packaged prescriptions, nor do they claim to be definitive in their conclusions. At best, they aim to advance the conversation and propose new lines of inquiry in a way that is both rigorous and accessible for public audiences and policymakers—and most crucially for the people of the Arab world.

Collectively, the authors of this volume are grateful for the generous financial assistance provided by the Henry Luce Foundation and in particular for the support of Dr. Toby Volkman, the former director for policy initiatives at the foundation, and Dr. Jonathan VanAntwerpen, the foundation's program director for religion and theology. At the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, we extend our deep thanks to Haley Clasen and Natalie Brase for adroitly editing the essays, to Madison Andrews for keeping the project on track, and to Jocelyn Soly for designing the compelling graphics.

CHAPTER 1

How Global Economic Shocks Worsen Arab Inequalities

Bessma Momani

The economies of the Arab region are directly shaped by anemic global economic growth and uncertainties around disruptions including inflation trends, China's economic future after its pandemic-related slowdown and reopening, rising debt levels, capital outflow from emerging market economies to advanced economies, and the trajectory of commodity and energy prices. Global political pressures are just as ominous: multilateralism and the liberal international order are eroding from within, making it infinitely more difficult to find international compromises and solutions to impending economic challenges. Without strong global political will to find solutions to the growing number of collective action problems, the world will see fewer compromises, more protectionism, and increasing insularity, which are all dangerous headwinds for the health of the global economy and the Arab region.

Oil prices have a large determining factor on the Arab region's economic health and are often correlated with investors' confidence in the future health of the global economy. Short-term fluctuations in oil prices do not just impact resource-rich countries but also resource-poor countries that are dependent on workers' remittances from Arab Gulf states. From tourism, trade, investment, and food prices, the potential positive spillover into Arab economies from a healthy global economy are clear.

While many Arab countries are still experiencing economic growth and projections remain positive, distribution of wealth has not improved: the Middle East and North Africa holds the unenviable record of being the most unequal region. The impact of these global challenges on Arab economies and societies, particularly on resource-poor countries and the most vulnerable people within them, will be significant. Unemployment levels have continued to rise since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly for Arab youth. In the Arab region, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Sudan, and Tunisia are all likely to experience challenges arising from an anemic global economy.

The young demographic profile of the region means that more youth are entering the labor market every year with increasingly weak employment prospects. Despite progress over the past two decades in tackling poverty and inequality, the economic pressures of both the pandemic and the Russian war against Ukraine are likely to reverse some of these gains. These global economic uncertainties will only further negatively impact the poorest and most vulnerable people in the Arab region and aggravate internal political dynamics in Arab countries.

How Global Uncertainties Affect Arab Economies

The health of the global economy is often a key factor impacting oil prices and investors' confidence in emerging market economies; prosperity in both can positively impact the Arab region either through oil revenue and workers' remittances from oil-rich countries or through positive catalytic effects on domestic economies. Arab economies are also strongly tied by trade and investment with China, the European Union, and the United States, such that a slowdown in any of these economic heavyweights can negatively impact the Arab region through decreased exports of oil and non-oil products and decreased foreign investment in domestic projects. Tourism, for example—which had accounted for nearly 10 percent of GDP in Egypt before the pandemic—is a vital source of hard currency for the region and employs almost 7 million people. Undoubtedly, the economies of the Arab region are impacted by the gyrations currently being experienced in the global economy.

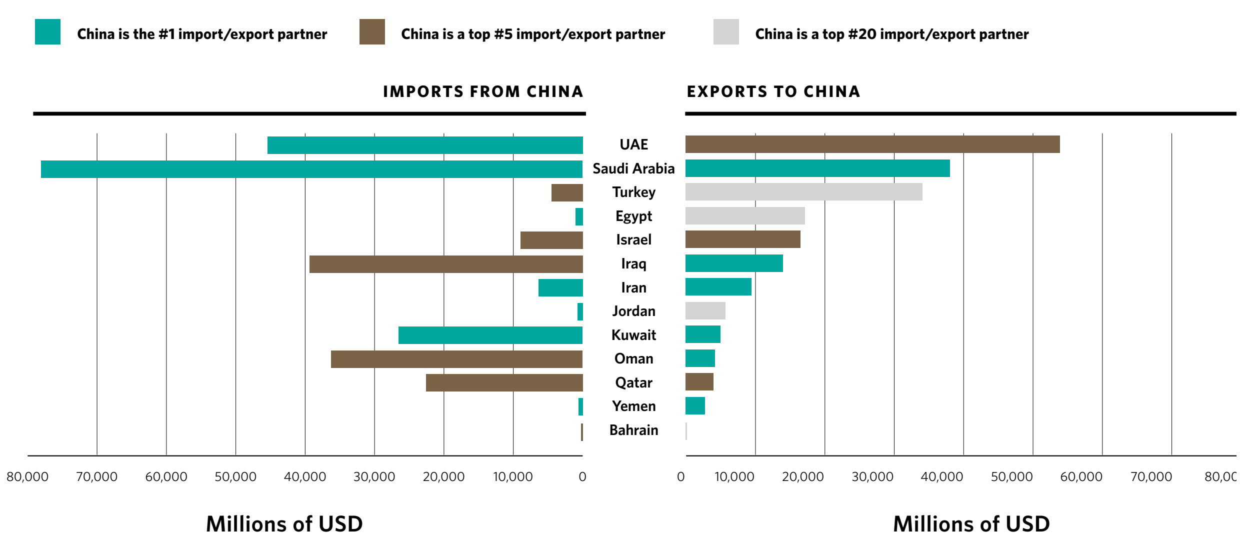
The projected health of the global economy today is uncertain. Based on estimates from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), global economic growth is expected to increase by 2.9 percent in 2023 and rebound to 3.1 percent in 2024. The IMF revised its estimates to be slightly more optimistic, although growth levels were relatively weaker compared to previous years. The more optimistic revision reflects both China's reopening from its COVID-19 lockdowns and successful global adjustments to reduced oil supplies in Europe after Russian invaded Ukraine. Western stock markets have surged in line with optimistic expectations of countries battling inflation, but then struggled again as a result of technology company layoffs and bank liquidity scares in the United States and Europe. A strong policy response in advanced economies to tackle inflation helped enhance confidence in their corrective measures, aided by the eventual clearing of supply chain bottlenecks that were created during the pandemic as Western disposable incomes increased and remote work increased demand for consumer goods. Hence, it appears that peak inflation may have passed in most advanced economies, although the same cannot be said for developing and emerging economies, particularly in Arab countries dependent on food imports where prices are already quite high. This all suggests that fears of a global economic slowdown remain prevalent but perhaps the feared global recession will not be as ferocious as once thought.

The state of capital flows is also adding uncertainty about the global economy and, in turn, affecting the health of Arab economies. For example, to cool its own inflationary economy, the U.S. government raised its interest rate, causing capital that is invested for speculative as opposed to productive purposes (also known as hot money) to leave emerging market economies, including many Arab countries. A weakening of the U.S. dollar from a November 2022 peak will help to reverse the outflow of capital from some emerging market economies in the Arab region. Nevertheless, the outflow of capital did result in many states accruing high levels of debt. Unsurprisingly, many emerging market economies and developing country governments sought external financing to cushion the impact of broader economic slowdowns and rising costs of mitigating the pandemic. Market studies suggest global debt is at $300 trillion, and debt-to-GDP ratios have increased significantly over the pandemic years. Many Arab governments have indeed accrued a great deal of public debt to manage the impacts of the pandemic. As interest rates rise, debt service payments have also increased, raising fears that debt sustainability will be a serious challenge for many countries, particularly developing countries and resource-poor Arab countries. This will be a potential reckoning and may hence dampen expectations of high global and regional growth.

The Role of China's Economic Future

Given China's significant economic footprint in the Arab world as the largest trading partner to almost all Arab countries, a significant investor in oil and gas and critical infrastructure developments throughout the region, and the leading consumer of oil from Saudi Arabia, what happens in China will invariably ripple across Arab economies (see figure 1). Indeed, China remains one of the largest engines of global economic growth. China is a key consumer of a significant share of global oil supply, and China's potential for an economic recovery will be an important variable in the future oil prices and therefore also in the economic health of the Arab region. Yet, China's pace of economic recovery is uncertain.

Figure 1. China Is a Leading Trading Partner to Almost All Middle East Countries



Source: ChinaMed Middle East and ChinaMed North Africa.

On the one hand, the end of China's Zero COVID policy and subsequent economic re-opening in late 2022 could eventually provide a stimulus to the global economy and a boost to oil exporters. However, despite China's reopening, production and supply cuts by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries since fall 2022, combined with the overall decreased global oil supplies owing to the Russian war on Ukraine and European sanctions on Russian oil, have meant that oil prices have not significantly rebounded or increased.

On the other hand, some analysts say that China's challenges are more structural and that it faces both the middle-income trap while facing a declining population. In this line of thinking, lower economic growth rates since well before the pandemic mean that China will fail to return to pre-pandemic economic growth levels. China will not be able to sufficiently boost the world out of anemic economic growth.

China's potential boost and positive impact on the global economy and the Arab region will be tempered by the broader geopolitical rifts that seem to be escalating between China and the West. This risk of fragmentation into geoeconomic blocs is slowly materializing in how countries are raising trade barriers, foreign direct investment barriers, and subsidies to domestic industries. This geopolitical rift is not yet to a cold-war level, but several developments point toward further fragmentation: the China-U.S. technological war over standards; the U.S. CHIPS and Science Act; the U.S. Inflation Reduction Act, which introduces subsidies for clean energy initiatives that will try to push China out of high-value-added manufacturing; and the prevention of access to Western markets for Chinese technology champions.

Fragmentation of the Global Economic Order

Fragmentation is about unstructured great power competition, principally coming from China and to a lesser extent from Russia, that challenge the existing distribution of international political power. Specifically, it is the U.S.-backed liberal international order that is being challenged as the distribution of international power has fundamentally changed. It is not surprising then that fragmentation is accompanied by regional powers, like Iran, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and the UAE, exhibiting more assertive foreign and economic policies. These countries are demanding more voice and input into regional affairs while challenging U.S. leadership. The rapprochement deal brokered by China between Iran and Saudi Arabia is exemplary of this type of rejection of the liberal international order. Fragmentation is less about disagreements over the legitimacy and role of global economic institutions—like, say, the IMF, World Bank, or the World Trade Organization—and more about what norms ought to underpin the international economic system.

No wonder then that many countries are resorting to more introverted economic policies that have a clear protectionist tone. This is not the death of globalization as some have sounded, but whether it is called decoupling, friendshoring, or deglobalization, this is a serious policy concern that will have negative global economic ramifications. Undoubtedly, the lurking of populist leaders in the background of many countries, including France, Germany, Italy, and the United States, has further contributed to a political discourse that favors nationalist economic policies and criticizes enhanced globalization. These are all troubling headwinds for the global economy and can result in less foreign direct investment and trade with the Arab world. An introverted West is not good for economic engagement in the Arab region and can invariably impact trade and investment flows with the region. These broader political trends cannot be ignored and continue to add to uncertainty and disruptions in the global economy.

Indeed, it has been suggested that trade, finance, and technology rules and standards may become an arena of further global contestation, which does not bode well for coordinating efforts to reverse anemic global growth. Where G20 coordination was a key political factor that got the global economy out of the doldrum of the 2008 international financial crisis, today's geoeconomic fragmentation portends the lack of political will to coordinate around finding solutions to low growth and productivity challenges. Economic challenges will only be aggravated by climate change, migration crises, and rising tides of populism. The future needs more coordination to address growing collective action problems. The Arab region benefits from strong linkages with a prosperous world economy and an international political system that can work amicably to find solutions to these forces pushing for economic fragmentation.

Oil Exporters Are More Likely to Be Insulated From Global Economic Disruptions Than Oil Importers

The future of oil prices is an important, albeit not the sole, determinant of the region's economic prospects. But it is unclear where oil prices are headed. Some have suggested that Gulf countries, and the oil and gas sector broadly, are poised to benefit from a return of capital and direct investment to the Arab region, but it is not clear that this will return to pre-pandemic levels. At the moment, oil prices are currently lower than they were when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. Europe had effectively met its oil and gas needs for 2022–2023 despite the sanctioning of Russian oil into Europe. It is not clear if the same could be said for 2023–2024.

If Europe is unable to meet its energy needs this upcoming winter and overall global supplies continue to contract, this could cause an increase in global oil prices, which would benefit many oil exporters and Arab economies. On the other hand, Europe may quickly move to replenish its oil and gas storage over the summer months, continue to develop terminals to receive liquefied natural gas (LNG) from international suppliers such as the United States and Qatar, and continue to move toward renewable energy and conservation.

Low demand for oil and a sputtering global economy does not bode well for the Arab region and will have a domino effect. However, the impact of these uncertainties on Arab economies and societies will be felt unequally both across the region and within countries. The Arab region can be divided into two broad types: resource-rich and resource-poor countries. Resource-rich countries include those of the Gulf Cooperation Council—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. They are labor-importing countries and will be the least hurt by both global economic disruptions and potential short-term drops in oil prices. Resource-poor countries are often labor-exporting countries like Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Sudan, and Tunisia, and they will hurt the most. Undoubtedly, the impact on countries that are already affected by natural disasters and conflict will be significant. Due to civil wars and the near demise of state institutions, Libya, Syria, and Yemen will continue to face severe challenges to reestablishing their economies.

Resource-Rich, Labor-Poor Countries

In the short to medium term, resource-rich, labor-importing countries are expected to generally fare better than other countries in the region despite low oil prices or global economic gyrations. These countries have decent levels of foreign exchange reserves, which will serve as an important defense against potential economic shocks. Moreover, they are among the world's wealthiest countries in terms of per capita income, and they have amassed sovereign wealth funds to weather global economic uncertainties. In response to the pandemic, for example, a number of these resource-rich Gulf countries had mitigated possible economic downturns by injecting capital into their economies and providing relief policies to their public and private sectors. Indeed, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have provided fiscal stimulus packages, although Bahrain and Oman have had less fiscal space to inject money into their economies. Nevertheless, resource-rich countries' relatively small populations allow them to have strong welfare policies, including free education, free healthcare, and high levels of public sector employment, which provide crucial social safety nets in the short to medium term to weather global economic storms and periodic drops in oil prices.

That said, while these resource-rich, labor-importing countries are on solid footing today, if oil supply and demand plateau as some suspect, the diversification away from oil remains illusory in these countries and they will face significant challenges in the long term if they continue to depend on oil for state revenue. Beyond ambitious government plans, such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and We the UAE 2031, Arab Gulf states have not successfully found ways to diversify away from oil, because the quality of their non-oil goods and services are often not competitive in international markets. Agriculture is not easy to stimulate in the Gulf's arid temperature, hence the region is still very dependent on food imports. Manufacturing has not been successful as Gulf countries tend to have small populations that are generally not skilled laborers, and labor prices are high. Tourism is also a widely used strategy in resource-rich countries including Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE as they attempt to find new sources of revenue, and it is an engine for economic development domestically. This in part has also motivated countries to invest in their national airline carriers to act as a hub and spoke for air travel, both internationally and to spur domestic tourism with mega-events like the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar. But when global economic growth sputters, international tourism and travel will also suffer because tourism depends on high disposable incomes and business travel to initiate and promote business ties and development. Lastly, despite attempts and ambitious plans to create high-tech knowledge economies through direct support of research and development in universities and state-owned companies, the Gulf region does not have strong indigenous skilled workers and researchers to make this turn to knowledge economies.

Resource-Poor, Labor-Abundant Countries

Resource-poor, labor-abundant countries are also highly impacted by the price of oil. Though they do not export oil, they receive workers' remittances from their nationals living in oil-exporting countries. Egypt has among the largest number of individuals working and living abroad, returning home approximately $31.5 billion in 2021, and the vast majority of these expatriate workers live and work in the oil-rich Arab Gulf region. These workers' remittances are usually sent in hard currency such as U.S. dollars into the Egyptian banking system and are counted toward the country's foreign reserves. Other Arab countries have far fewer workers than Egypt in the Gulf, but their workers' remittances from the Gulf make up a significant share of their countries' GDP. Averaging the past thirty years, for example, these workers' remittances accounted for 17 percent of Jordan's GDP, 14 percent of Lebanon's, and 7 percent of Morocco's.

Workers' remittances are valuable to these resource-poor Arab countries' banking and financial systems, not only because they inject hard currency but also because they stimulate financial services in the receiving country. There is some academic evidence to suggest that workers' remittances can promote local development, investment, stock market activities, and GDP growth. Early studies suggested workers' remittances mainly met the consumption needs of workers' families, but lately there has been greater recognition that these financial transfers can often be used to spur investment in receiving countries. While a high proportion of workers' remittances are still used to meet household expenses, an increased amount is being diverted to invest in education, real estate, and small enterprise. If oil prices decline significantly and if the global economy takes a significant downturn, these workers' remittances will decline with negative impacts for the resource-poor Arab countries. So, not only will oil exporting countries be negatively affected, but their partner countries will be as well—albeit to different extents.

Many resource-poor Arab countries, such as Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia, are also prime international tourist destinations. Egypt's antiquities, Morocco's cultural heritage, and Tunisian beaches are great attractions for international tourists. These countries heavily rely on Western tourists, particularly from Europe, which further subjects them to broader gyrations in the global economy. In fact, one of the largest dips in tourism in the Middle East and North Africa throughout the past twenty years was during the 2008 international financial crisis, reinforcing the point that tourism in this region is highly associated with broader global economic health. Of course, regional conflict and insecurity can also have important impacts on tourism. Lastly, rising populism in Western countries and the potential for growing global fragmentation can also have a negative effect on country branding and dissuade tourists from visiting the region.

Another challenge facing many Arab countries, both resource-rich and resource-poor, is their overall fiscal mix with shallow tax bases. Other than resorting to value-added taxes levied on consumption of goods and services, there is relatively less government revenue coming from income taxes or corporate taxes. Relying heavily on consumption taxes is a regressive policy that greatly impacts the poor more than the wealthy. Reliance on taxes on consumption goods when the region may already be suffering from global economic slowdowns or gyrations and when oil prices are low will only add to people's household bills and increase their ire of governments for perceived economic mismanagement, corruption, and lack of economic opportunities. As the global economic situation worsens, the inequity within countries will be revealed and aggravate already weak social contracts throughout the Arab region. The impact of global economic disruptions on the most vulnerable people within the Arab region cannot be ignored.

Vulnerable Communities Will Be Hurt Most

Within Arab countries, global economic uncertainty and anemic growth disproportionately hurts the most vulnerable. The distribution of wealth has not improved enough to rid the Middle East and North Africa of the unenviable record of being the most unequal of all other regions. In fact, in the past decade, youth unemployment in the MENA region has been nearly double the world average and is increasing at a pace 2.5 times faster than the rest of the world. Unemployment levels in the Arab region have continued to rise since the onset of the pandemic. In 2021, the unemployment rate in the Arab region, excluding high-income, resource-rich countries, was 11.4 percent for the overall population and 29.4 percent for youth (aged fifteen to twenty-four). Both indicators are worse in Arab countries than in any other region.

People working in the informal sector are highly vulnerable, particularly those who benefit from tourism and other economic activities that would be deterred if economies collapse. The demographic reality in the region means that more youth are entering the labor market every year with increasingly weak employment prospects, among the lowest in the world. Youth in the Arab region are three times more likely to be unemployed compared to adults, making them highly vulnerable to economic shocks. Youth (under thirty years old) account for 55 percent of the Arab region's population, compared to 36 percent in the OECD, making this a larger segment of the population than in many other countries. The young demographic profile is a political issue because youth often have high expectations to start their adult lives with job opportunities. Yet, when these opportunities are not available and they lose hope, their societal frustrations can lead to political and social protests. Indeed, polling in the region shows that Arab youth are among the most frustrated with the political and economic situations in their countries and more often want to emigrate. It is often the youngest and most educated who want to emigrate, which has a negative impact on the preservation of talented people in the region and contributes to the region's brain drain. Women in the region surpass men in post-secondary education and yet are more likely to be unemployed, representing yet another loss of human capital, talent, and ingenuity to Arab economies.

In addition to unemployment, the Arab region has a serious food insecurity issue due to high wheat and fertilizer prices because of Russia's war against Ukraine. Egypt, Lebanon, and Yemen are especially dependent on wheat imports from Russia and Ukraine. Türkiye had brokered a temporary deal to allow grain shipments through, but the deal is set to expire in May 2023. And as Russian President Vladimir Putin's regime is expected to double down on war against Ukraine, there may be less room for compromise and a return to restricted shipment of food grains. This will increase the number of people affected by food insecurity in Egypt and Lebanon, where food costs are soaring. Unsurprisingly, both countries signed agreements with the IMF, as have Jordan, Sudan, and Tunisia. Moreover, many Arab governments' fiscal capacity has been limited, sovereign debt levels are high, and IMF agreements often add restrictions on government spending as the terms of receiving funding. All of these factors further limit governments' abilities to spend on food and energy subsidies and to provide other social safety nets. Without targeted social protections, social inequality will worsen and the prospect of social unrest will increase.

Egypt, with a population over 100 million, is especially troubled since previous instances of soaring debt and economic hardship have produced protests in the streets. Under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Egypt has undergone significant building of and investment in large infrastructure projects, although many are unproductive vanity projects. The government financed these projects through debt and loans, and when money left the region to Western capital markets that offered higher interest rate returns, Egypt was saddled with a large debt load. Egypt has had to devalue its currency, in some cases upon the insistence of the IMF, making it very difficult for consumers reliant on imported food and other items. The impact on the poorest Egyptians is significant, since bread, a staple food that accounts for a large portion of their nutritional intake, is too expensive for them.

Similarly, Lebanon was in economic distress before the pandemic, and its situation has continued to worsen as the banking system and its currency have nearly collapsed while its debt load has increased beyond manageable levels. Today, the average Lebanese person has seen their bank savings, pensions, and local wages dwindle in purchasing value as the Lebanese pound plummets, despite an IMF agreement in 2022. In a country that imports 80 percent of its basic needs, prices have skyrocketed beyond the Lebanese people's reach. Many imported food items depended on government subsidies that the state can no longer afford to provide. Global inflation of food prices has worsened Lebanon's food security. In addition to food, Lebanon imports the fuel needed to generate its electricity, and the international volatility in oil prices has worsened the public provision of energy, making the domestic economic situation worse and unpredictable.

Both Egypt and Lebanon's short-to-medium-term economic prospects are quite worrisome. In the past, they have both leaned on foreign backers for financial support, both in the West and in the Arab Gulf, but these countries are currently facing their own economic challenges and have been less willing to shore up ailing regional laggards. Arab Gulf countries have a growing sense of nationalism to advance their own economies and do not feel the same obligation to financially back and support fellow Arab countries that they once did. Moreover, many Arab Gulf countries are undergoing ambitious national projects, such as Saudi Arabia's new smart cities called NEOM and THE LINE, as well as the skyscraper-like supercity Mukaab. Such projects require significant financial resources, and there is less political and public appetite to sacrifice these projects in the name of Arab nationalism or sympathy with resource-poor Arab governments. This is not good for Egypt and Lebanon, and to a lesser extent Jordan, which have expected their pivotal role in regional politics to garner them more support.

Conclusion

The future of the Arab region is uncertain, and there are many worrying trends, such as the potential decline in oil prices and tourism, as well as rising food prices, that will impact the economic well-being of the average Arab citizen. No country will be spared, but some countries will be better able to withstand the potential for anemic economic growth and global economic disruptions. Resource-poor countries in the Arab world will likely feel the global and regional economic challenges most negatively. There will be a huge need for external financial support for many countries, be it from the international community or resource-rich Arab countries. Unfortunately, however, the global and regional appetite to coordinate to fire up the global economic engines and to help poorer Arab countries with financial assistance will be low, which will ultimately harm the most vulnerable people in the Arab region—its youth, women, and the poor. As the past has shown, this is a recipe for sociopolitical unrest.

CHAPTER 2

The Hurdles of Energy Transitions in Arab States

Manal Shehabi

The global energy transition to mitigate climate change initially entailed reducing and phasing out fossil fuel consumption and inefficient fossil fuel subsidies. That position reflected the fact that fossil fuels have been the largest contributor to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and, thus, have been driving climate change. Recently, the narrative has expanded to include a variety of energy transition pathways. These include not only renewable energy but also new pathways such as net-zero emissions systems of hydrocarbons, decarbonized industries, and hydrogen.[1]

Arab states are directly impacted by energy transitions. They are home to some of the largest global reserves and the economies most overdependent on hydrocarbon rents (in the form of export revenue in exporting economies and foreign remittances in importing economies from nationals working in exporting states).[2] Thus, reduced global demand for hydrocarbons has long represented an existential threat to the region, especially for wealthy hydrocarbon-exporting Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states—namely Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

Yet, the expansion of energy transition pathways has put energy transition projects increasingly center stage in the region, both in GCC countries and in some poorer hydrocarbon importers—namely Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia.

Prior to COP26 in 2021, hydrocarbon-dependent Gulf states resisted the energy transition, winning them the reputation of climate obstructionists. Yet in an unprecedented shift, these states have been joining pro-climate endeavors since then. Around the time of COP26, the UAE pledged to reach net-zero emissions by 2050. Net-zero pledges by Saudi Arabia and Bahrain by 2060 followed. In 2022, during COP27, Kuwait and Oman followed suit with pledges by 2050. These states, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have positioned themselves as leaders in providing clean energy globally with both expertise in hydrocarbons and a potential advantage in renewables and energy transitions. GCC states announced ambitious renewable energy targets, plans for carbon capture and reduction technology, and widescale decarbonization targets, among other initiatives. Some observers have welcomed such GCC announcements as major advancements of the climate agenda, while others viewed them as greenwashing. So why and how could a quintessential threat to one of the region's main sources of socioeconomic development become the epicenter of its economic transformation and sustainability plans? And can energy transitions provide a transformative shift in energy and economic systems following decades of reliance on hydrocarbon exports for socioeconomic development?

GCC states are driving regional energy transitions, and their responses to the possibilities and potential threats of accelerating global energy transitions could engender significant transformation in their energy, economic, political, and social structures.

Although global energy transitions have emerged as a climate solution, GCC states' motivations in pursuing them are primarily economic. Specifically, these transitions safeguard hydrocarbon exports while generating new export revenue necessary to maintain the political equilibrium and the role of the state and to fund socioeconomic development. Consequently, domestic energy transitions (like renewable power and energy efficiency) are deprioritized, while pro-export projects (like hydrogen and carbon capture technology) are accelerated. These developments are transforming GCC economies from hydrocarbon to energy exporters while maintaining hydrocarbons at the center of their economies, without changing existing economic rigidities. This transformation perpetuates current economic policy regimes and their associated challenges—an unsustainable situation that threatens the viability of the energy transitions. An integrative energy, economic, industrial, and regulatory policy reform is thus required.

Energy Transitions: Trends and Ambitions

Notwithstanding differences (in resource endowment, politics, economic wealth, and other areas), GCC states share similar energy and economic structures, characterized by overdependence on hydrocarbons in energy usage and exports. Hydrocarbons represent over 95 percent of the region's energy consumption. In 2021, hydrocarbon export revenue's contribution to GDP ranged from 40 percent to more than half in each GCC state, while hydrocarbon exports contributed between 55 percent (in the UAE) and 92 percent (in Kuwait) of exports. Importantly, hydrocarbon exports are also the primary contributor to government revenue; in 2021, they contributed 60 percent of government revenue in Saudi Arabia, 63 percent in Bahrain, 74 percent in Oman, and between 80 and 84 percent in the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait.[3]

Initial Energy Transition and Mitigation Measures

Energy transition projects emerged under the umbrella of economic diversification, detailed in each GCC country's grandiose, ambitious, multiyear economic transformation plans known as "Visions."[4] They include targets for renewable energy capacity, ranging from as low as 15 percent in Kuwait by 2030 to 50 percent in the UAE by 2050 (see table 1). Yet in 2022, the share of renewable energy in power generation still hovered at less than 1 percent, except in the UAE where it reached 7 percent, also below target. The UAE also adopted nuclear energy to provide nearly 25 percent of its electricity needs.

Table 1. Installed Renewable Energy Capacity in the GCC Compared With National Targets

Country	Share of Renewable Energy in Total Electricity Capacity	National Renewable Energy Targets
Hydrocarbon-Exporting GCC Economies		
Bahrain	0.1%	5% by 2025 and 10% by 2035 of electricity generation
Kuwait	0.4%	15% by 2030 of electricity generation
Qatar	0.1%	200–500 MW of solar energy by 2020
Oman	0.4%	10% by 2025 of electricity generation
Saudi Arabia	0.2%	3.45 GW by 2020; 9.56 GW by 2023 (10% of cap), and 30% of electricity generation from renewables, nuclear, and others
UAE	7.0%	Abu Dhabi 7% of capacity by 2020; Dubai 7% of electricity generation by 2020; Ras al-Khaimah 20–30% clean energy by 2040; total UAE 27% clean energy by 2021, 44% of capacity by 2050
Hydrocarbon-Importing economies		
Egypt	20%	42% by 2035 of electricity generation
Jordan	15%	35% by 2035 of electricity generation
Morocco	34%	42% by 2020 and 52% by 2050 of installed capacity
Tunisia	8%	30% by 2035 of installed capacity

Source: Author's calculations using data from the International Renewable Energy Agency (2018, 2023); national official documents of visions and development plans in GCC countries; U.S. International Trade Administration; and the *Jordan Times*.

Moreover, GCC states enacted energy pricing reforms. Notwithstanding preexisting political pressures, it was not until the collapse of the oil price in mid-2014 and the ensuing substantial declines in government revenue that GCC policymakers implemented a fundamental shift in economic policy. They reduced energy subsidies to ease fiscal pressures and meet urgent economic diversification needs. GCC states also announced energy efficiency targets, but opportunities remain underdeveloped especially as policies incentivizing efficiency remain limited.

The Dawn of Hydrogen and Carbon Reduction Technology

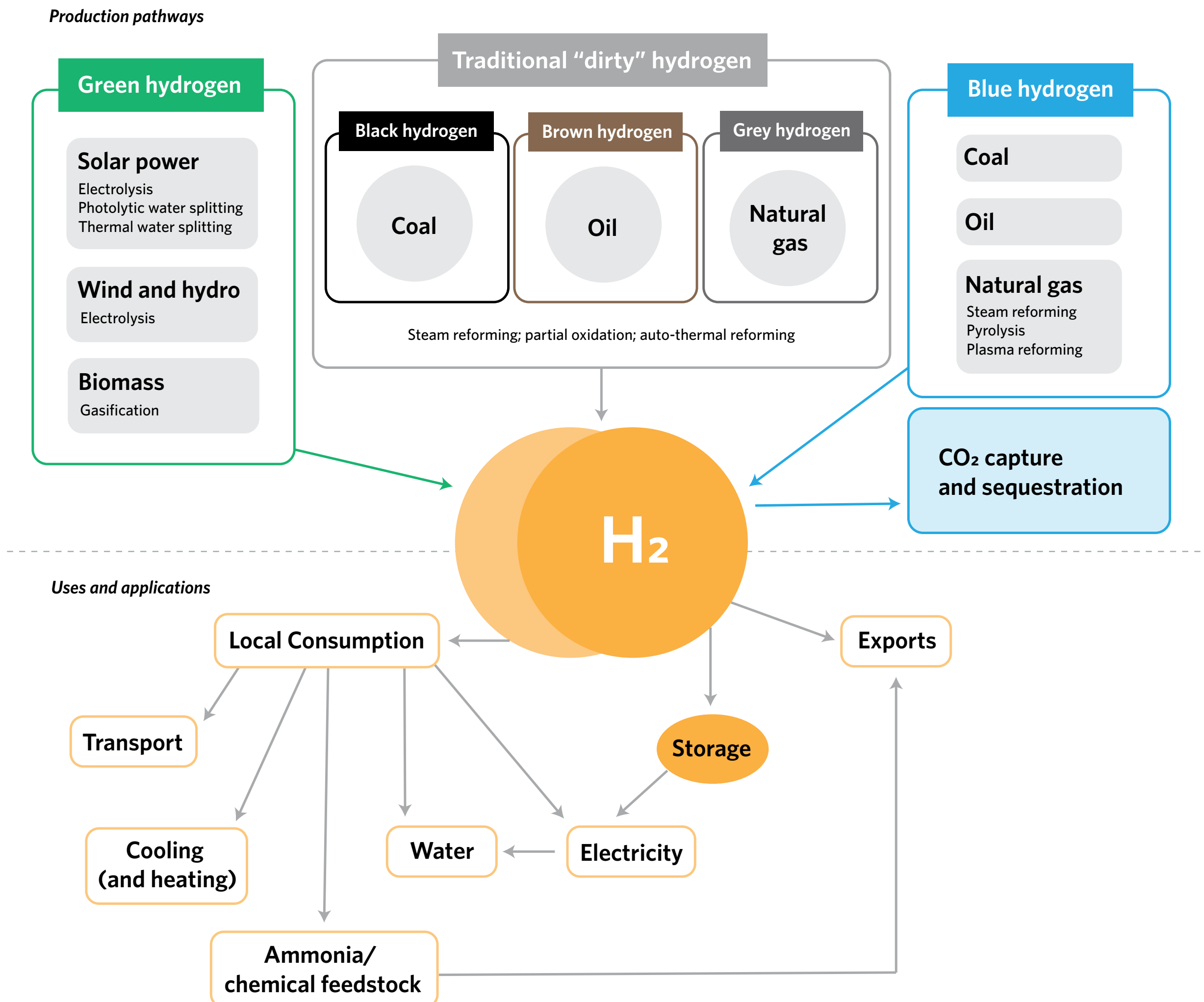
GCC states' economic sustainability was further threatened by post-pandemic economic challenges, which exacerbated existing pressures from the accelerating global energy transitions. In 2020 and 2021, GCC states announced ambitious energy transition projects, including hydrogen and carbon reduction technologies. These projects were then complemented by ambitious climate targets and net-zero emissions pledges, with Saudi Arabia and the UAE declaring clean energy leadership positions.

Two primary features characterize GCC states' energy transitions and net-zero targets.

First, the targets center around the ongoing production, consumption, and exportation of hydrocarbons, but with a twist: the hydrocarbons are low emissions thanks to the application of carbon capture mechanisms. This is explicitly stated in the Nationally Determined Contributions submissions to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (which are a government obligation under the Paris Agreement) from GCC states. It is also evident in Saudi Arabia's Circular Carbon Economy (CCE) National Program,[5] endorsed as the cornerstone of its decarbonization, carbon reduction, and recycling solutions. The CCE framework encompasses the production of hydrocarbons and new energy sources, most notably clean hydrogen and heavy industries that are difficult to electrify (known as hard-to-abate sectors) using carbon capture, utilization, and storage (CCUS) technology. Across the Gulf, nature-based solutions are highlighted over reducing hydrocarbons consumption and production: initiatives include the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company's planting of mangroves and Saudi Arabia's Green Initiative and Middle East Green Initiative to plant 10 billion in Saudi Arabia and 40 billion trees in the Middle East. However, CCUS technology is currently unviable, unlike carbon capture and storage (CCS) technology. Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have accelerated investments in CCS facilities, which currently capture approximately 12 percent of global carbon dioxide captured annually. Hydrocarbon production is a priority for other hydrocarbon exporters of the Net-Zero Producers Forum (created in 2021 by Norway, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United States).

Second, clean hydrogen projects intended for exports are at the heart of GCC energy transition plans (and those of some Arab hydrocarbon-importing states). Hydrogen does not emit GHG emissions when burned, and thus it has emerged globally as an important potential pathway for climate change mitigation, energy security, and industrial decarbonization. Currently, around 96 percent of the hydrogen used globally as industrial feedstock is produced from hydrocarbons in processes that emit high GHGs. However, emissions can be reduced in two ways. The first involves the application of CCS/CCUS technology in hydrogen production from hydrocarbons (known as blue hydrogen). Alternatively, emissions can be reduced when hydrogen is produced by electrolyzing water with emissions-free renewable energy (known as green hydrogen) (see figure 1).[6]

Figure 1. Primary Hydrogen Pathways and Applications



Source: Shehabi, M., "The Case of Hydrogen in the Gulf States: Opportunities and Challenges." Opportunities and Challenges, Power Point Presentation, Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, April 2021, https://www.oxfordenergy.org/publications/the-case-of-hydrogen-in-the-gulf-states-opportunities-and-challenges/

Clean (blue or green) hydrogen represents potentially large export and economic diversification opportunities for Arab states. Gulf states have a comparative advantage in blue hydrogen thanks to their well-known comparative advantage and expertise in the hydrocarbon sector and established trade routes and markets. Arab states generally have a potential comparative advantage in renewable energy, which can translate to a potential comparative advantage in green hydrogen as well. While the future role of clean hydrogen in the global energy system is uncertain,[7] it could be large, with the potential market for clean hydrogen and its derivatives (such as ammonia, which has hydrogen molecules) estimated at US$400–$700 billion. Of that, GCC states could potentially make $70–$200 billion.

GCC states had long lagged behind Europe, advanced Asian economies, Australia, and the United States in adopting hydrogen strategies. Starting in 2019, however, they began announcing hydrogen strategies and ambitious large-scale hydrogen projects. Notably, Saudi Arabia plans to be a leading green hydrogen producer with its $500 billion megaproject, NEOM, intended to produce 1.2 million tonnes of green-hydrogen-based ammonia per year. Saudi Aramco also announced plans to capture the lion's share of blue hydrogen demand by 2025, and it successfully exported the world's first blue ammonia to Japan in 2020 and to South Korea in 2022.

The UAE announced plans in 2019 to produce blue and green hydrogen, and Dubai Electricity and Water Authority along with Siemens Energy launched the region's first industrial-scale green hydrogen project in 2021. Driven by its limited hydrocarbon reserves relative to other GCC states, Oman also aims to transform its economy to a hydrogen economy. Its national hydrogen economy strategy was adopted in 2020. In 2020 and 2021, Oman's oil company OQ signed concessions and agreements through joint ventures, establishing the Hyport Duqm Project to develop green hydrogen and ammonia plants in the Special Economic Zone at Duqm. The $2.5 billion facility is expected to produce 2,200 million tonnes of green ammonia per day. In its 2020 White Paper Towards a National Hydrogen Strategy, Kuwait signaled its intentions for clean hydrogen production and has been shown to have the potential to produce green hydrogen competitively. Qatar, the last GCC state to join the global hydrogen market, announced in 2022 intentions to build the world's largest blue ammonia plant, Ammonia-7—a $1.156 billion facility with a planned production capacity of 1.2 million tonnes per year. Additional projects and agreements are likely to continue to emerge in the near future, especially given foreign interest (especially from Europe) in investing in and importing the region's green hydrogen production.

The aforementioned two features suggest that the ultimate goals of GCC states' net-zero targets are to safeguard and increase hydrocarbon export levels—a goal consistent with statements in Saudi Arabia's Nationally Determined Contributions submission.

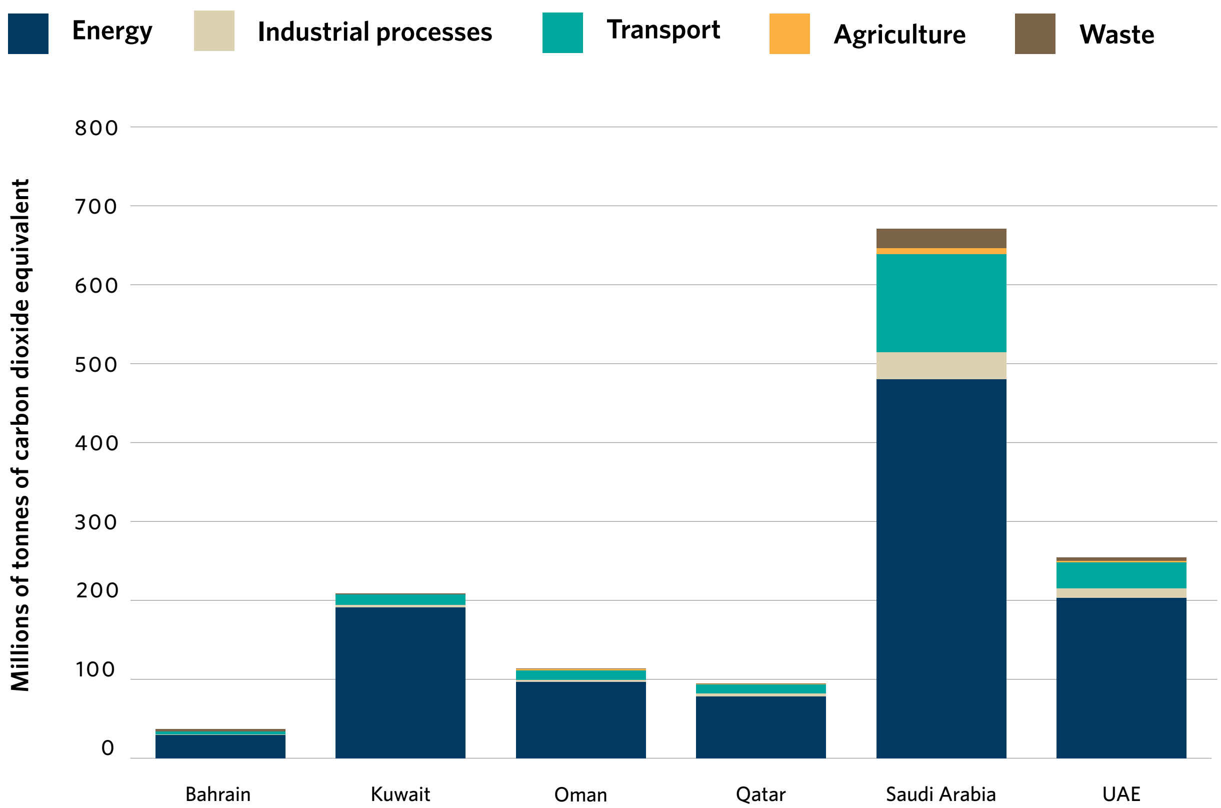
Energy Transitions: An Economic, not Environmental, Response

The main driver for the acceleration of energy transition pathways in GCC states (and Arab states in general) is economic: to safeguard hydrocarbon exports and derive new exports that are necessary to maintain the role of the state and drive socioeconomic development.

Indeed, energy transitions are part of much-needed environmental solutions. Situated in one of the warmest regions with environmentally constrained and arid geography, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Mediterranean regions are among the most impacted by climate change.[8] Yet they are most impacted by emissions from other regions; MENA contributed only 5 percent of global emissions in 2021.[9]

Over the last decade, however, emissions in Gulf countries have accelerated at an alarming pace. GCC states lead the region in emissions and energy consumption especially in energy (hydrocarbon and power) and transport sectors (as shown in figure 2). High emissions are driven by high production facilitated by very low production costs, rising water desalination and cooling requirements, and excessive energy consumption (both industrial and household).

Figure 2. Greenhouse Gas Emissions in GCC States by Source, 2018



Source: Author's representation based on data from the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, https://di.unfccc.int/time_series.

Note: 2018 was the most recent sectoral data available at the time of writing.

Similar trends emerge on a per capita level. Economic policies that distribute enviable energy subsidies and welfare measures have fostered overconsumption and a very carbon-intensive lifestyle. GCC countries consistently rank in the world's fifteen-highest energy consumers, averaging 10,066 kilograms of oil equivalent per capita (based on World Bank data), more than double the average per capita consumption of OECD countries. GCC states have some of the world's highest emissions per capita, consistently ranking among the top ten per-capita emitters (see table 2).

Table 2. Arab States Per Capita Carbon Dioxide Emissions Compared to Other Countries (2021)

Global rank	Country	CO_2 emissions per capita (tonnes per capita)
1	Qatar	35.59
2	Bahrain	26.66
3	Kuwait	24.97
4	Trinidad and Tobago	23.68
5	Brunei	23.53
6	United Arab Emirates	21.79
7	New Caledonia	19.10
8	Saudi Arabia	18.70
9	Oman	17.92
10	Australia	15.09
11	Mongolia	15.03
12	United States	14.86
15	Canada	14.30
20	Russia	12.10
82	Iraq	4.26
92	Algeria	3.99
127	Jordan	2.30
128	Egypt	2.28
139	India	1.93
140	Morocco	1.90

Source: Author analysis based on data from the Global Carbon Project.

Nevertheless, environment sustainability does not prominently feature in GCC vision statements (with only Oman having environment-specific targets). And GCC countries were slow in adopting net-zero targets that center hydrocarbons. Instead, economic considerations are motivating energy transitions in the Arab world. These considerations are key for hydrocarbon importers—namely Egypt,[10] Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia. Abundant renewable energy sources offer energy security and promise avenues for new exports, especially of green hydrogen and derivates to Europe.

For hydrocarbon exporters in the Gulf, net-zero targets are presented as part of economic transformation as a pragmatic response to the inevitability of expected future declines in global hydrocarbon demand. This is why investments and advancements in projects that expand exports (such as clean hydrogen and CCS/CCUS technology) accelerate at an impressive speed, while domestic energy transitions (especially renewables and energy efficiency) are slow.

Energy exports are necessary in the absence of diversified sources of government revenue, but they are also important for maintaining the prevailing political economy of a welfare-based state that depends on distributing hydrocarbon rents.[11] The political economy (often called the "social contract") emerged as massive windfalls of oil and gas export rents offered Gulf states key economic advantages. This was especially true after the Arab oil embargo and subsequent oil shock of 1973–1974, coupled with very low production costs owing to geological advantages and very liberal trade policies for goods and services, capital, and labor. As a result, GCC states achieved unprecedented socioeconomic development and per capita incomes. Hydrocarbon export rents funded the distribution of enviable welfare redistributive measures to citizens and local industries, including energy and other subsidies and guaranteed public sector employment to citizens with generous salaries and benefits. These policies secured general political and regime stability (despite historical local and geopolitical tensions) and military support from abroad.[12]

Prioritizing hydrocarbon exports dominated economic policy and was essential for socioeconomic development and the political economy in the Gulf. Diversification plans were discussed on paper for decades, but the main deliberate diversification policy choice was global asset accumulation in sovereign wealth funds (SWFs) along with, ironically, expansion of the hydrocarbon sector including downstream activities. The latter capture additional value across the whole supply chain but do not change the economic structure or the reliance on hydrocarbons with their volatile prices.

The depth of economic challenges of hydrocarbon dependence became evident following the oil price collapse mid-2014 and the ensuing fiscal challenges. Gulf states implemented various energy and tax reforms—most notably, the imposition of a value-added tax in historically tax-free states and the reduction of energy subsidies. These reforms have been politically contentious to varying degrees, as they threatened the distribution of wealth and resultant political equilibrium. Despite these reforms, subsidies and welfare distribution measures prevail, especially to private oligopolistic firms, and the state holds its central role in the economy. Energy transition projects are driven mostly by state-owned entities, and private industries expect subsidies to implement decarbonization.[13] Another serious challenge is generating employment, especially for the youth who represent more than 50 percent of the region's population. In the GCC, this challenge has serious implications for the labor market: the bloated public sector is a fiscal liability, and expatriate workers occupy jobs that many locals do not want and make up the majority of workers (from 74 percent in Saudi Arabia in 2022 to near 94 percent in the case of Qatar in 2022).

Ultimately, energy transition projects in GCC states only transform their economies from hydrocarbon exporters to energy exporters, with hydrocarbons remaining at the center of the economy. As a result, the existing political economy and role of the state are preserved, without a corresponding transformation in economic structure or economic rigidities.

The future remains uncertain: clean energy investments dropped following the COVID-19 pandemic, and upstream activities resumed with the rise of hydrocarbon prices and general demand following the war in Ukraine. At the same time, hydrogen and CCUS projects are dialed up but lack necessary investments and technology. But the region's sustainability necessitates energy and economic transformation.

Challenges

Notwithstanding ambitious targets, the region, including wealthy GCC states, lags in energy transition projects. Arab states generally and GCC states specifically face fundamental challenges that hinder energy transitions and endanger regional environmental and economic sustainability. Chief among these challenges are the often-ignored economic rigidities of procyclical fiscal policy, an oligopolistic private sector, limited technology and renewable energy infrastructure, and weak regulations.

Oligopolistic Private Sector

A key challenge in Gulf economies is the pervasiveness of private sector oligopolies coupled with the existence of large, publicly owned companies; this situation greatly limits the expansion of nonhydrocarbon productive sectors necessary for economic diversification. The majority of nonenergy sectors are dominated by a few companies (as evidenced in data presented in table 3) and reap substantial rewards of any expansion in oil price rents.

It is well accepted in economic theory that the pervasiveness of oligopolies limits competition. Oligopolistic firms price their products with a markup above average costs, causing a large part of the current economic efficiency to be captured by their rents. Sustained rents detract from growth-enhancing innovation and creative destruction, thereby hampering economic efficiency, competitiveness, and growth. In resource economies, the pervasiveness of oligopolies poses another challenge: it limits the expansion of non-oil productive capacity needed for export diversification.

Economics literature explains the dynamics of resource-dependent economies as an example of Dutch disease. This phenomenon refers to instances when an export boom in natural resources (following rises in their prices) leads to a significant appreciation of the nominal (and real) exchange rate (or inflation in countries with fixed exchange rates regimes). The appreciating real exchange rate renders nonresource exports relatively more expensive in international markets. Capital and labor move toward the resource sector and away from nonresource tradables, while the rise in incomes causes a secondary boom in nontraded services and imports.[14] Busts (following declines in resource export prices) have the opposite effect. They render nonresource exports more competitive in international markets. Thus, theoretically, reverse Dutch disease dynamics could be advantageous to nonresource exports or even reverse the pattern of trade, if large enough.[15]

Table 3. Listed Firms' Concentration in Kuwait, Oman, and Saudi Arabia *(most recently available data)*

Sector (as listed in the stock exchange)	Total number of listed firms	Percentage of total firms owning 60% of industry's capital	Percentage of total firms owning 80% of industry's capital
Kuwait			
Oil refining and gas	8	38%	63%
Chemical and mining	5	40%	40%
Light manufacturing	7	14%	14%
Telecommunications	3	33%	33%
Construction and transportation	36	14%	36%
Financial services (banks, insurance, other services)	72	8%	14%
Other services (real estate, technology, healthcare, other)	75	8%	15%
Oman			
Services	239	2%	8%
Industrial	88	15%	31%
Financial	140	18%	29%
Saudi Arabia			
Capital goods	13	46%	62%
Energy	5	20%	20%
Financial (banks, diversified financials, insurance)	47	9%	17%
Light manufacturing (consumer durables and apparel, food and beverages)	18	11%	17%
Materials	42	7%	19%
Real estate (development and management, REITs)	28	18%	32%
Services and retail (healthcare, commercial and professional services, IT, consumer services, media, and so on)	39	18%	41%
Telecommunications	4	25%	25%
Transportation	5	60%	80%
Utilities	2	50%	50%

Source: Author's analysis using data from the Kuwait Stock Exchange (2016), Omani Stock Exchange (2023), and the Saudi Stock Exchange (2020).

Yet in highly specialized Gulf states, oligopolies' pervasiveness yields results that are contrary to Dutch disease expectations. Economic efficiency during booms and busts is largely reduced because rents are captured by the oligopolies in the public and private sectors. Oligopolies capture rents during booms and busts owing to:

- access to subsidies to expand diversification (subsidies that persist despite energy price reforms in the GCC);
- access to expatriate labor with flexible contracts and lower wages than national labor; and
- limited regulation of oligopolistic collusion or pricing.

The dynamics are as follows. When oil prices are high (as in 2022), the rise in export rents expand economic activity (including output and employment) and profits in the energy sector, investments in SWFs as well as nontraded services and rent redistribution payments to the public and industries (through a procyclical fiscal policy). Consequently, terms of trade improvements are captured as higher rents by only a small number of firms in a few oligopolistic industries,[16] as explained above. But there is an almost nonexistent deindustrialization effect. These dynamics also render efficient and high-return investments in the domestic economy difficult. Busts, by contrast, result in the opposite. Oligopolistic firms' markups decline as a result, but they do not expand their exports even though they are more competitive with the depreciating real exchange rate. Instead, they cut costs by reducing expatriate labor employment at relatively low costs and without large repercussions for unemployment. Thus, the overall result is little to no expansion of nonhydrocarbon exports.

Thus, in the existing economic policy regime with low competition regulation, excess hydrocarbon export rents do not translate to meaningful export diversification. Despite private firms' rising participation (through foreign direct investment and joint ventures) in energy projects in GCC states, their oligopolistic nature will limit growth, competition, and economic efficiency. Changing these patterns in a way that can distribute economic efficiency gains economy-wide requires the implementation of private sector regulations, pro-competition microeconomic reform, and industrial policy reform.

Procyclical Fiscal Policies

Exacerbating effects of the pervasiveness of oligopolies in the Gulf states is their procyclical (rather than countercyclical) policy regime adopted for managing hydrocarbon price shocks. In fiscal procyclicality, government expenditures expand during economic booms and contract during busts. Such tendencies are often worsened by domestic macroeconomic and political instability. In GCC states with low oligopolistic regulation, fiscal procyclicality is problematic. It exacerbates the underlying business cycles and harms economic and energy diversification plans.

During booms, procyclical government expenditures expand hydrocarbon outputs and exports, SWF savings, and welfare redistribution payments—many of which are wrapped as business incentives, grants, or tax credits. Thus, they expand mainly nontraded oligopolies' markup, as described above. Further, transferring the windfall to private agents to induce them to undertake additional investments is likely to fail owing to limited information about the duration of the windfall.

Busts see a procyclical reduction in noncommitted expenditures (such as energy transition and economic diversification funds) because the committed expenditures (such as public sector wages) are very rigid and very large (50 percent or more of current expenditures in the Gulf). Oligopolistic firms respond to reduced local demand and procyclical expenditures by reducing output and releasing expatriate labor, rather than expanding into the international market. This flexibility in the expatriate labor market has been a key economic adjustment mechanism that acts as a cushion to the economy, along with other adjustment mechanisms (primarily investments in or fiscal commitments to maintain contributions to SWFs, which sterilize oil revenue and offer savings used during busts and fiscal deficits). The overall effects are limited to nonexisting expansion of nonhydrocarbon exports.

In the current economic regime, GCC states cannot be countercyclical even when they implement seemingly countercyclical policies. This was evidenced following the COVID-19 pandemic when large declines in hydrocarbon export revenue in the GCC were accompanied by expanded expenditures and COVID-19 relief packages. These packages seem countercyclical, but the potential gains of a countercyclical fiscal policy could not be realized because they were consumption-based. They eased consumption shocks and mitigated inflationary and unemployment effects but without expanding production nor supply nor reducing profits to oligopolistic firms. This is a powerful, evidence-based insight that further explains the GCC states' limited diversification to date.

Lack of Available CCS/CCUS Technology and Low R&D

Realizing GCC states' decarbonization, net-zero, and hydrogen ambitions alongside consuming and exporting hydrocarbons hinges on the availability of CCS and CCUS technology. Yet it is currently unviable and requires significant R&D investments. In the GCC, public sector involvement in the energy sector could support R&D activities to bolster the sector's technological readiness to achieve initial market penetration. However, in 2021, and despite large R&D investments in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, R&D spending made up low shares of GDP in GCC countries: Bahrain (0.1 percent), Kuwait (0.2 percent), Oman (0.4 percent), Qatar (0.5 percent), Saudi Arabia (0.5 percent), and the UAE (1.45 percent). These shares were lower than the 3–4 percent average in advanced economies with similar per capita income levels and lower than hydrocarbon exporters Australia (1.8 percent), Norway (2.3 percent), and the United States (3.45 percent). The GCC states' contribution to global hydrogen and low-carbon energy R&D has been negligible to date.

Recent announcements by Saudi Arabia and the UAE to invest in carbon reduction technologies could signal a potential improvement in the underlying ecosystem to fund technological developments, especially in CCS and CCUS.[17] Yet, given low R&D investments, absent acquiring the required technology, Gulf states will not be able to achieve their energy transition and net-zero targets.

Limited Renewable Energy Infrastructure Due to Lack of Economic Motivations

Another challenge is limited renewable energy infrastructure, without which domestic decarbonization and green hydrogen export plans cannot be realized. Despite variations among them, Arab countries are behind on their renewable energy targets, which are intended for domestic power generation only (see table 1). The Gulf states have the financial resources to undertake such projects. They also have a potential comparative advantage in renewable energy, owing to some of the world's best solar and wind resources and some of the lowest costs for renewable energy production. Yet in 2021, renewable energy capacity was significantly lower than targets for domestic energy needs, generating 1 percent of electricity in GCC states except the UAE, where it reached 7 percent.[18] These shares are also behind those of Egypt (20 percent), Jordan (26 percent), and Morocco (37 percent). Slow development in renewable infrastructure for domestic needs also raises the question about renewable infrastructure required for achieving pro-export projects. To meet hydrogen targets alone, GCC countries would need to increase their renewable energy capacity by an estimated sixtyfold (an additional 40–60 gigawatts).

Numerous reasons have been cited for the lack of renewable energy infrastructure. These include technical barriers (such as difficulties with grid access, confidence in new technology, and availability of a skilled workforce), institutional deficiencies that lack clear mandates and planning capacity, historic subsidies, and limited incentives, regulations, and enforcement.

Another reason largely absent from the literature is the underlying economics: renewable energy projects are a net cost for hydrocarbon-dependent states and generate an undesirable reduction in overall export revenue. Although renewable energy is environmentally advantageous and theoretically spares hydrocarbons for exports, it has, to date, been fundamentally at odds with the economic strategy of GCC states. The main culprits are the competing dynamics and mandates of the nationally owned sectors of hydrocarbons and electricity (which governs renewable energy). The former sells hydrocarbons for electricity at international markets prices, while the latter pays either subsidized or market prices.[19] Expanding renewables yields additional hydrocarbons that are no longer demanded by the power sector and thus need markets. Theoretically, the result could be additional hydrocarbons for exports, but under normal energy market conditions, holding inventories or increasing supplies poses downward pressures on export prices. In addition, the hydrocarbon sector traditionally cannot generate revenue from newly installed renewable energy as the latter falls under the mandate of the electricity sector and ministry. These competing mandates explain the delay of Phase II of Kuwait's Shagaya Renewable Energy Park in 2020, when a new law interrupted Kuwait Petroleum Company's work on the project.[20]

For state budgets, renewable energy for domestic power generation is nontraded, so it offers no export revenue to compensate for potentially lost hydrocarbon revenue. These opportunity costs are deepened by the large, lump-sum capital requirements for renewable energy infrastructure. Incentivizing private sector investments in renewable infrastructure might also require government subsidies.[21] In net, renewable power for domestic consumption is more costly for the state than hydrocarbon-based power.

This explanation is consistent with actual trends, which saw export-oriented green hydrogen plans accelerate renewable energy development—but only for export-oriented projects, as in Saudi's NEOM, not for domestic power use.

Renewable power for hydrogen exports should not be at the expense of domestic decarbonization. To meet future targets, GCC states must adopt policies and mobilize resources to meet the needs of both domestic power and export-oriented energy projects.

Weak Regulations

The absence of collective policies for environmental protection, decarbonization, and CCUS in the GCC hampers domestic decarbonization efforts and the development of clean hydrogen, particularly for domestic use. Given the high costs of the green transition (related to technology, feedstock, and energy mix), environmental and decarbonization policies can offer the primary incentive to achieve Gulf states' energy and emissions targets. Gulf states have included CCS and CCUS technologies in national communications. CCUS (rather than CCS) technology is particularly important for GCC states because it promises to decarbonize both hydrocarbons and the hard-to-abate sectors without necessarily abating hydrocarbons altogether. Yet, to date, Gulf states have significant policy gaps regarding environmental protection, decarbonization incentives, and CCUS (such as carbon transportation and storage).

Takeaways and Policy Implications for Economic and Political Sustainability

There are five main takeaways. First, energy transitions in Arab states are driven by economic motivations, primarily to maximize hydrocarbon and energy exports to protect the state and maintain the prevailing political economy. Second, prioritizing economic considerations delays domestic energy transitions while favoring export-oriented projects. Third, despite advancements in energy transitions and subsidy reform, GCC political economies remain largely unchanged, with hydrocarbon and energy rents at their center. Fourth, the accelerated energy transition projects to date transform economies from hydrocarbon to energy exporters without a fundamental change in economic structures or economic rigidities. Finally, even if hydrocarbon rents deliver energy transitions in the GCC, the current economic policy regime and rigidities in highly specialized welfare petrostates are unsustainable.

The current policy regime exacerbates existing economic distortions while eroding long-term economic resilience, diversification, and decarbonization incentives. Thus, there is significant scope for energy, economic, industrial, and regulatory policy reform. A top-down policy approach can be a potential pathway, given its historical precedence in effectuating social, political, and economic change across the region.

On the energy front, the MENA region stands to benefit from divorcing aspects of domestic energy policy from energy export motivations and reflecting local sustainability priorities in the larger energy policy at the lowest costs. Domestic energy policy should prioritize energy access, reducing energy consumption, incentivizing energy efficiency (which can abate up to 40 percent of emissions), and decarbonization. The region should also prioritize producing the majority of its power from renewables and even consider nuclear energy as a possible option. Energy policy for both domestic and export purposes must form part of a larger framework that aligns the various aspects of economic, industrial, and regulatory policies. Gulf states must also adopt targeted policies that incentivize energy efficiency and reduce consumption, as well as advance energy transitions by securing the necessary regulatory and technology infrastructure. Subsidy reform remains an important priority for the region. It requires redesigning countercyclical measures that balance socioeconomic development and affordable energy access for low-income households along with industrial competition priorities.

An immediate, phased, wide-scale microeconomic reform and oligopoly/industrial regulation can substantially improve economic efficiency and enhance economic resiliency in light of continuous energy export volatility. Examples include price cap regulations and competition reform that induce oligopolies to price more competitively, thereby reducing their markups and increasing competition. Although politically challenging, oligopoly/industrial regulation and countercyclical measures that expand productive capacity (rather than consumption) could help GCC countries raise economic efficiency, manage oil and non-oil rents, and expand nonenergy exports.

Lastly, filling existing decarbonization and emissions regulatory gaps is indispensable to ensure a low-carbon transition of the highest-emitting domestic sectors (especially transportation and renewables). Filling these regulatory gaps can also support new energy sectors such as clean hydrogen. They can facilitate the transition of the hard-to-abate sectors in a way that rewards green technologies adoption and investments as well as industrial output.

Successful implementation of said policy reform requires political will to accommodate changes in elements that have long undergirded the political economy. It will also require balancing long- and short-term policy objectives and trade-offs through a larger system of integrative policies to achieve decarbonization and economic development in a way that maximizes socioeconomic welfare and economic and resources sustainability alike.

Notes

1 This shift reflects geopolitical, economic, security, developmental, and technological motivations and implications for countries. It can be traced in climate negotiations and agreements during the UN Conference of the Parties (known as "COP"). In COP26, the members adopted the Glasgow Climate Pact, which called for phasing down (not phasing out) inefficient subsidies and unabated coal but not oil and gas, on the basis that they are necessary for energy access and security globally and for economic development in a large part of the world. The explicit mention of "coal" and "fossil fuel subsidies" was a break from previous UN climate agreements.

2 To demonstrate, in 2021, the UAE was the world's second-largest and MENA's largest source of foreign remittances ($43 billion) followed by Saudi Arabia ($35 billion). Egypt was the world's fifth-largest and MENA's largest recipient of foreign remittances ($32 billion) in the same year.

3 Shares are determined by author's calculations using data in each country's national accounts and Ministry of Finance, UN data, and the International Monetary Fund.

4 These statements extended existing economic diversification plans of previous multiyear development plans.

5 The CCE framework was endorsed by the 2020 Saudi-presided G20 in Riyadh.

6 The production method for low-carbon hydrogen has major implications for GHG emissions, costs, and location of energy production.

7 The expected share of hydrogen in total global energy demand by 2050 ranges from 3 percent (Announced Pledge Scenario by the IEA), to 13–16 percent in a net-zero world, up to 12 percent in a 1.5-degrees-Celsius scenario, to 22 percent.

8 Impacts include an excessive number of intolerably hot days and ensuing effects on health, productivity, energy consumption, reduced efficiency of power production, migration and conflict, and economic concerns. Water stresses alone could reduce GDPs in MENA countries by as much as 14 percent by 2050.

9 MENA emissions grew from around 4 percent of those of Europe and the United States in 1965 to approximately half in 2021, as can be seen from examining emissions data from the International Energy Agency.

10 Egypt has been both an importer and an exporter of hydrocarbons in the past decade. It has been a net importer of crude oil and condensate since 2019, and it achieved self-sufficiency in natural gas between 2010–2014 and in 2018–2021.

11 As Gulf and Arab states distribute rents to their citizens, the welfare-based state has often been described in the context of rentier state theory: rentier states distribute generous resource rents to their citizens in lieu of their political participation or power. But Gulf states' dynamics are more complex, variant, and have not yielded results consist with the theory.

12 Gulf countries have achieved general stability despite serious tensions, such as internal and external Arab nationalist agitation in the 1950s and 1960s, Islamist-inspired regime challenges from the 1970s onward, and the Arab Spring.

13 Author's interviews with private firms in Oman, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia, including a survey of private cement companies in Saudi Arabia as part of a project on decarbonizing cement. See Bassam Dally, Manal Shehabi, et al., "Decarbonization Options for the Saudi Cement Industry," King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, 2023, forthcoming.

14 For more information, see Corden (2012); Corden & Neary (1982); Venables & van der Ploeg (2013); Tyers & Walker (2016).

15 This is driven by nonresource exports becoming more competitive in the international market owing to the depreciating real exchange rate and the contracting hydrocarbon and nontradable services industries.

16 Even if firms can enter/exit the market.

17 Examples include Aramco's $1.5 million sustainability fund, Sabic's CCU investments in one of the world's largest plants, and ADNOC's $15 billion decarbonization commitment.

18 The share of non-fossil-fuels-based electricity in the UAE has reached around 12 percent in 2021, following the commissioning of Barakah Nuclear Energy Plant Unit 2.

19 This is presumably the case with the implementation of energy pricing reforms that have commenced in the region. Nevertheless, there is a general lack of transparency in data on pricing of hydrocarbons consumed by the electricity sector along with the possibility of the existence of hidden subsidies.

20 Phase II of Shagaya Renewable Energy Park project was initially developed by Kuwait Petroleum Company until 2020. The project was interrupted by Kuwait's Law 19 for 2015, which amended Law 28 of 2012. The law restricted the implementation of electrical power and water desalination plants to be within the mandate of Kuwait's Ministry of Electricity and Water and private-public partnerships under the Kuwait Authority of Partnership Projects.

21 As in the case in Jordan or Kuwait's public-private partnerships.

CHAPTER 3

Climate Change in the Arab World Requires More Holistic Reforms

Olivia Lazard

Climate change is a systemic form of change affecting the biosphere and all human civilizations in it. It is not a linear set of risks that will affect societies, but a form of change that takes a life of its own and reshapes societies and landscapes. Climate change will redistribute natural resources, impact relationships between governments and peoples, heighten vulnerabilities, and create security challenges that may go well beyond what societies can adapt to. The shocks that societies have been experiencing so far—mostly in the form of ever-devastating fires, droughts, and floods—are just the tip of the iceberg. They are the beginning of an upending process whose outcome is not yet fully capable of being understood. In the reshaping process that anthropogenic climate change has launched, foundations of society are themselves in the process of changing, including the equilibriums that have tied human settlements to reliable natural resources and the economic and political relations that have bound societies together.

Analysis, preparation, adaptation, and the willingness to consider radical changes (rather than incremental ones, within business-as-usual scenarios) are the factors that will determine both the quality and outcomes of the process and the ability to adapt to rapidly unfolding risks and opportunities. This way to talk about climate change has however not fully surfaced, and climate change is certainly not being framed this way in the Arab world. For more than a decade, if and when climate change was discussed, it was referred to as a threat or a risk multiplier—not as a game changer.

Yet, climate change in the Arab world is already unfolding rapidly. It will have deep and pervasive impacts even if the international community manages to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (°C) compared to preindustrial levels, which at this point seems unlikely. It is already well-known that the Arab world—spanning from the northern parts of Africa to the Fertile Crescent and the Arabian Peninsula—is one of the most ecologically depleted regions in the world and has been for centuries due to persistent anthropogenic pressures. This ecological depletion, which includes high water vulnerability and low soil productivity, predisposes the region to environmental shocks. Climate change is making those worse. If the world continues to cruise through another decade without acting decisively on climate mitigation, all countries around the world will need to shift their attention to the combined challenges of mitigation and adaptation. The ability of Arab countries to transition away from fossil-dependent economies while simultaneously building adaptation and aggressive regeneration into economic and policy planning will determine the region's stability in the future.

For decades, conflict protraction has remained a major concern in parts of the Arab world. It is only fair to ponder whether new or protracting conflicts may be on the horizon as the region undergoes profound biophysical and natural endowment change, which will necessarily impact political economies and sociocultural fabrics. While thinking through the lens of conflict and cooperation is obviously legitimate, it is too binary to really understand the profound ways in which the Arab world will change and what climate change will mean for the region and for how the region relates to the rest of the world. Tension and cooperation are likely to take place simultaneously in response to climate change. Tensions may include conflict hotspots, but insecurity will go beyond these hot spots and will take on diffuse manifestations in the future. Cooperation patterns will emerge in response to political, economic, and biophysical changes in the region, and some are already apparent today. But it is unlikely, given the current framing of climate disruptions today, that current cooperation patterns will be enough to hold and tackle the complexity of what is to come.

Climate Disruptions in the Arab World: A Landscape Approach

In February 2023, 419 parts per million of carbon dioxide were recorded in the planet's atmosphere. This leads to two consequences. First, global warming is on its way to hitting a level 1.2°C higher than preindustrial levels. Second, the accumulated stock of carbon into the atmosphere will materialize into a number of climate disruptions that are baked into the atmospheric system. These disruptions will occur in an increasingly systemic and nonlinear fashion. Looking beyond this already sobering state of affairs, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has highlighted the grave situation that will impact countries the world over:

- The release of excess greenhouse gases continues unabated and has largely rebounded after the slump observed during the coronavirus pandemic.

- The planet should not exceed 1.5°C of global warming compared to preindustrial levels, lest planetary tipping points be accelerated with consequences that may undermine the ability to sustain any human civilization in the future.

- Yet, mitigation strategies have so far failed to reach the necessary level of greenhouse gas curbing, and it is plausible that the world may peak at 1.5°C of warming as early in the next decade. It is hoped that the peak will be temporary and that mitigation strategies will steer humanity toward a lower warming threshold. However, current mitigation strategies are not on par with that scenario.

- Climate finance is drastically underdelivering on adaptation planning, even though it should now rank as a top priority for all countries, particularly in highly climate vulnerable countries such as those in the Arab world.

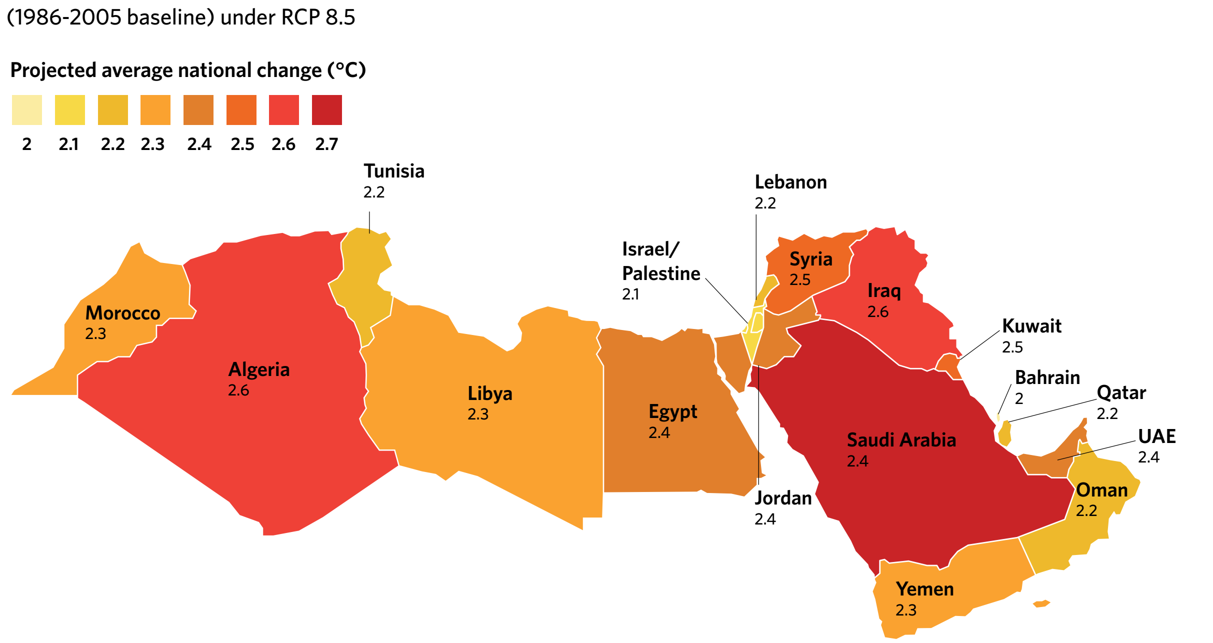
To say that these facts are deeply worrying is an understatement. They provide a global backdrop to the fight against climate change in every region, including in the Arab world—a region where impacts are manifesting in a stronger and more accelerated fashion than expected. Grappling with the reality that these facts create and inferring what needs to happen from a mitigation and adaptation perspective are what will make the difference globally and regionally between a world that adapts and a world that fragments under the weight of compounding crises and multidimensional disruptions.

How Is the Arab World Impacted by the Fast-Approaching Climate Reality?

The Arab region is on average warming twice as fast as the rest of the world. Temperatures in the region have already significantly increased and will continue to do so. The level to which they will increase depends naturally on the success of ambitious global mitigation strategies. It is however crucial to understand that even if the international community manages to keep global warming under the 1.5°C threshold, the Arab region would still experience an average temperature increase of about 2°C between 2021 and 2039, with peaks of temperatures in summer months at about 2.5°C (see figure 1). More alarming assessments estimate that the Arab world could experience as much as 4°C of warming by 2050 compared to preindustrial levels, a temperature increase that would effectively lead to inhabitability.

This prospect is not integrated into medium- and long-term planning from an energy, economic, humanitarian, sociopolitical, nor migratory perspective. It is actually not being discussed nor envisaged as a true possibility in spite of accumulating scientific evidence pointing to the accelerating trajectories of global warming. This is not just at the policy level. Perceptions about climate change in the Arab world indicate a lower level of mobilization about this issue compared to other regions in the world. Survey respondents as recently as in 2022 tended to believe that climate change may harm future generations, but they generally felt less concerned about current changes in the Arab region, in spite of experiencing increasingly dangerous disruptions. This lag in mobilization is the function of many different factors, including the fact that climate change coverage in the media has long received little attention.

Figure 1. Projected Temperature Increase in MENA, 2040–2059



Source: Florence Gaub and Clémentine Lienard, "Arab Climate Futures: Of Risk and Readiness," EU Institute for Security Studies, Chaillot Paper 170, October 2021, 9, https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/arab-climate-futures.

Note: The data use a 1986–2005 baseline and are calculated under a business-as-usual or worst-case scenario (RCP 8.5), where "insufficient efforts are made to curb gas emissions, and an increase in the global temperature of more than 3.5°C is to be expected by the end of the century, with a corresponding rise in extreme weather events."

The results of such a relatively low level of mobilization are disastrous: One is that governments tend to underestimate the threats that climate change will represent for political and economic continuity in their region. They still view climate change, including its worst trajectories, as a problem that can and will be managed. As a consequence, by failing to appreciate the long-term threats climate change represents, governments fail to organize the systemic type of change that would help to prevent the worst possible scenarios of climate collapse. By failing to tackle change from a systemic perspective, the Arab world faces a likelihood of profound collapse, which will lead to systematic population displacement to other regions.

Impact and Risk Conveyors

Water

Unsurprisingly, the first direct impacts of average global and regional warming collide with water systems on the one hand and food systems on the other. As the planet's average temperature rises, more water is sucked into the atmosphere and turns into water vapor, which in turn supercharges the disruptive effects of carbon dioxide. Droughts, floods, and fires are the primary forms of climate disruptions that have become common and are destabilizing the Arab region and elsewhere. Nearly half of the population in the region has already experienced acute and protracted effects of drought, which is usually followed by intense episodes of flooding. These forms of disruptions are all signs of too much or too little water. In other words, one of the key drivers of vulnerability in the Arab region has been the gradual and sustained degradation of the hydrological cycle.

This is a vulnerability that has built up over time: some would trace it back to as far as the birth of agricultural societies in the Fertile Crescent area of the modern Middle East. This water cycle degradation makes the Arab region the planet's most water-insecure area of the world. Apart from Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan, all countries in the region suffer from per capita water poverty, a reality that will only worsen unless multidimensional cooperation avenues are introduced. Water stress and water poverty eventually reverberate in all aspects of societal resilience: They impact food security, health security, energy security, and, more widely, the likelihood of quality sustainable development. In addition, water insecurity is expected to increase dramatically. According to the UN Development Programme, an additional 80 to 100 million people are anticipated to experience acute water stress as early as 2025 due to disrupted rainfall patterns and aquifer recharge capacities. In other words, water insecurity is on its way to becoming a fundamental aspect of systemic risk that impacts various sectors, including human health and mobility. The costs of multidimensional reverberations of water insecurity are often unaccounted for, yet they debilitate economic performance and political stability. With climate change, water bankruptcy is likely to bring governance, economic, and fiscal bankruptcy, too.

Food

Less water necessarily means less food security. This will affect the Arab region at national and collective levels and in direct and indirect manners. In a direct manner, the inability of soils to retain water and store carbon means that soils in the region will more rapidly lose their productive capacity, which will have deleterious impacts on those who rely on agriculture for their livelihoods and social resilience. From a macroeconomic perspective, the reliance on agriculture varies by country. For example, it is higher in Egypt than it is in Saudi Arabia. In spite of efforts to try and reinforce national food security in the face of obvious disruptions, the Arab region remains, on the whole, reliant on food imports, and increasingly so. Tunisia, for example, has decreased its agriculture contribution to overall GDP by 3 percentage points compared to 2010. Food import reliance exposes the region to two types of issues that may turn into indirect systemic risk conveyance.

The first relates to the way in which climate disruptions are stacking odds against political and economic integration and creating intergenerational challenges that limit adaptation capacity in some countries. This creates brittle foundations for economies to prosper in a rapidly warming region. In a country like Tunisia, agriculture is an important sector, but people who focus on agriculture tend to feel marginalized and receive less policy attention. In turn, the experience of marginalization can lead to political discontent associated with feelings of injustice and socioeconomic, as well as territorial, fragmentation. To give an example, agriculture is most prominent in interior regions while tourism is most often associated with coastal regions. The latter will experience long-term changes as the sea level rises. In the meantime, economic and political power will remain concentrated in various ways around coastal economies, as is already the case, while interior regions will keep experiencing degradation of economic and social opportunities. The lack of economic prospects is not new in interior regions and has already festered into security issues. The advent of the Arab Spring in Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia was but one famous example. The situation, before and since then, has been protracted and led to continued frustration with government policy against a backdrop of worsening drought and environmental issues. The buildup of discontent has led the central government over time to try and restrict labor migration and contain youth populations on the basis of security concerns.[1] The lack of movement options, combined with desolate landscapes where monocultures exhaust ecological integrity, constitute a bedrock of socioeconomic potential for destabilization in which young people feel like the government tries to contain them without providing viable options for the future.

This brittleness is then easily magnified and expanded in an import-oriented economy whose food and energy commodity prices can spike radically, whether due to climate-related breadbasket failures (as was seen during the Arab Spring) or grain export weaponization (as is currently being witnessed during the Ukraine war). This is an indirect risk conveyance: political stability can be elusive when inflationary pressures and economic destitution hit territorially and economically marginalized populations the hardest, especially when these populations actually represent a majority of the country. And it is likely to remain so in a world where climate change advances much faster than originally modeled by the IPCC—and where breadbasket failures are bound to increase as long as the world fails to turn the tide on conventional and input-dependent agriculture.

Impacts Beyond Water and Food

The story of climate disruptions and structurally embedded fragility is well known in the Arab region, not least because it in part drove the revolutionary swell of the Arab Spring in light of inflationary pressures on staple crops, a process that lit up movements aiming to overthrow dictatorial regimes unable to care for vulnerability in their population. Climate change impacts do not limit themselves to water and food. They only start there and expand into energy disruptions, as Iraq made visible over the last two summers with long-lasting power cuts. They also extend to health issues, with the growing threat of dust storms that bring the economies subject to these occurrences to a stall and contribute to a growing health crisis. These various forms of crises amount to multidimensional fragility, which creates bottom-up pressures on governments and societies.

This compounding fragility is significant because it stands on the shoulders of widening and structural inequalities, which the region experiences at national and regional levels. Indeed, the Arab world is characterized by some of the direst levels of inequalities in the world. In the region, the wealthiest 10 percent of people control 81 percent of net wealth (up from the prepandemic level of 75 percent). It is expected that an additional 10 million people in the region will fall into extreme poverty by 2023—a number that will likely grow as a result of water scarcity.

Beyond the aggregate regional data, the differences between countries are significant too: conflict-affected countries such as Iraq or Yemen have fundamental troubles climbing the development ladder compared to neighboring countries such as Saudi Arabia or the UAE. The structural and regional inequalities tell a larger story when informed by IPCC findings. Indeed, in its February 2022 report, Working Group II demonstrated clearly that more unequal societies and regions are least likely to adapt to climate change on a structural level, making de-development and conflict risks more plausible. In other words, climate change will widen current levels of inequality and poverty, likely cause reversals in development gains, and therefore pose challenges of new proportions for countries whose national and regional baselines are already fragile.

In the face of such prospects, examining current adaptation approaches is key to understand how the Arab world may shape up in the future.

Resilience Building, Geoeconomics, and Technosolutionism

Resilience in the Arab world is a delicate matter. It depends on global and regional strategies to move as fast as possible away from fossil fuel dependencies and on simultaneous investments into deep adaptation. The faster the energy transition, the more chances the Arab region will have to avoid inhabitability in the medium term. Logically, this should be incentive enough. But several odds play against this realization.

The first stumbling blocks start with fossil dependency. Fossil exports have created rentier economies in a number of countries across the region. Rents are closely linked to power distribution systems, which creates a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it generates path dependency. Elites are unlikely to give up the source of their economic and political power as they maintain important patronage and redistribution systems. Changing energy systems would mean changing the way in which power is administered and shared. Moreover, as over 80 percent of the world's energy comes from fossil fuels, countries dependent on fossil exports have little decisive incentive to shift away to alternative investments. As the war in Ukraine demonstrated, fossil fuel–exporting countries like Saudi Arabia remain at the heart of the global economic metabolism—a leverage of force that fossil-dependent countries are unlikely to want to give up.

This energy and power path dependency has three consequences. One is that countries like Saudi Arabia are actively choosing policies and energy production systems that compound the rapidly unfolding climate breakdown. The second has to do with climate finance. Funds for adaptation measures keep falling short. Indeed, in late 2022, adaptation funds only represented about 10 percent of overall climate finance. This provides an easy rationale for fossil-fuel-dependent countries: They argue they need the money generated from fossil fuel rents to invest in deep adaptation. But if fossil fuels keep creating a rentier path dependency, they say, then the only solution is to go toward technosolutionism for fossil-dependent countries.

Technosolutionism relies on the belief that carbon capture and removal systems will enable the world to keep up its business as usual and that technological innovation will eventually stall climate-related disasters. This belief assumes technologies will be developed in time to allow for deep mitigation and deep adaptation. For example, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are among rising investors in carbon capture and carbon removal technologies, which, if proven effective enough and taken at scale, would enable these countries to maintain their dependency on fossil exports. Yet, so far, no technological solution has been proven to work effectively enough, and certainly not at scale. Taken too far, technosolutionism may well contribute to making the climate crisis worse by delaying the radical type of action needed to turn the ship.

This belief in technology is not just confined to the energy sector. It extends into a technologically oriented approach toward adaptation, including for water, food, and habitability security. The most affluent countries in the Arab region are in fact using the climate crisis and their ability to invest in innovative technologies to propel themselves into a new type of technology-driven economy, understood to be one of the next frontiers of economic growth and competition. This is the case with the UAE's attempt to support the drive toward "smart sustainable cities." It is equally the case with Saudi Arabia's attempts to invest in smart agriculture and other technology-supported ways to generate water security, including expensive forms of desalination and water conversion and diversion. The dual strategy to keep current forms of rentier economies while investing into complementary ones that aim to mitigate the effects of climate change in the region represents a new type of regional, political, and rent-harvesting opportunity for those countries. But it is one that comes at a high cost for others in the region. One only has to look at the investments originally made in the Great Man-Made River in Libya, which are now resulting in national conflict drivers, as well as potential regional tensions with Egypt over Nubian aquifers due to geological water pumping.

The systemic costs of continued fossil dependency and technosolutionism make sense: Not all countries in the region are as well-endowed in economic resources as the UEA and Saudi Arabia. Places like Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen lack capital access and political space to invest in deep-technology forms of adaptation. The more climate-related disruptions that come their way, the greater the challenges and crises to deal with over time and the less fiscal and economic space they have to handle those crises. The cooperative space between countries in the region will be rigged by countries that generally try to use the climate crisis to their own advantage, while underestimating the might of the problem, and those that experience the full set of climate disruptions, without having extensive resources to deal with the consequences at home and in border regions. In all likelihood, this will indeed lead to a future scenario where conflict dynamics worsen and economies of countries already affected by violence stunt—fitting the depiction of climate change as a risk multiplier.

Such will be the case in Iraq, Libya, and Syria, for example. In these countries, ecological services will keep on degrading as a direct result of the acceleration of climate breakdown. Thus conflicts will most likely concentrate in areas of *relative* abundance, that is, in places where water resources remain relatively available. Relative abundance results in competition for available resources in the context of a growing population and leads, over time, to potential weaponization. In a country like Iraq, relatively abundant zones could include marshes, a wetland-type ecosystem that has historically led to the rise of agriculture and still sustains important livelihoods in the Fertile Crescent. The more this ecosystem is disrupted, the less ecological services it will provide and the more degradation will lead to destitution without adequate means of adaptation. The end result is not just a multiplication of security challenges related to the loss of livelihoods and human insecurity; if states keep failing to provide fundamental solutions and services in the face of growing disruptions, social contracts will rupture beyond repair.

Beyond national challenges, the overall impact of sustained dependency on fossil fuels may create new forms of regional challenges, in addition to existing ones. As mentioned, climate change needs to be understood as the great redistributor of natural resources, starting with water. In the Arab world, major countries tend to share transboundary water basins that are under direct threat of accelerating climate change. Upstream and downstream countries tend to lack the cooperative infrastructures that may lead to joint stability. This is the result of historically tense relations and, more recently, of the increasing threat of scarcity that leads to having countries pit respective visions of development against one another. Most notably, Egypt and Ethiopia—home to two of the most important tributaries of the Nile River—have escalated geopolitical tensions over river and infrastructure management to the UN Security Council without reaching a resolution so far. Tensions between Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey keep surfacing over water management around the Euphrates and Tigris river systems. Turkey controls over 90 percent of the water that goes into the Euphrates River and more than 40 percent of the water that goes into the Tigris river system. Ankara has been accused on several occasions of weaponizing water to purse its own geopolitical objectives in a region that is prone to deep violence and turmoil.

In all cases regarding transboundary issues, the construction of hydropower infrastructure and nationally determined plans tend to pit countries with more financial capacity against others, often driven by elites who skew decisionmaking regarding public goods. The result is natural capital protectionism. In a context where natural resources are rapidly running scarce, this can easily be perceived in a belligerent light. And, currently, mediation or negotiation mechanisms are simply inadequate even when they are utilized, which is seldom the case. The use of cooperative processes and infrastructures is likely to increase alongside the threat of insecurity and belligerence. The problem is that these processes will occur in a reactive manner and fail to address fundamental insecurity drivers.

The reliance on technology and infrastructure is likely to create more and more fractures at national and regional levels in the future. Plans to divert water, desalinate it, and make its use more efficient tend to fall into an energy-versus-natural-resource trap over time. Technology requires energy. In the Arab world, the more convenient source of energy is also the source of the problems that technologies try to fix when natural resources are scarce. And, innovative technology requires monetary and fiscal resources that are likely to be increasingly used for disaster risk reduction and management. The technosolutionist logic may seem appealing for now, as climate-related changes are underestimated and as long as climate change is relegated to a topic of growing yet manageable concern. Over time, climate degradation may trap countries that fail to prepare in an impossible economic equation and security dilemma. This is why the use of technology needs to be accompanied by larger systemic changes, starting with a plan to stabilize the hydrological cycle at regional levels and, if successful, at global levels.

Transformative Cooperation: Dual Investments Into Decarbonization and Regeneration at Scale

The Arab world faces a dual challenge. One is to shift its economies and energy systems into renewable investments, and the other is to work toward stabilizing and regenerating the hydrological cycle to reboot ecological services and strengthen climate adaptation and resilience.

Remediating the systematic assaults against the hydrological cycle in the region is crucial in order to mitigate climate-related disruptions related to water evaporation. Only by working with the hydrological cycle will countries manage to rebuild water resilience over time rather than navigate scarcity. This requires a different approach to water and security. All states in the region have an interest in trying to rebuild the quality of their soil, starting with its ability to retain water and store carbon. This would necessitate repositioning agriculture and ecological services at the heart of policy and urban and rural planning with a view to shift away from economic activities that are inappropriate to the region's soils and ecological conditions. To start with, a shift toward regenerative agriculture should be considered as a matter of priority for disaster, conflict, and insecurity prevention in climate-disrupted futures. Incentivizing regenerative, complex, soil-specific agricultures would also have the benefit of providing a different economic vision for countries in the region, especially those that feel territorially and socioeconomically marginalized. It is therefore not just about rebooting productive agriculture; it is actually about tackling systemic changes from the literal ground up, rethinking the way in which socioeconomic fabrics maintain themselves over time and how mobility is envisaged. It is, at the core, a question of dignity (*karama*, as Arab Spring protesters chanted in 2011 and keep on demanding today).

Beyond agriculture, regenerative approaches should include landscaping changes for disasters and adaptation. Several experiments have already demonstrated that landscaping techniques can be used in arid and semi-arid areas to stock water in times of inundations. The techniques can also contribute to rebuilding ecological resilience in desertified areas, which can help with carbon storage and ecological rebooting. Finally, regenerative processes can be used to support mediation over transboundary issues in the Arab world, particularly when it comes to water management. This requires shifting the mediation focus from managing to fighting and reversing scarcity through confidence-building measures and cooperative frameworks. It also involves working with data-driven methodologies that make apparent the hydrological cycle and atmospheric rivers that bind together countries of the Arab world. By working with the hydrological cycle and trying to bring water back from its gas form into water bodies and aquifers, there may be hope of increasing more reliable weather and rainfall patterns, including in the age of climate disruptions.

Working with the hydrological cycle involves complex methodologies and economic sector changes. It is a more diffuse and inclusive type of adaptation, since it involves rebuilding human societies that nourish ecological services as much as they take from them. Technical support for this work is scarce, but it is slowly starting to emerge within the region as one area of potential engagement and as a conflict prevention approach. Appetite for innovative approaches for transformative integrated conflict and climate disaster prevention is growing. Tools exist, but they need to be tested and refined. At this point of looming climate breakdown, countries in the regions would do well to open up to adaptation avenues that are less conventional, yet potentially disruptive for the better. The good news is that economic resources may gradually become more available if carbon markets are connected to this type of adaptation work. Carbon credits, defined as financial schemes payable to carbon storage projects or facilities, are most often associated with finance flowing to ecosystems like the Amazon Rainforest. They are rarely considered for the Arab world since soils are so dry and vegetation so scarce compared to other regions of the world. But it is a mistake to think the Arab world cannot play its part in rebuilding ecological services that include carbon storage. In fact, this region may well be a low-hanging fruit for effective carbon finance flows.

These financial flows will have to be limited in timeframe, though, since they should stop when fossil fuels are phased out. This is where the Arab world also needs to play an active role. It is not just about investing in solar and wind farms or electrified systems; it is also about investing in a new set of supply chains and technological innovations that will define the future of stability for energy and industrial systems in the years to come. It is also, therefore, about investing in the new type of geopolitical relations that will shape international relations in the decades to come.

A number of economies in the Arab world have leverage to play into the new energy ecosystems of tomorrow. Finance is needed to accelerate extraction, processing, technological development, and end-use installations. In addition, new regional integrations for energy resilience need to be designed and planned. The green revolution is not a panacea for peace. No energy transition in the history of humankind has gone without deep turbulence. But there is indeed something different about this one: It is not just a matter of competition for the next phase of economic expansion; it is a matter of survival, and nowhere but the Arab region demonstrates better the need for investments and climate action to move fast. And no region has more of an incentive nor greater agency to shift directions toward the age of renewables, even if it entails some xq in power distribution structures.

Conclusion

Conflict and cooperation will coexist in the Arab world, and both trends are likely to intensify in the near future. But the most important aspect lies beyond the binary: Humanity is not just facing the plausibility of increased conflict or violence. In the case of the Arab world, humanity is facing the possibility of inhabitability. An area of over 13 million square kilometers that hosts over 430 million people is on its way to becoming unfit for human living. This is unprecedented and, frankly, difficult to imagine. Yet, taking this fast-approaching reality as the departing point for planning and action is in order. The dual priorities of regeneration and decarbonization require changes in political economies of power and resource distribution, which currently represent the major obstacles to change. Elites, especially in the wealthiest of countries of the Arab world, must become aware of their responsibilities and interests in the age of climate adaptation, lest they have no country to govern in the next two to three decades.

Notes

1 Author's field work, 2018.

CHAPTER 4

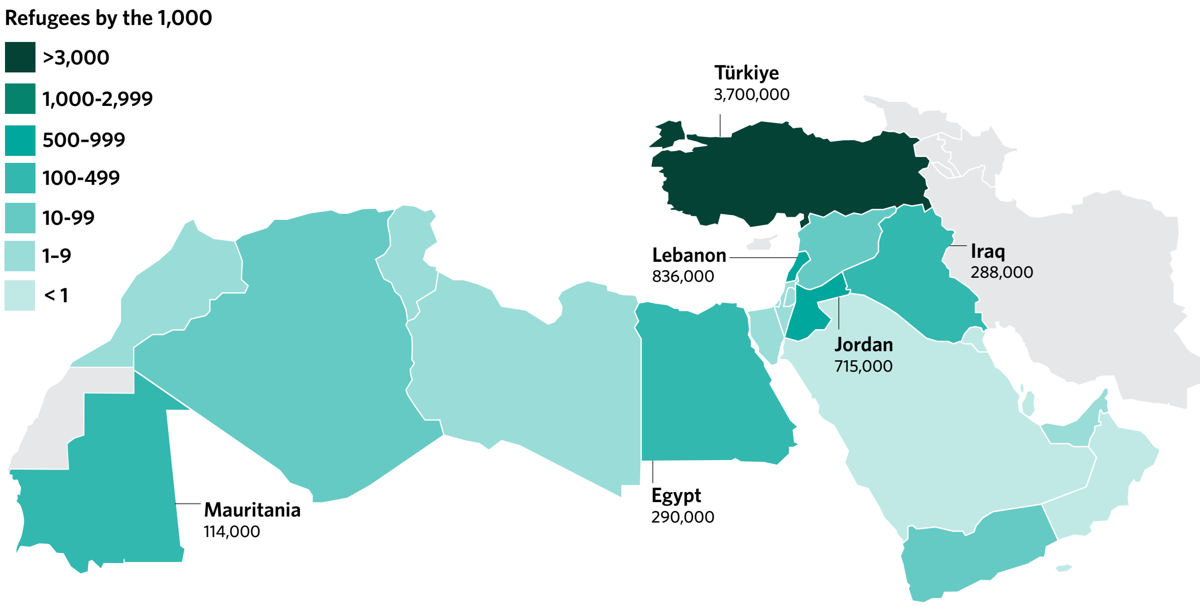
Migration and Displacement in the Arab World Demands a More Equitable Response

Kelsey P. Norman

More than a decade after the 2011 Arab uprisings, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) continues to face unprecedented levels of displacement. Lebanon hosts the largest number of refugees per capita (one in eight), followed by Jordan (one in fourteen) and Türkiye (one in twenty-three) (see figure 1). Millions of Iraqis, Syrians, and Yemenis also remain internally displaced, with 2.6 of the 4 million Yemeni internally displaced individuals facing life-threatening food shortages. Across the region, the ongoing war in Ukraine has increased food and fuel prices and further disrupted supply chains, exacerbating the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and raising the cost of delivering humanitarian assistance to refugees and displaced people. In the coming decades, the effects of climate change will also compound the existing conflict-driven reasons that lead individuals to flee their home regions or countries, whether droughts, rising sea levels, food insecurity as a result of crop failure, or desertification.

These challenges—conflict, poor governance, climate change, and a worsening economic picture—have created immense difficulties for migrants, refugees, and other vulnerable populations originating from and residing in the MENA region. These include the ongoing fallout from the Syrian civil war and the lack of a durable solution for most Syrian refugees; the international displacement of Iraqis, Yemenis, and Syrians, which is only compounded by pressures of climate change; and the lack of safe migratory options for citizens and non-nationals in North Africa. As Europe remains focused on brokering deals to contain migrants and refugees within MENA host states—despite attempts at improved international responsibility sharing, such as the 2018 Global Compact for Migration—countries across the region will continue to grapple with the political, economic, and societal impacts of

Figure 1. Refugees in the Middle East and North Africa by Country of Asylum, 2022



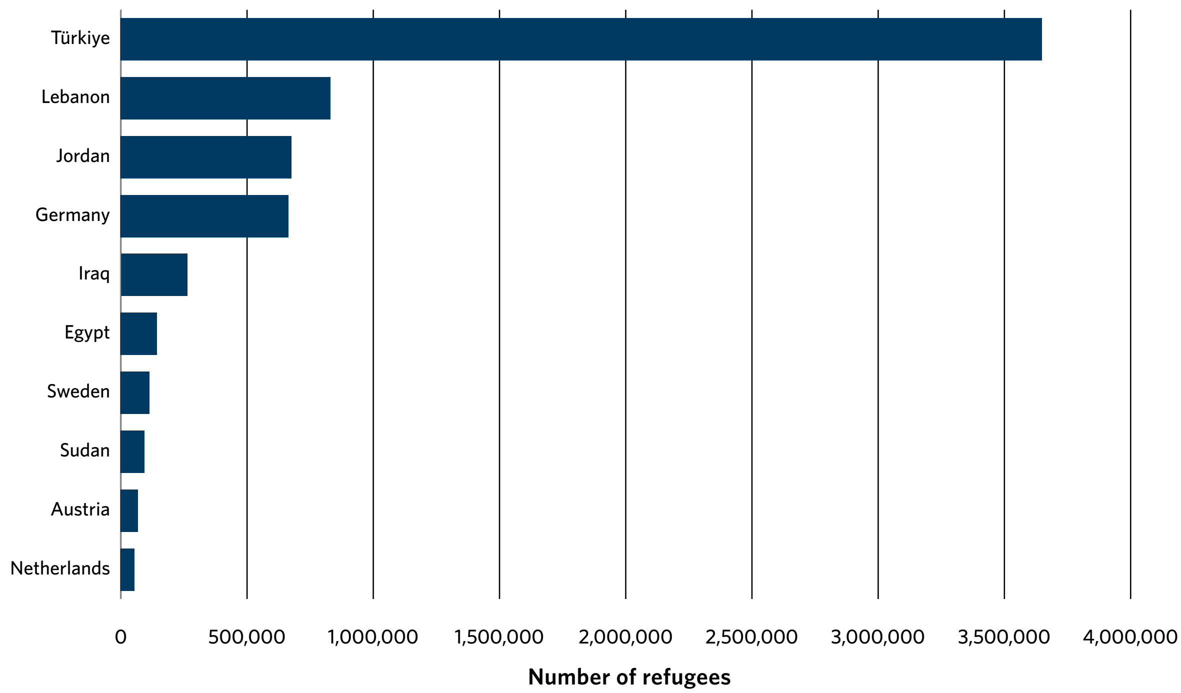
Source: UNHCR, "Number of Refugees in the Middle East and North Africa Region as of Mid-2022, by Country of Asylum," June 16, 2022, accessed from Statista, April 11, 2023, https://www.statista.com/statistics/1201495/mena-refugees-number-by-country-of-origin/?locale=en; and "Türkiye: Populations," UN Refugee Agency, accessed April 17, 2023, https://reporting.unhcr.org/turkey.

migration. Without investments in climate resilience, responsive governance, and equitable social policies and without opportunities for regular migration as an adaptive mechanism, displacement may exacerbate existing inequalities and social tensions.

Safe Return for Refugees and Regional Stability

The war in Syria, the biggest driver of human-caused displacement in the Middle East over the last decade, has transformed the region and left millions displaced with no prospect of safe return. Little has changed in terms of the circumstances—repression, regime violence, and the exploitation of sectarian and religious divisions—that caused individuals to flee in the first place. Since 2011, this situation has contributed to regional insecurity and impacted domestic politics in a range of host countries, including Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Türkiye (see figure 2). Although the implications of the conflict continue to reverberate, the war effectively ended in 2019, with President Bashar al-Assad's regime reasserting control over most of the country, leaving smaller regions in the northwest and northeast under the sway of two opposition groups, the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), respectively.

Figure 2. Top Ten Countries Hosting Syrian Refugees, 2022



Source: UNHCR, "Ranking of the Largest Syrian Refugee-Hosting Countries in 2022," June 16, 2022, accessed from Statista, April 11, 2023, https://www.statista.com/statistics/740233/major-syrian-refugee-hosting-countries-worldwide.

Over the past five years, an international push for refugees to return to Syria had gained momentum among major host states, driven partly by a decree the Assad regime issued in 2018 offering amnesty to Syrian men who fled the country to avoid military conscription—but not to those who had joined opposition forces. In reality, returning to Syria is a gamble. Amnesty International has documented dozens of cases of Syrian intelligence officers subjecting men, women, and children to detention, torture, sexual violence, and forced disappearance. By the end of 2022, only approximately 350,000 Syrians had returned to Syria, though actual figures may be higher as returns also occur via informal routes.

Assad has normalized relations with a number of Arab countries, including the UAE and Bahrain, and in early 2023 there were indications of a possible rapprochement between Assad and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Observers have pointed to how the arrangement would serve both sides. Syria hopes to remove SDF forces from the areas containing oil fields in northeast Syria and needs support from Ankara to do so. In turn, Türkiye hopes to both eliminate the Kurdish armed presence and organizational capacity in Syria and, likely, attempt to return Syrian refugees from Türkiye to Syria under the auspices of the United Nations and other international organizations. Erdoğan also wants to exploit the idea of a Syrian-Turkish rapprochement to strengthen his domestic support ahead of the scheduled May 2023 presidential election.

While it is unlikely that the majority of the nearly 4 million Syrians in Türkiye would return, full normalization could still be devastating. Türkiye has financed the Islamist militants of the Syrian National Army (SNA), who fought against Syrian Kurdish forces on behalf of Ankara, and it also hosts the Syrian National Coalition, the largest coalition of Assad opponents. Since the summer of 2022, Erdoğan has been asking these groups for reconciliation with Damascus—an impossible request from the point of view of the opposition. While Türkiye has returned refugees to Syria previously, in apparent contravention of international law, those who returned were able to reside in regions where the Assad regime had not established full control. However, if the rapprochement succeeds in fully quashing the Syrian opposition, many of the returnees would be at high risk of persecution and retaliation.

The devastating 7.8-magnitude earthquake in February 2023 gravely impacted nationals as well as refugees and displaced people in both Türkiye and Syria. The Turkish city of Gaziantep, the epicenter of the first quake, hosts 500,000 Syrian refugees, with hundreds of thousands of others residing throughout southeast Türkiye. The Turkish public has shown some resentment toward Syrians since at least 2014—waxing and waning depending on domestic political events—but the earthquake reaggravated tensions, with Turkish nationals resentful of the $40 billion spent by the government since 2011 to host Syrians in light of the perceived inadequate response to the earthquake. In northeast Syria, even before the earthquake, 4.1 million people, predominantly women and children, were relying on humanitarian assistance to survive. As a result of the Syrian regime's choke hold, supported by Russia, on aid entering opposition-controlled areas, UN assistance could initially only enter Syria from Türkiye via the Bab al-Hawa crossing, which was damaged by the quake. The Syrian government eventually allowed for two additional crossings from Türkiye to open to UN aid convoys, but even then, many residents in the region were forced to rely on makeshift methods of rescuing families and individuals trapped under the rubble, and many were left without shelter.

Lebanon officially hosts approximately 850,000 registered Syrian refugees, in addition to an estimated 650,000 unregistered Syrians. There are nearly 250,000 migrant domestic workers in the country and approximately 210,000 Palestinians (including Palestinians from Syria) registered with the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). The devaluation of Lebanon's currency by over 90 percent and the COVID-19 pandemic have led to unprecedented poverty rates, which disproportionally impact refugee and migrant populations and poorer host communities. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimates that 90 percent of Syrians in Lebanon live in extreme poverty, and UNRWA calculates that 93 percent of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon also live in poverty. Furthermore, Lebanon as a whole, and at-risk communities in particular, face acute food insecurity; Lebanon imports 80 percent of its wheat, and of that figure, 80 percent historically came from Ukraine and 16 percent from Russia. The country's storage capacity was greatly diminished following the Port of Beirut explosion and the destruction of the port silos in August 2020.

Jordan hosts approximately 600,000 registered Syrian refugees, 700,000 unregistered individuals, and 17,000 Palestinians from Syria. While not facing the same economic crisis as Lebanon, 80 percent of Syrians in Jordan live in poverty. At the same time that the costs of basic necessities including food and healthcare have risen and livelihoods have been slashed as a result of the pandemic, international organizations that provide assistance to refugees (such as the World Food Programme) have cut programs due to funding shortfalls.

Despite these dire situations, and even with small numbers of Syrians voluntarily and involuntarily returning from Lebanon and Jordan just as they have from Türkiye, most Syrians will remain in the countries where they currently live in the medium term. A 2019 survey of Syrians in Lebanon suggested that refugees will not willingly go home before local conditions are deemed safe and economic livelihoods can be supported, even with worsening conditions in host countries. Issues of property restitution and an inability to obtain necessary documentation, including birth certificates and passports, are also major barriers to return. According to international legal norms, refugee repatriation should only happen under conditions that can ensure safety and dignity and should not contravene the principle of nonrefoulement, meaning that refugees cannot be sent back to a location where their lives could be in danger. In the Syrian case in particular, forcibly returning refugees to a country that continues to be governed by the regime from which they fled could restart cycles of violence and repression, ultimately making the possibility of future conflict more likely. Moreover, the economic devastation as well as food and fuel insecurity in Syria have meant that even areas loyal to the Assad regime throughout the war have recently expressed discontent. Aside from issues of safety, refugees and internally displaced returnees will face dire economic circumstances, making it more likely that individuals will attempt to remain in host countries—Jordan, Lebanon, or Türkiye—in the medium term.

Internal Displacement as a Growing Challenge

The intersection of climate change, economic instability, and poor governance is making internal displacement an increasingly difficult challenge in many Arab countries. In Iraq, displacement reached a peak in 2016 as a cumulative result of the U.S. invasion, sectarian violence, and the expansion of the Islamic State. Since then, overall displacement has declined, but Iraq still hosts more than 1 million internally displaced people (IDPs), as well as nearly 5 million IDP returnees, many of whom have struggled to fully reintegrate and continue to require humanitarian assistance. In addition, 1.5 million displaced Iraqi and Syrian refugees reside in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, where 25 percent of the population is displaced. In 2021, the government of Iraq took steps to address IDPs with its National Plan to End Displacement. In reality, though, the closure of camps across the country led to premature returns that particularly impacted women-headed households, leaving many individuals and families to deal with administrative hurdles that prevented them from properly accessing government services and welfare benefits. Most recently, in February 2023, the government announced a new plan to transition IDPs away from humanitarian assistance provided by international actors to a government-run social assistance program, though whether this will run into similar administrative barriers remains to be seen.

The repatriation of the approximately 30,000 Iraqi nationals in Syria's al-Hol camp, most of whom are women and children, has also proven extremely difficult. Individuals are first taken to Jeddah-1 camp, located in Iraq's Nineveh province, where they spend several months or more undergoing security screenings and so-called rehabilitation, though even successfully repatriated individuals continue to struggle with community acceptance and administrative issues.

Finally, existing displacement issues in Iraq will be compounded by rising temperatures and drought, as well as the possibility of future political tensions leading to mismanagement of the shared Euphrates-Tigris water basin. Southern Iraq already faces water insecurity, and more than 90 percent of Iraq's population is dependent on the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, which are at historically low levels. Iraq's Indigenous Marsh Arabs are exemplars of the risk that climate change poses to traditional ways of life. In addition to historical political actions, such as those taken by former president Saddam Hussein, to destroy their livelihoods and environment by intentionally draining Iraq's marshlands, climate change threatens to further displace this population, forcing many into urban areas where issues such as overcrowding and a lack of services might fuel discontent.

In Yemen, there are more than 4 million IDPs, and the country also hosts nearly 1 million refugees and asylum seekers, primarily from the Horn of Africa. Climate change was a dire issue in Yemen prior to the civil war, but eight years of fighting has further stressed limited resources, and the breakdown of basic government services as well as blockades by warring factions have compounded existing water and food shortages. The weaponization of water has also exacerbated the acute famine in Yemen and prolonged conflict. While the climate crisis impacts all Yemenis, IDPs are at particular risk, as their temporary homes are especially vulnerable to flooding and those residing in camps are less likely to have regular access to drinking water and food. Women and girls have also been acutely affected, as they are usually responsible for gathering water, leading them to undertake unsafe journeys into conflict-impacted areas with greater exposure to land mines.

While Iraq and Yemen are two of the most harrowing examples of how years of conflict can interact with poor governance and climate change to produce and endanger IDPs, they represent cautionary tales for how countries across the region might be impacted in the future. As seen in Iraq, the arrival of IDPs can strain existing resources, potentially leading to discontent or even violence, while Yemen demonstrates how the effects of climate change can reify the human challenges created by ongoing conflict. As most displaced individuals globally remain within their own country, rather than moving across international borders, the multifaceted set of factors that lead to the creation of IDPs will be an increasingly salient issue going forward.

The EU's Ongoing Containment of Migration

Since Europe's political crisis in 2015 in reaction to the arrival of asylum seekers, most of whom originated from Syria, migration has played an increasingly important role in European relations with MENA countries. On the heels of what Europe perceived as a successful migration deal with Türkiye in 2016, whereby Türkiye would accept Syrian refugees arriving in Greece in exchange for €6 billion and other diplomatic benefits, Italy agreed to a deal in 2017 (endorsed by the EU) with the UN-backed Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA). The EU agreed to assist the Libyan Coast Guard in apprehending migratory boats departing Libya and to financially support the establishment of detention centers (referred to as local reception centers) in the country. In exchange, the GNA would further prevent irregular migration toward Europe and repatriate migrants and asylum seekers willing to return to their origin countries. More brazen than the EU-Türkiye deal, the agreement with Libya ignored known human rights abuses, and, shortly after its implementation, journalists revealed images of migrants being traded at slave auctions. EU financial and material support also has implications for Libyan citizens, as armed groups affiliated with the GNA have carried out torture, abductions, and extrajudicial executions. While EU funding was initially correlated with a decrease in migrant arrivals via the central Mediterranean route, the number of arrivals increased from around 35,000 in 2020 to 105,000 in 2022, illustrating that Europe's policy of trapping migrants in Libya not only comes at an enormous human cost but is also ineffective.

Neighboring Egypt was not initially as interested in migration agreements with Europe, but President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has become one of the EU's most praised partners on preventing irregular migration. Egypt is the most populous state in the Arab world, with just over 100 million citizens residing in the country, in addition to approximately 250,000 asylum seekers and refugees, though Sisi has famously exaggerated this number at 5 million refugees. The country faces a debt crisis that preceded the 2011 uprising but that has worsened drastically over the last decade, and Cairo has been slow to implement the fiscal reforms required by its 2016 loan from the International Monetary Fund. As a major importer of wheat, Egypt has also been hugely impacted by the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and subsequent war, and in January 2023, the Egyptian pound hit a new low when the government implemented a more flexible exchange rate. Egypt's large population and economic woes have made Europe fearful of large-scale emigration from the country, leading the EU to seek Egypt's assistance in preventing its own nationals from departing and also in intercepting and returning migrant boats departing from Libya. In exchange, Europe has been willing to offer development and security aid, including the provision of military equipment.

In September 2022, the EU confirmed that €23 million would be allocated to Cairo over the remainder of the year, in addition to €57 million in 2023, to further equip Egyptian authorities to carry out "search and rescue" missions and conduct "surveillance at land and sea borders." Yet, as with Libya, there are very few provisions in place to prevent negative spillover effects and violence from authorities toward migrants and Egyptian citizens alike. Additionally, by praising Egypt's capabilities as a partner on antitrafficking and irregular migration prevention, the EU helps to distract from international criticism over the Egyptian government's ongoing human rights abuses.

Morocco was already deeply involved with various forms of European externalization efforts prior to 2015, but since then Rabat has sought to take further advantage of the increased funding allotted for EU migration partnerships. Morocco and Spain intensified their cooperation around the issue of migration in 2018, with Spain's secretary of state for migration declaring that Spain would be Morocco's "voice" in Europe. However, the relationship quickly fell apart in 2021 when Brahim Ghali, the leader of the Polisario Front, was allowed to enter Spain to receive medical treatment for COVID-19, leading Morocco to allow approximately 6,000 African migrants to enter the Spanish enclave of Ceuta in one day. Bilateral relations were later repaired in 2022, which also meant that border policing returned to normal, leading to the deaths of at least twenty-three asylum seekers and migrants attempting to enter Spain's other enclave, Melilla, in June.

Tunisia also has a long history of cooperating with Europe on migration, but European interest in the country increased greatly after 2020. The pandemic-related economic downturn had led to increased pressure for Tunisians—and to a lesser extent, migrants that had been residing in Tunisia—to migrate irregularly to Europe. With President Kais Saied's increasingly authoritarian turn since 2019 and his inability to address the country's economic issues, it is unlikely that even European-financed border measures will prevent the irregular migration of Tunisian nationals, especially as the composition of those departing is increasingly middle-class and composed of entire families, illustrating the desperation felt by citizens across socioeconomic strata.

Migration Challenges Exacerbated by Climate Change

More than a decade of war has eroded states' abilities to mitigate the effects of climate change, leaving key populations—especially migrants, refugees, and displaced populations—vulnerable to climate impacts because nonresidents and noncitizens are often accorded lower priority for services or because they may not have legal status in a host country. Looking forward across the region, the numerous impacts of climate change will have varying effects on migration and displacement, as states have vastly different adaptation capabilities. For example, populations in poorer countries such as Egypt, Iraq, Libya, and Syria will feel the impact acutely. In Iraq, recent summer temperatures have reached peaks of 125 degrees Fahrenheit, leading to disturbed livelihoods, heatstroke, and, in some cases, death. In comparison, Gulf states have the economic means to mitigate the effects of extreme heat, even though a rise in global temperature will particularly impact them. The UAE has the world's highest per capita water consumption levels, and predictions indicate that population growth could lead the country to deplete its freshwater resources in the next fifty years. It is unclear whether Gulf countries will be able to maintain their extremely high levels of labor migration absent any meaningful rights to workers, as environmental pressures increase and the possibility of oil and gas depletion looms on the horizon.

As discussed in the previous section, the vast majority of individuals displaced by climate change will migrate within their own countries; only some will be able to cross international borders. According to the World Bank, up to 19 million individuals across North Africa could be forced to move internally by 2050 due to climate change impacts including water scarcity, sea level rise, or crop failure. Projections of climate-induced displacement across the MENA region are equally worrying. It is also important to note that displacement related to climate change is likely to be gendered, with the UN estimating that 80 percent of individuals currently displaced by climate change are women. As sudden-onset climate events lead to a breakdown of infrastructure and governance, the likelihood of human trafficking greatly increases, which has a disproportionate impact on women and girls. Even when women do not migrate themselves, they may be expected to assume duties traditionally left to men after an incidence of crop failure or water scarcity causes a male head of household to migrate in order to search for alternative livelihood opportunities. However, in many Arab states, women may not have the same authority as men over legal issues or may be discriminated against in land ownership or inheritance laws.

It is not possible to conceive of an adequate response to future climate-induced displacement across the MENA region without reversing the trend of European countries attempting to contain migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees within MENA, a trend that has been amplified since 2015. Despite the adoption of the nonbinding Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration and its companion agreement, the Global Compact on Refugees, in 2018, the compacts have had little impact on the pattern of states outsourcing migration prevention, with deleterious effects for migrants and refugees. And while lip service is paid to funding climate adaptation policies as part of the EU's external migration management aid—through pots of money such as the 2015 EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa—the majority of funding goes to further securitizing borders and supporting regimes with grave human rights records.

Rich countries of the Global North—and in this case, particularly countries of the EU—must be prepared to increase opportunities for mobility, including through humanitarian visas, private sponsorships, educational opportunities, and temporary work permits for those forced to leave their countries due to precarious situations. At the very least, the EU must reverse course on its untenable policy of containing displaced populations within MENA host states and subsequently turning a blind eye to their plight. Ultimately though, governments across the MENA region will have to address pervasive issues including poverty, inequality, and corruption in order to mitigate the current and impending impacts of a changing climate for their populations, including both citizens and migrants. It was these same unaddressed issues that gave rise to the uprisings of 2011, the heavy-handed response to which drove the subsequent displacement of the last decade. Yet, with the advent of climate change and the increasingly serious challenge it will pose in the coming years, the stakes are even higher than they were twelve years ago. Governments in the region, with the support of the international community, must focus on providing more equitable services, developing inclusive socioeconomic policies, and instating climate change mitigation processes that benefit *all* populations in order to avoid exacerbating the very underlying factors that induce further displacement.

CHAPTER 5

Trends in Arab Public Opinion Amid Regional and Global Disruptions

Amaney Jamal and Michael Robbins

The COVID-19 pandemic left no part of the globe untouched. Across the world, governments responded in varying manners to try to control the virus and to limit its effects on their populations and their livelihoods. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is no different. Although many countries were spared from the initial global wave of infections, by the fall of 2020 large-scale outbreaks affected much of the region. Over the next two years, citizens were forced to adapt to the changing environment and to lockdowns, economic shocks, and the rising cost of living, among other challenges.

The effects of COVID-19 on the region have been examined from a number of perspectives, especially the tragic loss of human life. Initially, much of the focus was on the public health angle, thinking about the challenges that COVID-19 posed to healthcare systems and the weaknesses it exposed. Additionally, the pandemic's economic costs have received substantial attention, including the costs for everyday lives. Lockdowns forced hardships on many households whose members may not have been able to work, while subsequent shortages in supply chains have led to rising costs for goods.

What has received less attention is how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the views and attitudes of ordinary citizens toward their governments and toward each other in the MENA region. The pandemic has the possibility to affect relations between citizens and their governments: ordinary people may blame governments for the perceived failure to protect their health and economic security. It also may affect how they view their governments' justifications for limiting their basic rights or freedoms, seeing as how most governments across the region restricted basic liberties (such as freedom of movement) in the name of public health. Finally, this crisis may have changed how citizens view each other. Social relations were vastly affected during lockdowns, with households being forced to remain together, for example.

Using data from Arab Barometer, the region's largest publicly available source for public opinion data, this essay considers the changes in the views and attitudes of ordinary citizens as a result of the pandemic. The survey found that confidence in government remains low in the MENA region, although this trend does not appear to be dramatically affected by the coronavirus pandemic. However, a more detailed analysis suggests that the longer-term economic challenges that emerged from the pandemic may further hurt the standing of governments in their citizens' eyes. In terms of views of rights, perhaps counterintuitively, the survey found that most citizens were more likely to say they enjoyed basic rights than before the pandemic, but this likely relates to their comparison of the state of their rights today versus the heavy restrictions that existed during the early pandemic era. Additionally, the survey found that citizens were reluctant to give up their basic rights even during times of emergencies such as COVID-19. Finally, this essay examines the growing support for women's equality across the MENA region. Although a majority still favored men having power in both the public and private spheres, there has been a recent shift in favor of greater equality. Most likely, this comes down to shifts in daily life brought about by the pandemic and is similar to shifts in favor of gender equality observed in other regions of the world.

Domestic Political Actors

For much of the 2010s, perceptions of government had been worsening in the MENA region. Broadly speaking, citizens were losing faith in their governments and other political actors and in these actors' ability to resolve long-standing challenges, such as low economic growth; high unemployment, especially among youth; and quality public services. The pandemic represented not only a unique challenge but also an opportunity for governments to work toward rebuilding trust with their populations. If MENA governments were able to effectively manage this crisis, they reasoned, it could lead publics to have greater confidence in their ability to address other challenges. In fact, the governments that took drastic steps, including lockdowns and closing borders, fared quite well in the initial days of the pandemic. These actions appeared to have delayed the spread of COVID-19 in most MENA countries. Results from Arab Barometer Wave 6—conducted between July 2020 and April 2021—suggested that citizens strongly supported such measures and rewarded governments that took decisive action in the name of protecting public health.

Yet, the benefits did not last. By fall 2020, most countries in the region had experienced a significant outbreak of the disease, which had dramatic effects on citizens in the region. It also changed how citizens rated governments and their performance overall. As quickly as long-standing trends had given way to greater confidence in governments, the initial gains in confidence were largely lost as governments failed to contain the virus in the medium term.

As the pandemic progressed, the broader effects became clearer. Not only were many lives lost and health systems put under severe strain, but economic outcomes also worsened. Supply chain shortages contributed to significant increases in the cost of living across much of the region. Even governments that had managed the pandemic relatively effectively, such as Morocco, found citizens coming under economic strain from the lasting effects of the pandemic.

Three key emerging challenges were access to basic necessities, a rising cost of living, and increasing economic inequality. In half of the twelve countries that Arab Barometer surveyed between October 2021 and July 2022, more than half of citizens said that within the last year they had run out of food before they had money to buy more. Although this was the first time Arab Barometer included this question, meaning trend data are not available, the degree of hunger in a set of mostly middle-income countries is particularly striking.

Second, there was a strong perception that the rising cost of living was a growing challenge. In most countries surveyed, this was the most common response to the biggest problem that resulted from the pandemic. When respondents were asked to choose among eight potential options, at least one in five chose the rising cost of living. Similarly, when asked about the most important step governments in the region could take to fix economic conditions, lowering the cost of living was, on average, the second most important step after creating jobs. Overall, when asked to pick among eight potential actions, at least one in five (in seven of twelve countries surveyed) selected limiting rising costs as the most important step governments could take.

Rising economic inequality was widely perceived as another major problem across the region. In all twelve countries surveyed, clear majorities said they were concerned about the wealth gap, including at least three-quarters of respondents in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Tunisia. Meanwhile, in six of ten countries where the question was included, half or more said that this gap had increased over the past year, including 83 percent in Jordan, 82 percent in Egypt, and 74 percent in Lebanon.

Views of government appeared strongly linked with concerns about these economic challenges. In none of the nine countries where the question was included in the 2021–2022 wave of the Arab Barometer did a majority say they had confidence in their government. In more than half of the countries, fewer than a third said they trusted their government a great deal or quite a lot.

Isolating the exact effect of COVID-19 on levels of trust in government is challenging in light of confounding events that have also affected public perceptions. For example, despite the desperate situation faced by Tunisia during the pandemic, the election of populist President Kais Saied and his subsequent effective coup in July 2021 more likely affected views of the government than did the pandemic. In this case, Tunisians expressed more confidence in the government in fall 2021 than they did in 2018. Lebanon, a country that underwent a complete financial collapse in 2019, reveals the opposite trend. Although citizens were surely concerned about the government's weak response to COVID-19, the financial crisis more likely accounted for the decline from 19 percent to 8 percent of respondents who trusted the government over the same period.

The cases of Jordan and Morocco provide additional insight, particularly given that COVID-19 represented the primary challenge faced by both countries during this period. In the case of Jordan, perceptions of government emerged worse than before the pandemic. Although the government's performance was initially strong and delayed the onset of the coronavirus, by late 2020 Jordan was confronting the worst and deadliest COVID-19 outbreak in the region. Even if there was little the government could do to prevent the virus from entering Jordan, public perceptions of the government fell by 7 points from 2018 to 2022. In contrast, although Morocco also suffered heavily from COVID-19, the trust in government increased during this period. It is plausible that since the government was one of the most ambitious in the region in securing vaccines at an early stage of the pandemic, the public rewarded the government for its relatively strong performance on the issue. Yet, additional analysis suggests other factors may be at play instead.

When asked specifically about how the government did responding to COVID-19, there is relatively little variation. In the vast majority of countries, citizens did not believe that the government did overly well, but they did not blame the government extensively for its handing either. In eight of the eleven countries where the question was asked, between 44 and 62 percent of respondents said the government had done a good or very good job managing the pandemic. In the case of Jordan and Morocco, there was effectively no perceived difference in how the government managed the pandemic, with Jordan at 55 percent and Morocco at 53 percent, suggesting that the divergent changes in levels of trust in government during this period may not be linked with government performance on COVID-19. Notably, in most countries surveyed, ratings of the government's performance of managing the coronavirus were substantially higher than levels of trust in government.

However, there was a clear correlation between views of how the government managed COVID-19 and levels of trust in government. On average across the region, those who said the government did well on the pandemic were more than twice as likely to say they trusted the government compared to those who said the government did not do well. Although managing COVID-19 well did not yield greater trust for all citizens, it appears that a government's perceived success at handing the crisis could improve citizens' confidence in their government overall.

Still, for the longer term, opportunities to rebuild levels of trust in government are likely to be limited. Even if the COVID-19 pandemic's effect on healthcare systems passes, the longer-term effects from the pandemic and other global challenges, particularly rising cost of living, are likely to grow in importance. Most likely, citizens will return to judging their governments based more on economic performance than on their management of the pandemic.

Economic Concerns

Perceptions of the economy were unfavorable across most of the region. Among countries surveyed, only in Kuwait, a state with vast oil wealth, did a majority rate economic conditions as good or very good. In ten of the remaining eleven countries, at most a third said the economic situation was positive. These levels were extremely low in Jordan (15 percent), Tunisia (14 percent), Sudan (13 percent), and Lebanon (less than 1 percent).

Ratings of the economy were low even before the pandemic and have since declined in some countries. For example, in Jordan nearly a quarter (23 percent) said the economy was good in 2018 compared to 15 percent in 2022, an 8-point decline. Notably, this continues a dramatic decline that predates COVID-19, with the figure having fallen from 46 percent in 2016.

However, domestic events also played a role beyond the challenges from COVID-19. In Tunisia, economic ratings remained low, with 14 percent saying the economy was good—a 7-point increase from 2018. Most likely, this somewhat more favorable perception was in response to Saied's actions in July 2021 more than changes to the economy itself relating to COVID-19. Initially, Saied's closure of parliament was very popular, and Tunisians became far more hopeful about their economic future. Meanwhile, in Lebanon, ratings fell from 14 percent saying the economy was good in 2018 to less than 1 percent in 2022. This outcome may reflect the challenges from COVID-19 but also reflects the financial collapse of the country in the fall of 2019, when the currency lost upward of 90 percent of its value.

To evaluate the perceived effects of COVID-19, Arab Barometer asked citizens what they believed was the biggest challenge to emerge out of the pandemic. In most countries surveyed, the plurality of citizens named the rising cost of living. In Egypt (40 percent), Tunisia (35 percent), and Mauritania (33 percent), at least one in three held this view. In the vast majority of countries, nearly a quarter or more did.

At the same time, it appears that citizens were more likely to feel the impacts of rising costs than a complete lack of basic goods. In all countries surveyed, fewer than one in five said that the biggest challenge resulting from COVID-19 was a decreased availability of necessities. In most countries, fewer than one in ten held this view.

The effect of rising costs was made clear by the challenges citizens had affording basic necessities. In nine of the twelve countries surveyed, at least half of respondents said it was often or sometimes true over the past year that they worried that their supply of food would run out before they had money to buy more. In fact, at least two-thirds reported this happening in the past year in Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, and Sudan.

When asked if they had actually run out of food in the past year, in half of the countries surveyed a majority said yes. In Egypt, Mauritania, and Sudan, more than six in ten said they had run out of food in the last twelve months. For the most part, this wave of surveys was completed before Russia invaded Ukraine, meaning that the ensuing rise in inflation and global shortages had not yet been felt by publics. In other words, in most countries surveyed, this was the picture of food security in MENA that was emerging after the breakout of COVID-19 but before subsequent global events made the situation worse.

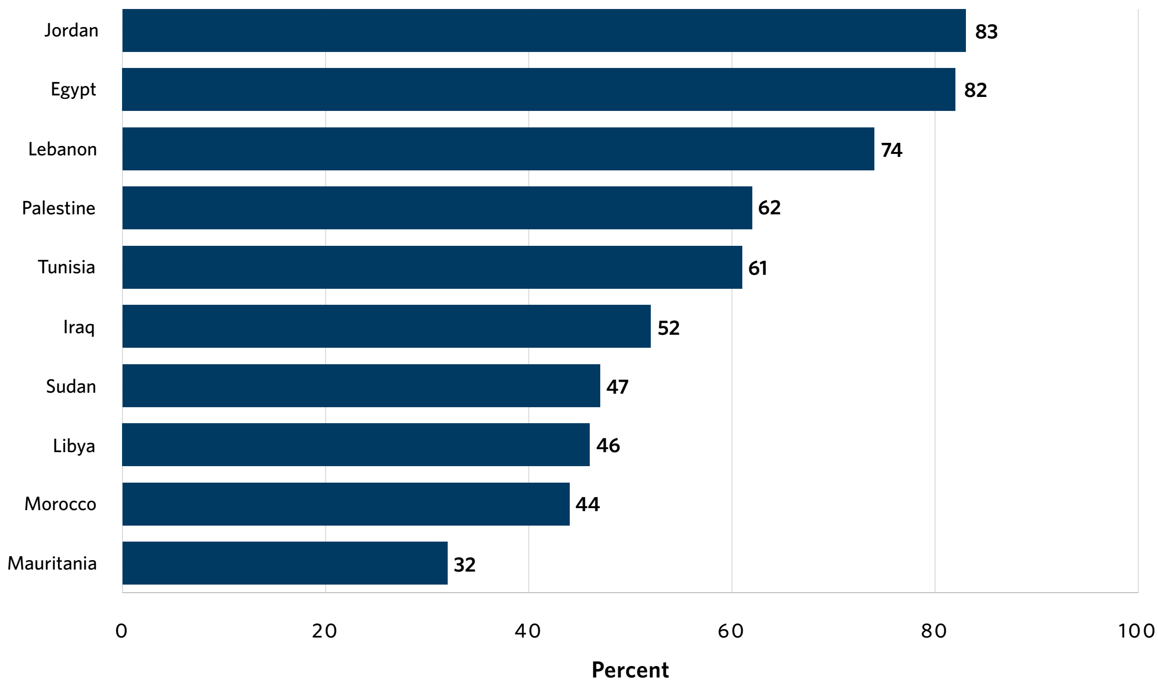
Despite these challenges, few in the region reported receiving help to mitigate the situation. In ten of eleven countries where the question was asked, at least three-quarters said they did not receive any kind of relief aid during the pandemic. The key exception was Morocco, where only about half (53 percent) reported receiving no assistance. In Morocco, the key source of assistance was in fact the government, with 61 percent of those who received help saying it came from the national government. In half of the other countries as well, the national government was listed as being the primary source of assistance. However, given the relatively small percentage that received assistance, it is clear that in most countries, many if not the majority of those in need did not receive the financial assistance that they needed to help weather the pandemic.

Yet, the results also suggest that citizens did not believe that all citizens in their country were affected equally. In part, this stems from broad concerns about the wealth gap that is observed across the region. In all twelve countries surveyed, clear majorities said that the gap between the rich and the poor was problematic to a great or medium extent. In half of the countries surveyed, at least three-quarters held this view, including 92 percent in Jordan and 87 percent in Egypt. Moreover, in six of ten countries where the question was asked, at least half said that compared with twelve months prior, the wealth gap had widened (see figure 1). This sentiment was particularly prevalent in Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon, where about three-quarters or more said it was increasing. In three of the remaining countries, almost half (between 44 percent and 47 percent) said the wealth gap was increasing. Mauritania was the singular surveyed country where only a minority of citizens (32 percent) said the wealth gap had increased.

Overall, these results paint a troubling economic picture across the region. Although not all of these outcomes can be linked directly with the coronavirus pandemic, it is clear that citizens perceived their fortunes to be declining during this period. Although not a majority, a sizeable percentage of citizens said that the primary challenge from the pandemic was not health-related but instead an effect on their personal economic outcomes. As people go hungry in many countries that are formally considered middle income, the toll of the last few years becomes clear. Whether governments have the will or capacity to meaningfully address these challenges remains to be seen. However, for the most part, they have not done so effectively over the previous decade. As COVID-19 exacerbates long-standing challenges facing the region, governments will be forced to find solutions under even more difficult circumstances. If they do not, then it is likely views of government will decline even further due, at least in part, to the long-lasting effects from the pandemic.

Figure 1. Change In Wealth Gap

Percent saying in comparison to one year ago, the gap between rich and poor was wider



Source: "Arab Barometer Wave VII: October 2021–July 2022," https://www.arabbarometer.org/surveys/arab-barometer-wave-vii.

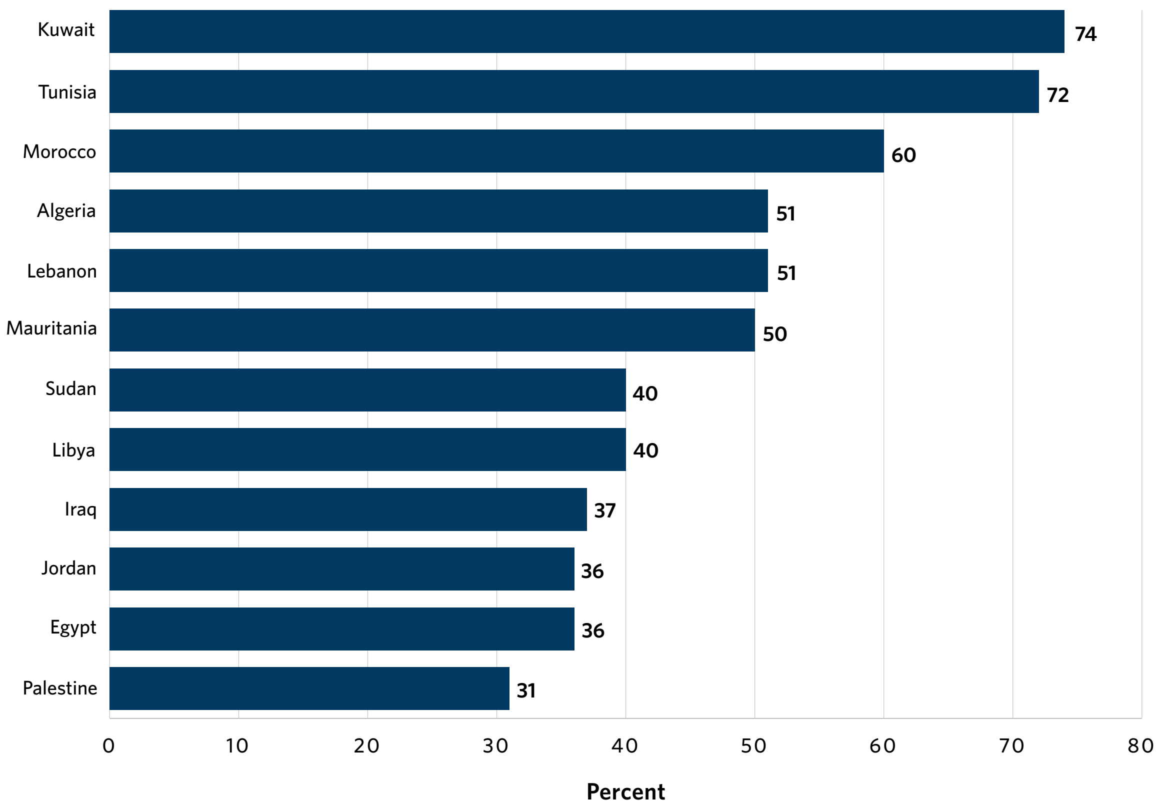
Changes to Basic Rights

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a number of restrictions on basic activities in the name of public health, particularly freedom of movement or assembly. In many countries, governments enforced strict lockdowns to try to limit or slow the spread of the virus, in part to help hospitals cope with the caseload. However, some governments took additional steps, including limiting freedom of speech or of the press, ostensibly to prevent the spread of unsubstantiated rumors or false information about COVID-19. In fact, the public emergency measures were often used as a means of limiting criticism of the government and its actions during the pandemic.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, citizens across the MENA region were divided on the degree to which they felt their basic rights were guaranteed after the pandemic. In nine of the twelve countries surveyed, at most about half said that the freedom to express opinions was guaranteed to a great or medium extent (see figure 2). This level ranged from 51 percent in Lebanon and Algeria to just 31 percent in Palestine. The key exceptions were Kuwait (74 percent), Tunisia (72 percent), and Morocco (60 percent), where a clear majority believed this right was guaranteed, at least to a medium extent.

Figure 2. Freedom To Express Opinions

Percent saying guaranteed to a great or medium extent



Source: "Arab Barometer Wave VII: October 2021–July 2022," https://www.arabbarometer.org/surveys/arab-barometer-wave-vii.

Although relatively few felt that the basic right to freedom of expression was guaranteed, the trends in most countries actually suggest that citizens felt they had greater freedom of speech in 2021 and 2022 than they did before the pandemic. In Libya, Sudan, Kuwait, and Morocco, citizens were more than ten points more likely to say that this basic freedom was guaranteed in 2021–2022, at least to a medium extent, than they were in 2018–2019 just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. There were also increases of 7 points in Lebanon and 6 points in Tunisia on this measure. To some extent, these changes may not be entirely linked with COVID-19; for example, the rise in Sudan may be due to the increased liberties gained from the protest movement that began in late 2019. However, it is notable that even in cases like Morocco and Lebanon, which did not experience similar changes, there was a perceived increase, suggesting that perhaps citizens felt that as restrictions on their basic rights were lifted more generally, their rights seemed more guaranteed than they did before the pandemic.

However, this trend does not hold up in all countries. In Jordan in 2022, citizens were 18 points less likely to say their right to freedom of expression was guaranteed than they were before the pandemic, while Palestine exhibited a 9-point decrease. Notably, Jordan instituted one of the world's strictest lockdowns in the early days of the pandemic in the name of stopping the virus from entering the country. However, at the time of the survey, it did not appear that citizens believed all of their rights to freedom of speech had fully recovered since the pandemic started. In Palestine, the decrease in citizens' saying their freedom of expression was protected may be tied less to the pandemic and more to some of the changing perceptions of basic rights associated with governments in the West Bank and in Gaza, as well as increasing tensions and greater restrictions as a result of the Israeli occupation.

Restrictions on mass gatherings are more in line with measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 according to public health experts. Across the MENA region, perceptions about the extent to which freedom of assembly was protected was lower than for freedom of speech. A clear majority said they enjoyed freedom of assembly in just one of the eleven countries where this question was asked. In most countries surveyed, about four in ten or less said the right to demonstrate peacefully was guaranteed to a great or medium extent, including just 27 percent in Palestine, 25 percent in Jordan, and 12 percent in Egypt. The key exception was Tunisia, the country that has been most democratic since 2011 in the region, where 61 percent of citizens still said this right was guaranteed.

However, a similar trend emerges when examining changes over time, with a widespread perception that the right to demonstrate peacefully was more guaranteed in 2021 and 2022 than it was before the pandemic. In countries for which trend data are available, there have been increases in six countries, including by 20 points in Sudan, 13 points in Tunisia, 12 points in Libya, and 10 points in Lebanon, since shortly before the pandemic struck. Although in some cases, like Sudan, this most likely represents a meaningful change in the legal rights enjoyed by citizens, elsewhere this may reflect the sense that restrictions on people gathering had been lifted since the early days of the pandemic. Even if there has been no meaningful improvement since the 2018–2019 period in most countries, the comparison to a time when all gatherings were formally restricted in many countries may result in citizens saying that their basic rights are more guaranteed than before the pandemic.

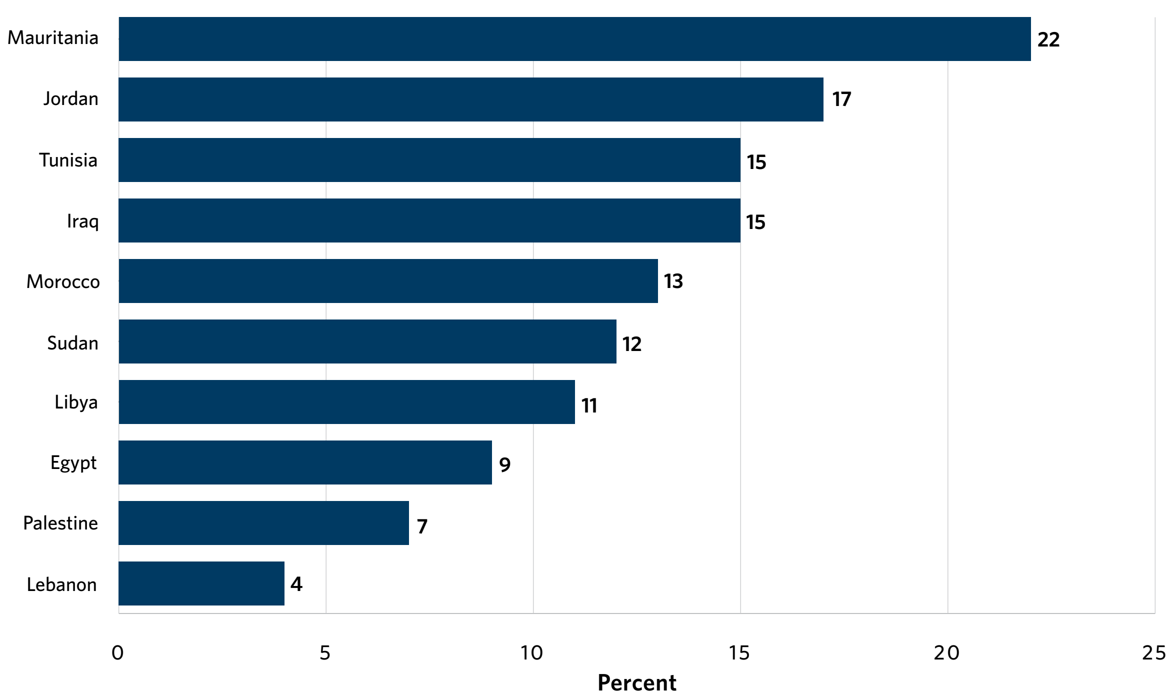
Again, the two key exceptions to this trend are Jordan (-18 points) and Palestine (-12 points). As with perceptions about freedom of expression, these changes are most likely a result of the stringent restriction of movement in Jordan at the beginning of the pandemic and a sense that these rights have not since been restored. In Palestine, movement of people is often restricted by Palestinian authorities or the Israeli occupation, so these numbers may again reflect this reality.

The issue of basic rights, particularly restrictions on essential freedoms, takes on a renewed importance in societies where these rights have often been restricted. Although limiting rights in the name of protecting public health may have been important, there remains a question of whether publics across the region are willing to accept such restrictions. Results from Arab Barometer make clear that publics are mostly accepting of such restrictions under certain circumstances, but very few are willing to give their governments carte blanche approval to restrict them any time there is a public emergency. For example, only in Mauritania did more than one in five citizens say the government should *always* be able to limit freedom of speech during a public emergency (see figure 3). In Egypt (9 percent), Palestine (7 percent), and Lebanon (4 percent), fewer than one in ten held this view.

However, the pandemic has likely influenced how citizens feel about this issue. In many cases, citizens said that it is sometimes justified to restrict freedom of speech during public emergencies. This perception was highest in Kuwait (55 percent), followed by Algeria (52 percent) and Libya (48 percent). However, only about a third of respondents in Lebanon (36 percent), Egypt (36 percent), Sudan (34 percent), and Iraq (33 percent) felt the same. Notably, Egypt, Sudan, and Iraq were all countries that experienced long periods during which state of emergency laws were implemented, suggesting these historical legacies may account for a greater reluctance to cede basic rights even in times of crisis.

Figure 3. Freedom of Speech During Public Emergencies

Percent saying it is always justifiable for the government to limit freedom of speech during a public emergency



Source: “Arab Barometer Wave VII: October 2021–July 2022,” https://www.arabbarometer.org/surveys/arab-barometer-wave-vii.

However, in most countries, pluralities if not outright majorities said that it is never acceptable to limit freedom of speech during times of emergency. In four cases—Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, and Sudan—at least half said these rights should never be compromised. In the remining eight countries, between four in ten (Morocco) and about three in ten (Kuwait) said the same.

However, there was a somewhat greater willingness to accept restrictions on the media during times of crisis. In seven of the twelve countries surveyed, between a fifth and a third of citizens said it was *always* justifiable to censor the media during a public emergency. Only in Egypt and Palestine did fewer than 15 percent hold this view. In most countries, a plurality said that it was sometimes justifiable to censor the media during a time of crisis. In most countries surveyed, this ranged between 40 and 50 percent, although the percentage was only about a third in Iraq (36 percent), Mauritania (35 percent), and Sudan (31 percent).

Meanwhile, in eight of twelve countries, a third or fewer said it was never justifiable to censor the media during a time of emergency. This belief was lowest in Algeria (24 percent) and Kuwait (23 percent). However, in Sudan (46 percent), Palestine (45 percent), and Iraq (41 percent), pluralities said that this action was never justified during a time of emergency.

These findings highlight shifting views on the issues of basic rights across the region. As before the pandemic, in most countries, minorities said that these rights were guaranteed, but the pandemic may have shifted expectations. In most countries surveyed, citizens were more likely to say they enjoyed basic rights than shortly before the onset of COVID-19. As restrictions have been lifted, citizens may feel that rights have improved, even if this is not an actual change from the pre-pandemic period. However, citizens were largely unwilling to say their governments should be able to curtail these rights during any public emergency. Although many were willing to accept this under at least some circumstances, this was not universally held, and citizens demonstrated that they prefer their governments to tackle these challenges while still guaranteeing their civil rights.

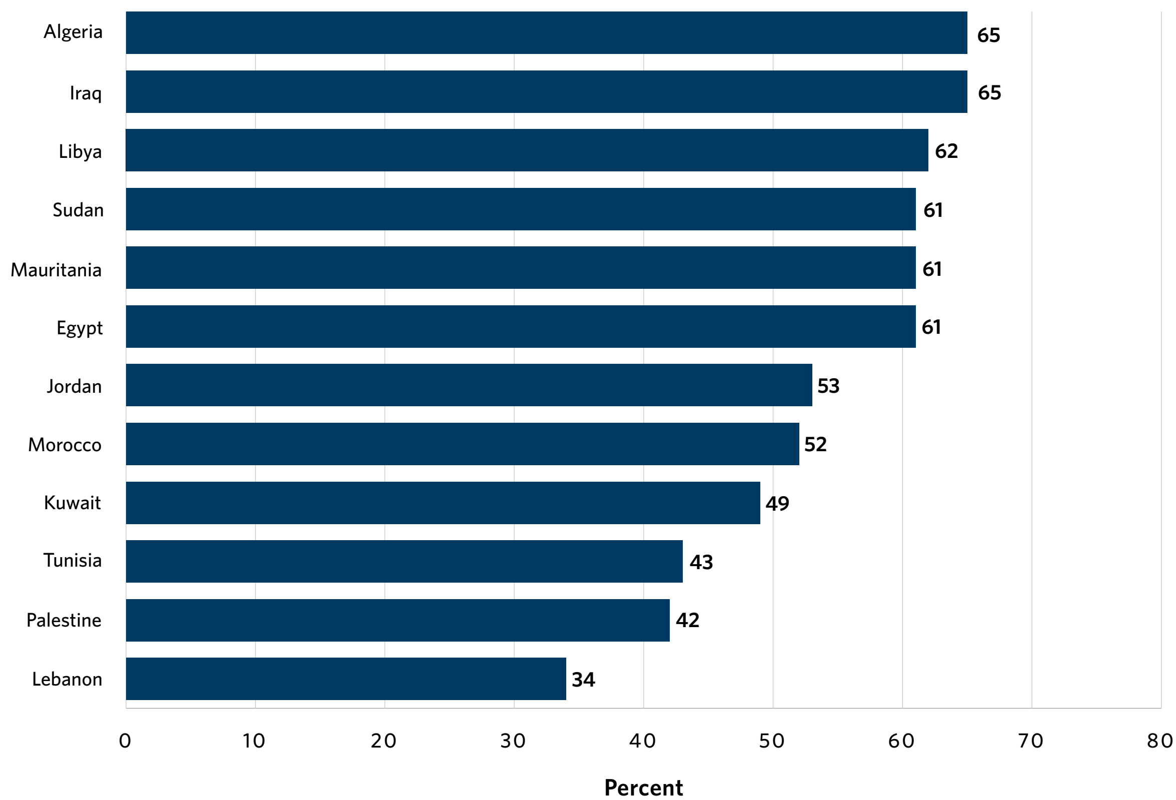
Gender

Evidence from around the world suggests that COVID-19 affected not only relationships between citizens and their governments but also within the family unit. Many of these changes have had a disproportionate impact on women. Globally, women appear more likely to have suffered job losses resulting from the pandemic compared to men. However, there may be some positive changes well, particularly related to perceptions of gender roles. Namely, as lockdowns brought men and women into closer contact within the home environment, perceptions of women's roles appear to have changed.

Results from Arab Barometer suggest that in most countries citizens are now more likely to say women should have equal say within the home than they did before the pandemic. However, this does not mean women are viewed equally. When asked if a man should have

Figure 4. Gender Equality in the Household

Percent saying they strongly agree or agree that men should have the final say in all decisions concerning the family



Source: "Arab Barometer Wave VII: October 2021–July 2022," https://www.arabbarometer.org/surveys/arab-barometer-wave-vii.

the final say in all decisions concerning the family, about half or more agreed in nine out of twelve countries surveyed (see figure 4). The perception that men should be given the final say was most prevalent in Algeria and Iraq (65 percent). In contrast, fewer than half said men should have the final say in the household in Tunisia (43 percent), Palestine (42 percent), and Lebanon (34 percent).

Changes over time do suggest that support for women's equality within a household did improve during the period of the pandemic. In six countries, the percentage of citizens who said a man should have final say within the household declined significantly from 2018–2019 to 2021–2022. The most notable declines in this view were found in Lebanon (-16 points), Sudan (-13 points), Kuwait (-13 points), and Tunisia (-11 points), while meaningful declines also occurred in Palestine (-9 points), Algeria (-6 points), and Iraq (-5 points). Meanwhile, in Libya and Jordan, there was no discernable trend, while in Morocco there was a 6-point increase. In other words, with a single exception, views of women's role within the household have either been unchanged or, in the majority of cases, have shifted toward equality during the course of the pandemic.

Support for women's equality by a second measure also increased during the period of the pandemic. In this case, the shift was in the views of women's role in the public sphere. The degree to which this change was directly linked with the pandemic is not fully clear, although it is possible that higher views of women within the home may translate into greater support for women's equality in the public sphere. In large part, this may be due to the relatively strong link between support for greater equality for women in the private sphere and in the public sphere. Evidence from the United States has demonstrated this linkage, as has other research. Although support for women's equality in the public sphere lags that in the private sphere, it appears that the changes in views of women within the home during the coronavirus pandemic may have spilled over into views of women in the public sphere.

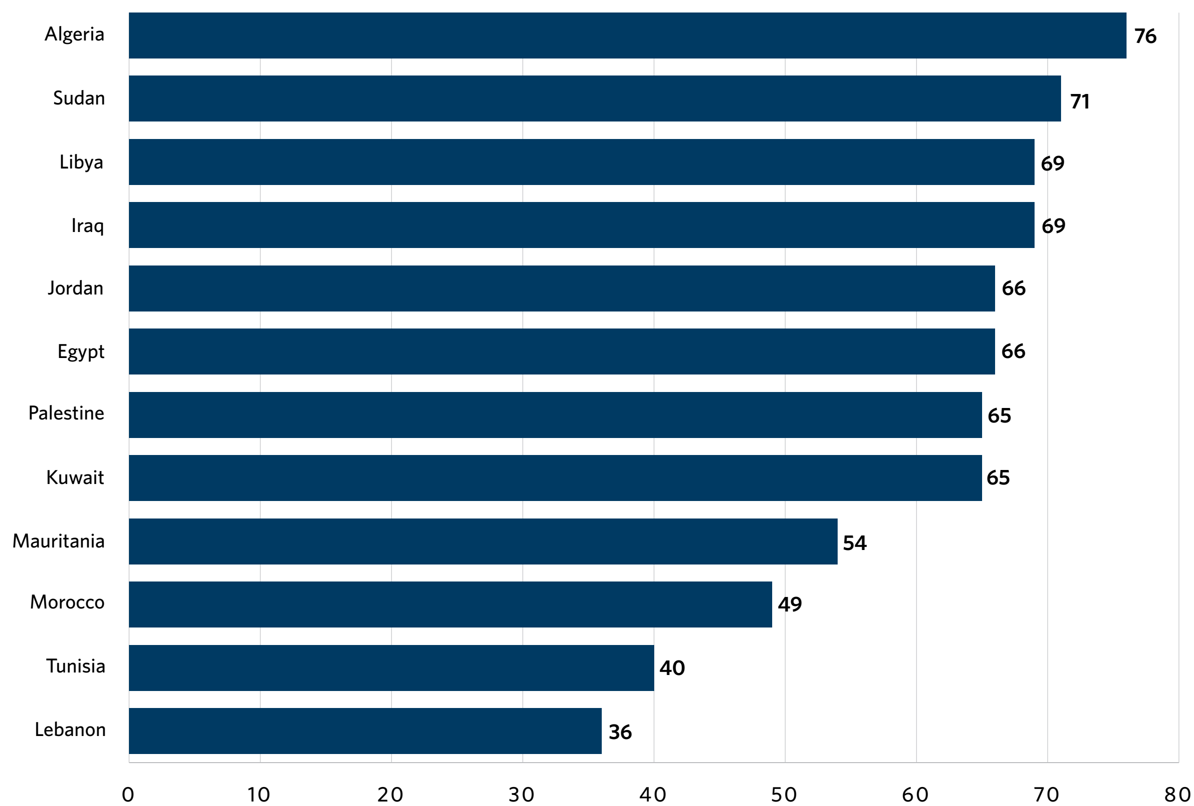
To evaluate this possibility, Arab Barometer included a question about whether men make better political leaders than women. By this measure as well, views of women are trending toward greater equality. Nevertheless, most citizens in the region still believed that women were not equal to men as political leaders (see figure 5). In eight of twelve countries surveyed, about two-thirds or more affirmed that men were better at political leadership. This perception was particularly strong in Algeria (76 percent) and Sudan (71 percent). Only in Morocco (49 percent), Tunisia (40 percent), and Lebanon (36 percent) did half or fewer agree with this view.

Similarly, in six countries, views of women's equality in the political sphere increased during this period. This was especially true in Tunisia, where citizens were 16 points less likely to say men were better at political leadership than they were before the pandemic. Some of this change may be due to the appointment of Tunisia's first female prime minister shortly before the survey, but the fact that the trend extends to additional countries suggests a broader pattern. Other meaningful changes were observed in Lebanon (-14 points), Sudan (-11 points), Kuwait (-9 points), Jordan (-9 points), and Palestine (-5 points). In Iraq, the trend was effectively unchanged taking into account the margin of error, while in Morocco (+14 points) and Algeria (+4 points), the trend moved in the opposite direction away from women's equality.

These results demonstrate that COVID-19 likely had effects on social relations as well. In most countries in the MENA region, views of women's roles in society had been relatively stable over much of the previous decade. This shift across numerous countries could be the result of other factors, and the magnitude of change within each country likely relates to country-specific conditions; however, the broader shift toward women's equality across the region is most likely related to changes from the pandemic. This result is particularly noteworthy, suggesting that views toward women in both public and private spheres are linked, meaning changes that ensued from COVID-19 have likely benefited women's equality beyond the home.

Figure 5. Gender Equality in the Public Sphere

Percent saying they strongly agree or agree that, in general, men are better at political leadership than women



Source: "Arab Barometer Wave VII: October 2021–July 2022," https://www.arabbarometer.org/surveys/arab-barometer-wave-vii.

Conclusion

These results from Arab Barometer make clear that in addition to the known changes that have taken place in health and economic outcomes, among others, MENA publics are also changed. COVID-19 has exacerbated many long-standing challenges that governments in the region must address, particularly on the economic front. Although citizens do not appear to be much more likely to blame their governments coming out of this pandemic, if these broader issues cannot be solved in the years ahead, this is likely to change.

The survey also makes clear that citizens are worried about their basic civil rights, with relatively few saying these are guaranteed. Despite perceptions that citizens' rights are more assured than they were shortly before COVID-19, there are reasons to believe that this effect may be temporary. Citizens are mostly unwilling to cede their basic rights during any event the government deems to be an emergency, indicating a broader desire for these rights to be respected.

Finally, in terms of everyday social interactions, the results strongly suggest that COVID-19 has changed how citizens think about women's rights. This finding accords with evidence from other regions around the globe, suggesting a broader trend. It is possible that this will not hold over time and that old patterns will reemerge, but for now it suggests that women have made tangible gains in their quest for greater equality across the MENA region.

CHAPTER 6

Islamist Adaptation and Change in the Arab World

Courtney Freer

Sunni Islamists long enjoyed a unique advantage in electoral settings across the Middle East, whether due to their ability to implement social welfare networks; their power to play on religiosity to mobilize electoral support; or their skill in attracting followers on the basis of a religious ideology, which governments of Muslim-majority states are hesitant to repress. And yet, in the decade since the 2011 Arab revolutions and uprisings, initial electoral victories in Tunisia and Egypt have given way to a seeming reversal of fortune for Sunni Islamist movements and parties across the region, especially the Muslim Brotherhood. A powerful bloc of anti-Islamist Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have labeled these movements as terrorist organizations and have repeatedly denigrated them: for example, the Emirati foreign minister famously dubbed the Muslim Brotherhood "the gateway drug" to jihadism. Such disparagement has severely diminished both the governance capacity and coherence of Islamists and their image among Arab publics. In tandem, internal divisions, fragmentations, and shortcomings within Muslim Brotherhood groups that attained power have contributed to their demise—or at least their serious loss of popularity. Further damaging the Brotherhood's brand and showing the reach of anti-Islamist activism on the international stage, the UK and United States have considered designating it a terrorist group. And finally, historic state backers of the Brotherhood, most notably Türkiye, appear willing to deny haven and support to Brotherhood political networks and media outlets. Allegedly, Türkiye arrested thirty-four members of the Muslim Brotherhood who had encouraged protests in Egypt during the COP27 climate conference in November—notably a claim that Turkish authorities have denied but that garnered considerable media attention.

Given these misfortunes, the Brotherhood's historic sources of appeal and comparative advantage—electoral skill, service provision, ideological guidance, and state sponsors—have now become political liabilities in the minds of many Arab citizens, particularly in Egypt and Tunisia. In those states, the Muslim Brotherhood is increasingly associated with majoritarian or illiberal practices in electoral settings and with radical Islamist movements.

Given this new environment, Sunni Islamists in the post–Arab Spring era are less likely to focus solely on electoral mobilization and will become increasingly dedicated to national issues (rather than regional ones). Further, it is worth highlighting that not all Islamist groups across the region have changed their programs significantly since the Arab Spring, yet they may alter their priorities and tactics in the face of new economic challenges since the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Islamists and Electoral Power: The Cases of Tunisia and Egypt

Although the protests of the Arab Spring began as largely nonideological mass movements aimed at improving the lives of citizens by advancing economic development and political reform, Islamist groups quickly emerged as the main beneficiaries of regime changes in 2011. After twenty-eight days of mass protests broke out across Tunisia following the self-immolation of street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi on December 17, 2010, Tunisian president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, who had been in office since 1987, resigned on January 14, 2011, and fled to Saudi Arabia. Elections for a constituent assembly were held in October 2011, and the previously banned Sunni Islamist party Ennahda won the most seats, nearly 41 percent of seats in total. In comparison, the second most successful party, the Congress for the Republic, won only 14 percent of seats. Notably, Ennahda, once elected, chose to rule in a coalition government with two secular parties that, by 2018–2019, together controlled 64 percent of seats in parliament. Over the course of the first parliamentary session, the issue of the appropriate place of Islam in public life was raised—particularly since the Ben Ali government had aggressively pursued secularism, to such an extent that the hijab had been banned in public institutions. The first government had to contend with these debates while discussing the country's new constitution and in the context of increased violent attacks by Salafist group Ansar al-Sharia, which Ennahda had initially welcomed to join the political process.

A new constitution was passed in 2014, and the secular party Nidaa Tounes won the presidency and the most seats (eighty-five) in parliament. But its leader, president Beji Caid Essebsi, chose to rule in a coalition government that included Ennahda. The two parties were used to working together, because even at its height, Ennahda had only ever won a plurality but never a majority in the Tunisian parliament. So, its members had been forced to form coalitions with secular parties, chief among them Nidaa Tounes. Essebsi was more willing to work with Ennahda, given that, in his words, the party was "becoming Tunisified." The formation of the coalition government, specifically between 2014 and 2019, demonstrated the "dark side of consensus," as it in turn led to gridlock in parliament. Indeed, the coalition sought to avoid the secular-Islamist polarization that emerged in Egypt after the military overthrew the regime of the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi in 2013, discussed in greater detail below. To do so, however, Tunisia's coalition often chose to table or avoid issues that could have led to division, namely security sector reform, the place of Islam in society, and transitional justice. As veteran politicians proved unable to reach consensus on major issues in parliament, however, so-called outsiders were voted in the 2019 election, chief among them Kais Saied who won the presidency by a landslide.

Saied in July 2021 issued an emergency declaration sacking the prime minister, freezing parliament, and subsuming all executive power. In July 2022, a new constitution was passed, removing many checks on executive power that had been put in place in the 2014 document: now, the president can appoint the prime minister and cabinet, and the legislature has been weakened and divided into two houses. Despite such changes, which have spurred considerable conversation in the academic and policy worlds, there has not been a massive public uprising against these moves, although protests have emerged in 2023. Large-scale mobilization has not thus far effected change, possibly because a "trust deficit has led a majority of Tunisians to support the exceptional measures Saied took in July 2021, believing he cannot do any worse than the democratically elected governments of the last decade."

Egypt saw a similar outcome of military-backed authoritarianism after a period of elected Islamist rule. Large protests broke out in Cairo on January 25, 2011, eventually spreading across the country. The protests coincided with an annual police holiday as a statement against police brutality, which had increased markedly in the later years of the Hosni Mubarak regime. Violence emerged, as did clashes with security forces. Protesters focused primarily on forcing the downfall of the Mubarak regime, as protesters in Tunisia had done with the Ben Ali government. On February 11, 2011, Egyptian vice president Omar Suleiman announced that Mubarak would cede power to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. Parliamentary elections were held between November 2011 and January 2012 under a new election law. The Muslim Brotherhood had formed the Freedom and Justice Party to contest the elections and, along with twenty-seven other parties, joined an alliance called the Democratic Alliance for Egypt. The Freedom and Justice Party dominated the eleven-party ruling coalition, however, fielding the overwhelming majority of candidates and winning 47 percent of seats; meanwhile, the Salafist Nour Party took 24 percent of seats.

In the June 2012 elections, Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi became president. Over the course of his thirteen-month rule, Morsi made a series of decisions that spurred considerable contestation. For one, the Morsi administration favored its own members in political positions and decisionmaking. Further, Morsi controversially issued a presidential decree that allowed his decisions about judicial review to bypass the constitution, claiming that he was doing so to protect the revolution. Morsi also attempted to proclaim sharia as the source of legislation in the country and to introduce a requirement for legislation related to sharia to be reviewed by Al-Azhar, Egypt's preeminent Islamic institution. Morsi's administration made the critical mistake, in the words of Ashraf El-Sherif, of "believing its electoral victory to be an irreversible popular mandate." Morsi's overreach spurred protests and the eventual overthrow of his government on July 3, 2013, by then minister of defense Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who has remained in power since that time and amended the constitution to strengthen the military's control over society and to extend his term in power.

Lessons From Islamist Experiences in Tunisia and Egypt

The experiences of Islamists in Tunisia and Egypt illustrate a number of dynamics and lessons about Islamists in institutionalized positions of political power, though these lessons are not applicable to all the countries of the region. First, these examples show that Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood strand after the Arab Spring have been willing to form coalitions with non-Islamist groups (traditionally seen as a sign of "moderation"). The results of these coalitions, however, differ greatly: Tunisia's Ennahda was seen as too willing to set aside its own agenda to reach consensus, whereas the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood was seen as too eager to push out competing political actors. The same action toward moderation, therefore, had opposite effects in the Tunisian and Egyptian political environments, although in both cases such actions resulted in a reputation for ineffective governance at best and dishonest governance at worst.

Second, many Islamists do, as suggested by their name, want to Islamize society and aim to change legislation to do so. As a result, they are sincerely and persistently committed to altering social policy even alongside a commitment to democratic principles. This tendency may create a paradox as Islamists use democratic means to put in place illiberal social policies, an arrangement that could foster a future of democracy in the Middle East that is "Islamist and illiberal." That said, so-called secular authoritarians in the Arab world, in their bid to undercut the power of Islamists in the social realm, are themselves enacting more illiberal social policies and attempting to exert greater control over the religious sector. This dynamic is evident in Tunisia under Saied, with the government's April 2023 arrest of Ennahda founder Rached Ghannouchi, implementation of policies targeting members of the LGBTQ community, and apparent incitement of violence against Black Africans. These steps underscore that the Tunisian president is becoming more socially illiberal than his former Islamist opponents.

Third, elected Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood strand can be pragmatists when it comes to electoral strategizing and forming coalitions, but this pragmatism appears limited in the face of ideological issues such as the implementation of sharia law. This dichotomy has fueled suspicion about the extent to which Islamists are truly committed to democratic practices and has generated substantial political and social polarization between the religious and secular segments of society.

Overall, between 1955 and 2022, Islamist parties won no more than 13 percent of parliamentary seats in the Muslim-majority world. Further, they have only been elected to single-party governments in two countries: Türkiye since 2002 and Egypt between 2012 and 2013. Otherwise, they have solely held institutionalized political power through coalitions. As such, the few cases where Islamists have gained institutionalized political power after the Arab Spring can teach limited, though important, lessons. Certainly, they only show a limited amount about Islamism as a whole, particularly since Islamist movements do far more than merely contest elections.

Weathering the Storm: Gulf Islamists During the Arab Spring

In the decade after the Arab Spring, the status quo in the Gulf largely remained intact. This is striking, particularly when considering the appearance of protest movements and of clearly articulated concerns from Gulf leaders about the rise of Sunni Islamist movements to power elsewhere in the region.

Bahrain saw the largest-scale Arab Spring–inspired protests, which were forcefully stopped with the help of the Gulf Cooperation Council's Peninsula Shield Force in February 2011. The Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni organization, has tended to support Bahrain's Sunni monarchy; the Brotherhood's former leader is also the current king's uncle and a former labor and social affairs minister. In contrast, the politically underrepresented Shia majority in Bahrain has been linked with opposition groups, although it is by no means the sole source of political opposition in the state. Notably, however, since the Arab Spring, Sunni Islamist groups in Bahrain have failed to articulate agendas independent enough of the ruling family to earn seats in parliament. Meanwhile, Shia groups have been effectively stifled, as they have become increasingly associated with opposition movements and thus subject to government surveillance and crackdowns. Opposition blocs were banned from contesting the most recent parliamentary elections, held in November 2022.

Kuwait saw the rise of a cross-ideological reform movement as early as 2010 as efforts to interpellate the prime minister on corruption charges gained momentum. Islamists did not gain substantial seats in parliament as a result of the Arab Spring, nor did they become the object of crackdowns. Instead, Kuwait's Shia and Sunni Islamists remained capable of contesting (and winning) seats in parliament and articulating specific policy preferences. Kuwait's most recent election, in September 2022, demonstrated the resilience of both Shia and Sunni Islamist messaging in elections: eight members of Sunni Islamist ideologies won seats, compared to nine Shias. They can work together in instances to call for reform, but the most powerful Shia Islamist political bloc in Kuwait, many of whose members are part of the urban merchant elite, have been reliably loyalist since 2008.

Qatar and the UAE did not experience protests during the Arab Spring, and yet there was a marked change in Emirati treatment of the Muslim Brotherhood in the aftermath of protests elsewhere. The Emirati leadership became outspoken in its denunciation of the group as one that threatened the very existence of the nation-state, despite the fact that the group had not been involved in protests, and indeed no protests emerged in 2011. Some members of the UAE's local Muslim Brotherhood affiliate, however, had signed a petition circulated among segments of the Emirati opposition that called for an expansion of the powers of the country's only elected body, the Federal National Council (FNC). As a result, government rhetoric began to conflate political opposition with Sunni Islamism. As recently as 2019, Emirati news sources claimed that the Muslim Brotherhood was targeting the UAE due to President and Abu Dhabi leader Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan's "commitment to Islamic moderation," fueling a narrative that cracking down on the Sunni group was necessary for regime survival.

In Qatar, many observers noted a shift in the state's treatment of Islamist groups—but in fact, the Qatari government was simply continuing the status quo prior to the Arab Spring. Indeed, the Qatari political leadership came to be associated increasingly with backing Islamist movements, largely due to its links with the Morsi government, growing ties with Türkiye, and involvement with certain Sunni militias in Syria. Despite this supposed predilection toward Sunni Islamism, however, no grassroots Islamist movement appeared to emerge in Qatar, aside from a secular call for reforms, primarily of the Qatari economy. Further, when Qatar held Shura Council elections for the first time in October 2021, platforms were associated with individuals rather than with parties, and there was no evidence of Islamist ideology at play.

Saudi Arabia experienced protests during the Arab Spring and responded by cracking down on Shia protesters primarily in Eastern Province, designating the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization in 2014, and moving increasingly toward secularizing reforms. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has also been embarking on a revision of Saudi Arabia's religious history, claiming that he is returning the state to moderate Islam and questioning what Wahhabism, long referenced as the state religion, is. Since 2017, several members of the Sahwa movement, a Sunni Islamist group that emerged in the 1990s, have been arrested seemingly due to anti-government activities.

Lessons Learned by Gulf Islamists: Co-optation, Loyalism, and Adaptation

In the Gulf, Islamists have not won or even contested a plurality of parliamentary seats for a variety of reasons, whether political opportunity structures or lack of popular support. So, these cases show four additional lessons about Islamism in the post–Arab Spring era.

First, Islamists are not necessarily oppositional political actors. The Gulf provides cases in which both Shia and Sunni Islamist groups are in fact loyalists. Bahrain's Muslim Brotherhood since the protest movement in 2011 has struggled to earn votes, as it has failed to develop an agenda sufficiently distinct from the ruling family to attract voters. Indeed, since 2011, "its agenda [has been] shaped by national context and a good relationship with the ruling Al Khalifa family, rather than ideology or any imagined connection to a transnational organization." Kuwait's Shia Islamists, previously oppositional in the 1990s, have been reliably pro-government voters in parliament since 2008, even before the Arab Spring.

Second, these loyalist Islamists, whether Shia or Sunni, appear to be reliably pro-regime, as evidenced again by the cases of Bahrain and Kuwait. In 2008, several Kuwaiti Shias were summoned by the Kuwaiti Public Prosecution for mourning Hezbollah militant Imad Mughniyeh; following that crackdown, Kuwait's most organized Shia bloc, the National Islamic Alliance (NIA), has remained loyalist, even during widespread protests that emerged in 2011–2013. The NIA "gradually became a pragmatic political group that seeks the protection of Shia constituencies' rights and political participation," particularly as Salafists have become more active in the opposition and more anti-Shia in their rhetoric. As the NIA has in recent years become reliably politically loyalist, it has secured its political future and position.

Third, Islamists can and do work in coalition with secular groups when pushing for systemic political reform. Over the course of Arab Spring–inspired protests in Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, cooperation across ideological divides was common and indeed spurred anti-opposition moves in Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. As I have written elsewhere, the crackdowns that specifically targeted Islamist movements happened in states where Islamists have worked across ideological lines. When segments of the opposition are united, it is more difficult for governments to divide and rule.

Fourth, elections are only one part of the Islamist agenda, so they are less relevant in states where political parties are banned or legislative elections do not take place. Indeed, religiously motivated groups are uniquely able to operate and exert social and political influence without institutionalized political openings—a characteristic overlooked when academics and policymakers focus too intently on the Egyptian and Tunisian cases. My own work focused on Islamists in the Gulf has shown the extent to which Muslim Brotherhood groups emerged in wealthy Gulf states largely not by constructing alternate networks of social welfare or even by contesting elections, as they have elsewhere—but instead by working *through* state structures, such as education and *awqaf* ministries (which manage Islamic endowments, including financial and property assets). In so doing, Islamists can have an impact on curricula and religious practice and, consequently, on political ideology and social practice. Outside of the Gulf, Islamists in places including Jordan and the Palestinian territories sometimes focus on elections while at other times use different means of effecting political and social change. Scholarship on the Gulf and on Islamism since the Arab Spring more broadly tends to obscure or dismiss such less-formal means of political or social mobilization precisely because these are unlikely to lead to a change in leadership.

How Islamists Across the Region Are Responding to New Challenges

In many countries, the Arab Spring did not decisively change the balance of Islamist power in national legislatures. In the Gulf, for instance, the balance of power between Islamists and states largely remained the same (with the exception of Bahrain). Nonetheless, Islamist contestation has remained politically and socially relevant, showing that electoral performance alone is not the only metric for Islamist success or failure. And the bar is likely high for new challenges beyond the traditionally understood Islamist agenda—such as climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, and Russia's war in Ukraine—to affect the balance of power.

Climate Change

While there has been some Islamic unity on combating climate change, little unity has emerged among Islamists. This is largely a consequence of the increasing processes of localization and nationalization of Islamist agendas. Urgent action on climate change has not been a sustained political priority for electoral agendas in any country, and therefore it has not been for Islamist groups, either.

The largest collective effort in the Islamic world to address climate change began in 2008. That year, twenty-eight members of various Islamic NGOs, governments, academia, and Islamic environmental groups from fourteen countries participated in a meeting convened by the UN Development Programme to create the Seven Year Plan for Islamic Action on the Environment.

A 2015 meeting was meant to revive and expand efforts begun in 2008 with a call to combat climate change from an Islamic point of view. The Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change resulted from an international symposium of academics, religious authorities, international not-for-profits, and civil society groups in advance of the UN Climate Change Conference in Paris. The 2015 meeting was hosted jointly by the several Islamic organizations and aimed to achieve "broad unity and ownership from the Islamic community around the Declaration." The declaration, interestingly, singled out oil-producing countries, calling on them to lead the way in phasing out their greenhouse gas emissions by mid-century and invest in a green economy as a moral obligation. The oil-producing states of the Gulf have repeatedly voiced their intentions to make progress on climate change, with work ranging from the construction of Masdar City in Abu Dhabi committed to advancing renewable and clean energy to an ambitious Saudi plan to plant 10 billion trees to increase by twelve the area in the country covered by trees. Nonetheless, the announcement that the head of Abu Dhabi National Oil Company would be president of the COP28 climate conference to be hosted by the UAE in November 2023 led many to question the commitment of the UAE and other oil producers to climate initiatives and efforts to diversify away from hydrocarbon resources in an era of rising oil and gas prices. With climate change initiatives no longer seen as urgent national issues, it is unlikely that domestic Islamist groups will take steps to address them either.

Further, any Islamist unity will still be affected by the reality of global oil markets. Indeed, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, there has been a shift in rhetoric, reflected at the COP27 summit in Egypt, largely due to rising global concerns about energy security. In this environment, oil-wealthy states are increasingly justifying their continued reliance on hydrocarbon products, highlighting that the use of fossil fuels cannot be entirely abandoned until sustainable and viable alternatives are found. And Islamists are not broadly challenging regimes' views, largely because they are focused on local issues rather than global issues on which opinions diverge.

The COVID-19 Pandemic

When it came to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic at the start of 2020, two main issues were raised for Islamists: first, the ability of Muslims to continue to practice their religion by, for instance, attending Friday prayers and pilgrimages (primarily hajj, but also pilgrimages to Shia shrines in Najaf and Karbala as well as the *umra* pilgrimage), and second, the appropriateness of state-backed efforts to stem the virus, including through location-enabled mobile phone applications and vaccination drives. On the first point, most if not all independent Islamist groups, whether in or out of government, supported efforts to stop the virus. Egypt's top Islamic authority, the Council of Senior Scholars of Al-Azhar, agreed and allowed a temporary stop in Friday prayers as a means of quelling the spread of the virus. Al-Azhar and Dar al-Ifta, which can generate fatwa (or religious rulings), also stated that adhering to preventive measures from the coronavirus is "a religious obligation." Egypt's Ministry of Religious Endowments went so far as to change the call to prayer to invite people to pray not in the mosque but at home.

There was initially a sectarian dimension to the virus, given that Iran was the first Middle Eastern country to experience a major outbreak, specifically in the Shia holy city and pilgrimage site of Qom. Reflecting preexisting sectarian splits, Saudi Arabia initially blamed Iran for having brought the virus to the Gulf and began by isolating its Shia population in Qatif, as some people had returned from pilgrimages despite a Saudi travel ban to Iran. After the virus spread worldwide, however, the sectarian dimension faded, and religious clerics and Islamists alike agreed about the need to adhere to advice from public health professionals, thus showing some flexibility in terms of the practice of Islam in the face of crisis.

In 2023, with the pandemic no longer considered a major public health emergency, restrictions on religious gatherings have been lifted; oil-wealthy Gulf states have managed to recoup their initial losses after oil prices decreased in 2020, and by and large, the Islamist scene was not influenced in any long-term manner.

War in Ukraine

Immediately after Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood expressed its condemnation of the event but stated that "it is nothing compared with the group regime's repressive crimes in Egypt." Indeed, the Sisi government in Egypt, which had previously sought to strengthen ties with Russia, has sought to maintain neutrality, voting in favor of a UN resolution condemning Russian actions yet maintaining ties with the country to balance its relationship with the United States. Many local media organizations and social media users across the Arab world have called out a Western double standard in responding to war in Ukraine compared to Syria, spurring further Islamist suspicion and distrust of the West. Within Russia, the leadership appears to be exploiting fear about Islamists. In August 2022, for instance, an official in Russia-annexed Crimea said that Russia had dismantled a six-person terrorist cell linked to a banned Islamist group.

There is of course no unified Muslim or Islamist stance when it comes to Russian actions, with some states—Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE—seeking to balance ties with the United States and Russia by keeping diplomatic links open with the Russian leadership. Meanwhile, Qatar has repeatedly voiced the extent to which sovereignty is a redline in discussions of Ukraine but has also had to continue conversations with Russia about global energy markets. If there is any unity from the region, whether from Islamists or governments, it is shared concerns that the Western world views the Middle East in a fundamentally different way from how it considers Europe—and from how these states view themselves, as independent actors on the global stage. Seeing the Ukrainian case as proof of Western double standards long suspected in the region, however, is unlikely to alter Islamist or government views or relationships with the West in any systemic way.

New Directions for Arab Islamist Movements and Parties

There are four major conclusions from the above. First, the future of Islamism, whether Sunni or Shia, does not necessarily lie in electoral politics or even in governance, given the post-Arab-Spring emergence of new crackdowns and suspicions of the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamist political actors more generally. Because Islamist groups are uniquely placed to work within the social sphere, they will likely place more focus on gaining support socially or changing social policy. In some countries, the move will be out of necessity due to crackdowns, and in others, it will be a means of mobilizing constituents outside of restricted political institutions. For instance, a focus on social policy issues—such as gender segregation, limits on social exposure to Western media, and dress codes—could become major issues for such groups, and they could use social media and social networks to push such agendas. Importantly, in expatriate-majority states of the Gulf, these issues may hold particular appeal: many citizens who believe in guarding what are often dubbed as traditional values can agree on them, even if they are not Islamists. Gulf governments appear to be recognizing the popularity of such stances. For instance, a Gulf Cooperation Council body released a statement calling on Netflix to ban "offensive" content that "violates Islamic and societal values and principles."

Second, both Shia and Sunni Islamism have become increasingly localized and nationalized and are likely to continue as such. Islamist groups that do contest parliamentary elections need to put forward agendas that will mobilize local voters and therefore tend to have very country-specific aims. The process of the nationalization of Islamism is not new, since the transnational organ of the Muslim Brotherhood has become increasingly irrelevant with the rise of increasingly powerful national Brotherhood movements. But as governments across the Middle East have taken more extreme (and different) stances on Islamism since the Arab Spring, it is now very difficult to discuss one unifying Islamist position, on either the Shia or Sunni side, due to the importance of local political opportunity structures and social contexts in shaping their agendas. For instance, abandonment of large-scale regional issues (such as support for the Palestinian cause) for a focus on national-level issues (such as how government austerity measures may affect their constituents) means that fragmentation of the Islamist scene is likely to continue. As a result, it will be necessary for Western governments to engage with and study groups within their local contexts, rather than trying to position them alongside other Islamists in the region by virtue of ideological alignment.

Third, the new challenges outlined above (climate change, the pandemic, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine) have not ignited a reset on Islamist agendas writ large. Rather, they have served to demonstrate again the degree to which Islamism of varying strands has become localized, each group taking cues for its reaction from government actors rather than a shared, universal ideology. The future of Islamism depends on these actors' relationships with their governments rather than their ideologies. This means they will become more diversified, less united, and more reactive to state policy. For instance, while Islamists across the region tend to support the Palestinian cause, they are likely to set these preferences aside if the government is not in agreement with, or likely to listen to, that agenda.

Fourth, in light of the global challenges posed by climate change, it is likely that a shift away from reliance on hydrocarbon resources will take place albeit gradually, given how lucrative these resources remain in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In this situation, traditionally oil-wealthy rentier states of the Gulf will likely delay putting in place much-needed austerity measures. This could, in turn, spur inequality and change Islamist stances if traditionally loyalist Islamist actors decide that it is no longer politically viable for them to sustain their support of the state—particularly if state support for religious actors diminishes. Further, if the state is less able to deliver services due to fiscal constraints, there could be more of a place for Islamists to restart service provision and criticize regime legitimacy on grounds of economic performance and provision of social welfare networks for citizens. Until global oil prices decrease, however, these changes remain unlikely.

CHAPTER 7

How Arab Authoritarians Are Using Citizens' Data to Establish Control

Sultan Alamer and Nathan J. Brown

For all their concern with stability and security, many states in the Arab world have lacked the necessary governance capacity to design and implement policies to meet the sudden wave of health, economic, security, and environmental challenges of the past decade. They have blunt instruments: repressive sticks and welfare benefits are often meted out crudely and even indiscriminately. And global shocks, especially when compounded by a still-fresh memory of popular uprisings and years of complaints about poor policy performance, have increased regime fears.

Yet there is a strong enough track record to examine new trends at work, beyond simply observing the traditional (and accurate) expectation that authoritarian regimes monitor, patrol, survey, and control their citizens. Now, changes in governance are more subtle, more profound, and sometimes less crude in their forms of repression. States are developing new tools to collect information, insert their authority into daily life, and steer behavior in ways that they have been unable to do in the past. The goals are to extract resources, target and enhance the provision of services, increase their monitoring capability of citizens' behavior, and enhance enforcement outcomes of regulations and rules. It is not simply citizens' political opinions but also their water usage, family structures, educational choices, and health practices that states need to know about—and steer. The challenges presented over the past decade have been strong and severe, and regimes have responded by sharpening their tools for governance. But they have not improved their tools for building consensus, consultation, or participation. That means their support is based on their strength and performance, not on their representativeness nor accountability.

Nowhere is this emerging mode of authoritarian control on sharper display than in some of the region's most established states; we focus here on Saudi Arabia and Egypt, two of the Arab world's most consequential states who've long been considered harbingers of broader regional trends. Together they constitute 31 percent of the total population of the Arab world and 43 percent of the total Arab GDP. And while both are dominated by one-person rule, a few key differences between them serve to highlight how this new trend in governance is adapted to local specificities: Saudi Arabia has fewer short-term fiscal constraints and rapidly expanding advanced technological capabilities, whereas Egypt faces much more severe fiscal burdens and is in the early phases of adopting advanced technologies.

Both countries experienced a shock to their political systems in 2011, though only one emerged unscathed. As with other Arab countries, both Cairo and Riyadh faced additional pressures after the Arab uprisings in the form of the coronavirus pandemic, fiscal burdens, and additional perceived threats to regime and public security. Along with other administratively extensive Arab states, Egypt and Saudi Arabia have met these challenges not by increasing societal trust in the state or restructuring incentives for their citizens to cooperate with state policies. Instead, they have tried to use technology and coercion to compel citizens to comply with laws and share personal information that was otherwise unavailable to regimes. In short, they are looking to increase legibility, which refers to "the breadth and depth of the state's knowledge of its citizens and their activities."

Such autocratic governments certainly do not eliminate older forms of surveillance and repression, but they do not simply operate alongside of them; citizens are still imprisoned for violating policies or for organizing or speaking in ways authorities wish to suppress—but citizens are now much more closely monitored in their movements and regulated in their usage of public utilities in ways that are more mundane than traditional security concerns and heavy-handed enforcement.

While the effects of this trend—in evidence prior to 2011 in a few areas but more extensively deployed over the past decade—can be strong, they are not good or bad in and of themselves. They may bring less privacy but also more equitable tax collection; they can produce a sense of surveillance but also of state effectiveness. And they must be examined as part of a long-term global trend in governance.

But if the trend is global, countries will achieve different levels of effectiveness: Saudi Arabia has rolled out more ways of tracking citizen behavior, done so more effectively, and proceeded more quickly than Egypt has. The point is not that Egypt is a failure but that states will proceed at different paces, and sometimes their ambitions will exceed their abilities. But any international interlocutor—a global health specialist worried about disease transmission, a representative of an international financial institution listening to pledges about tax collection rates, or an investor being invited to participate in the construction of a new concept in urban living—will be presented with a shifting landscape.

But one aspect of the trend toward legibility is constant: it is not coupled with citizen empowerment to monitor rulers. Indeed, these new tools do not help cultivate trust between the rulers and the ruled; instead, they cope with its absence by making compliance easier to monitor and less clumsy to enforce. The new enforcement tools have inserted themselves very effectively in daily life, but there is much less evidence that they give political authorities what they need to cope with governance challenges. Emerging governance patterns not only have some negative normative implications in terms of authoritarianism but also are betraying some already-visible signs of profound policy mistakes—mistakes that would not have been possible if rulers had been restricted to the older, blunter tools for monitoring compliance.

Clumsy Administrative States Under Challenge

Beginning in the nineteenth century in Egypt and the twentieth in Saudi Arabia, impressive administrative apparatuses were built that not only controlled public space and security but also oversaw many social services, shaped markets, counted citizens, and recorded basic information about them. The administrative apparatus rendered groups and individual citizens legible to state officials, making it possible to design new policies for everything from foodstuffs to private speech to consumption. But the tools could be crude, indiscriminate, inefficient, and prone to corruption—their effects included widespread arrests; untargeted subsidies; labyrinthine procedures requiring papers, forms, and official stamps; bureaucratic fiefdoms; and loopholes (such as informality, bribes, or favoritism through connections) that led to tremendous leakage.

In both countries, administrative capacity tended to be most developed when it served specific purposes, such as the provision of social services or regime security (leading to a heavy reliance on surveillance, policing, intelligence gathering, and focusing on the Ministries of Interior and the large and overlapping security services). Indeed, the reliance on various forms of rent allowed states to open access to housing, schooling, healthcare, and basic consumer goods.

This was obviously the case in Saudi Arabia, where the state apparatus knit a diverse society in areas such as labor, energy, transportation, and agriculture, first around Aramco and the oil industry. Saudi resultant oil revenues, especially after the 1973 oil boom, made possible the generous provision of services, including free healthcare, free education, jobs, and subsidized energy, water, and electricity. The regime heavily controlled almost all aspects of formal public life but only loosely monitored a rich set of informal and private structures for groups, families, and tribes.

In Egypt, despite its poorer resources, social services were also a major focus of state activity. Since World War II, the supply of basic commodities in urban areas has not simply been an economic concern but also one of public order and security. In subsequent decades, the Egyptian state expanded its social safety net widely (if sometimes shallowly) by building schools, universities, public housing, and public health facilities; creating jobs; and subsidizing basic commodities.

Both policy areas, regime security and the provision of social services, have run into problems in recent years. With regard to regime security, the uprisings of 2011 overwhelmed some regimes and frightened all of them. And with regard to the provision of social services, each country has experienced its own distinct but long-brewing crisis; Egypt and Saudi Arabia both find themselves fiscally strapped but often lack the administrative capacity or political will to pull back or target allocations. In both states, the new governments are increasingly shifting their image from providing for consumption (and targeting what they do provide much more carefully) to encouraging production and attracting investment.

This requires not merely policing public speech and potential opposition but gathering finely grained information, affecting individual behavior, and steering economic activity at the level of individuals. Informality threatens these needs as states need cooperative, not just compliant, behavior. They need legible societies, not just quiescent ones.

Rendering Consumption Legible

Starting from the late 1970s in Egypt and late 1980s in Saudi Arabia, subsidy programs came to be seen by rulers as unsustainable, expensive, and inefficient. The fact that both governments lacked the necessary information about the income and consumption behavior of their population led them first to supply-side changes that did not necessarily require knowledge of citizens' consumption behavior: raising the price of subsidized items, downsizing the number of eligible people, and changing the size and quality of the subsidized items themselves.

However, the slow adoption of new technologies for governance purposes starting in the early 2000s allowed both governments to expand their institutional capacities and render their population more legible. Thus, starting in 2014, both Saudi Arabia and Egypt radically restructured subsidies.

Saudi Citizen Accounts

The changes in governance are most visible at the most mundane level imaginable: how do citizens pay their bills?

Since the 1960s, Saudi Arabia has provided electricity, water, and gasoline at subsidized prices to all inhabitants regardless of their nationality and income level. In 2015, the difference between the subsidized price and the market price reached 300 billion riyals (about $80 billion) and accounted for 80 percent of the overall subsidies in the kingdom. Only 30 percent of the benefits of these subsidies went to the lowest 40 percent of households by income.

In 2016, the government announced its Fiscal Balance Program (now the Fiscal Sustainability Program) which included a plan to discontinue these subsidies. The purpose of this change was to save around 209 billion riyals (about $55 billion) per year by 2020 and incentivize consumption reduction. The change left a huge impact on the population (see table 1).

Table 1. Saudi Arabia Phases Out Subsidies

Commodity	($) prices 2015	($) prices 2023	Increase
Electricity (per kilowatt-hour)	0.013-0.07	0.048-0.08	54.22%
Gasoline (per gallon)	0.45-0.6	2.2-2.35	333.33%
Water (per 50 cubic meters)	1.3	32.6	2,407%

Source: Authors' compilation.

To mitigate this impact, the government launched a new cash transfer program called the Citizen Account where eligible citizens receive periodic payments. To successfully implement this program, the government needed to overcome two gaps of legibility: it did not yet have the billing and price monitoring capabilities nor did it have the information to identify those qualified for direct payments.

On prices, the existing system for gasoline was for Aramco to sell it to local gas stations to resell to end consumers after adding a fixed profit margin. But it was beyond the government's capacity to monitor pump prices, especially because the price charged to retailers fluctuated. For electricity and water, consumers were charged based on human readings of electromechanical and mechanical meters linked to each household—a system prone to manipulation and human error. And in most apartment buildings, there was only one meter, making it difficult for the government to know and bill the consumption of each apartment separately from the others.

To address these challenges, the government relied on a combination of new legal, technological, and punitive measures that required interagency coordination and public-private harmonization. To ensure gas stations' strict implementation of the periodic change of gasoline prices, the Ministry of Commerce frequently sent inspection teams to monitor, report, and fine violations—but also utilized Tabligh Tijari, a mobile app released in 2013, to ask citizens to report violations. The Saudi Electricity Company introduced smart, fully automated meters resistant to tampering. The National Water Company did the same.

Technology was also the main tool for solving the challenge of collecting and verifying citizens' financial information. The government opened an online platform electronically linked to the technological infrastructure that the Ministry of Interior had been building since 2009, beginning with a new identification card system. To issue a new identification card, the ten fingerprints of each citizen were required in addition to their photo image. In April 2011, the General Directorate of Passports launched a new online service called Absher to switch its services online. Slowly, Absher's services expanded to include other ministry sectors such as traffic and civil affairs. By 2015, Absher's username and password were universalized, and all other government entities used them to verify the identity of the user and provide services to them. Building on this decade-long digital transformation, the Citizen Account was able to use the same Absher username and password to verify the identity of its users. In terms of user income, the Citizen Account requires each applicant to grant the program the right to verify every reported piece of information, including by providing access to bank accounts.

New Food Subsidy System in Egypt

In Egypt, legibility has increased more slowly and fitfully—but it has unmistakably come. Electricity and water bills matter, but as in so much of Egyptian politics, bread matters most.

Before 2014, three-fourths of Egypt's subsidy spending went to the commodities category (including fuel, food, electricity, and water), with the lion's share going to fuel and food. The Egyptian food subsidy system (FSS) started as an emergency measure during World War II, but it was repurposed and expanded after the war to be a universal safety net for all Egyptians. By 1975, around 17 percent of Egyptian government spending went to the FSS.

The system was not only expensive but leaky. Corruption, weak monitoring capacities, and an underdeveloped supply chain were rampant. And poor monitoring allowed a sizable segment of bakeries to resell subsidized wheat in the black market rather than baking and selling it to customers as intended (sometimes obscuring this by baking smaller loaves and selling the excess). Poor storage and warehousing conditions for domestic wheat compounded the problem, and there was little incentive to monitor waste.

But when the government tried to raise the price of some of the subsidized food items in January 1977, protests erupted throughout Egypt, forcing the government to reverse its decision. It moved to more gradual and indirect strategies still aimed crudely at supply rather than working to target or eliminate inefficiency. It increased the price of bread in 1983 and 1987—leading to tensions but no unrest. But it also tinkered with the size, quality, and supply of subsidized items and even removed them from some varieties of bread. And it decreased the number of ration cardholders through suspending the registration of newborns and removing the deceased and those who were abroad. By 2000, the number of cardholders was reduced from 99 percent of the population to 70 percent. The government also moved to adopt a system that privileged the needy, but it lacked the information to make a color-coded ration card system viable. Overall, as the below table shows, by 2014 the Egyptian government was able to lower the amount spent on the FSS to 4.3 percent of overall spending (see table 2).

Table 2. Dwindling Subsidies in Egypt

	2008–2009		2013–2014		2022–2023	
	Egyptian pounds	U.S. dollars	Egyptian pounds	U.S. dollars	Egyptian pounds	U.S. dollars
Total Government Expenditure on Subsidies	374.7 billion	$67.56 billion	824.4 billion	$116.4 billion	3,066.3 billion	$156.4 billion
Total Government Spending on Food	21.1 billion	$3.8 billion	35.5 billion	$5.01 billion	90 billion	$4.59 billion
Percent of Government Expenditure on Subsidies That Go Toward Food	5.63%		4.30%		2.93%	

Source: Authors' compilation.

In 2014, Egypt adopted a radical restructuring plan for the FSS. Instead of selling wheat to bakeries at subsidized prices, the new system required bakeries to buy the wheat at its market price and sell it to customers at the subsidized price, with the government paying the difference based on loaves sold—undercutting the black market and incentivizing bakeries to attract customers with the quality of their bread.

The new system was based on an intrusive innovation: a 2006 initiative that replaced the old paper ration cards with smart ones. The government had partnered with the private sector to equip every grocery store with an electronic point of sale (POS) and build the technological network that links all of these POSs with the government. In 2014, to monitor loaves sold, the government expanded this system to include bakeries. It equipped every bakery with an electronic POS and required eligible individuals to use their ration card, automatically monitoring every transaction. And converting into electronic transactions allowed a second innovation: each eligible ration card user was allowed five loaves of bread every day. For those who did not use their full quota, their ration cards transferred the subsidies to other goods, encouraging people not to waste or resell what they bought.

Formalizing Informal Markets

Water and bread have not been the only places where the trend to build legibility is in evidence. In functioning states in the Arab world, rulers have found themselves controlling governments with powerful presences in their societies but that are unable to cope with a host of practices that make individual and local behavior accessible. The most far-reaching attempts to overcome the illegibility of social practices may be taking place at present in Egypt and Saudi Arabia in ways that rarely attract international or media attention. But every Egyptian or Saudi senses governance changing when they are fined when photographed not wearing a seatbelt, are directed by a mobile phone company to register or verify the link to their national identification, or find passport renewal, driver licenses, and other similar services electronically suspended because they owe fees or fines.

What had remained off the books is increasingly recorded not on paper but in electronic form—in a manner that can be monitored, regulated, and patrolled by various state authorities. Even informal practices, generally defined as practices beyond the reach of the state, are being brought within the state's administrative grasp—once again a bit more fitfully and slowly in Egypt than in Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia, the process focuses on economic enterprises; in Egypt, the focus has been on transactions among citizens. In both cases, new techniques have been developed to ensure that when a business operates or money changes hands, the state can see.

Pulling Back the Curtains on the Saudi Informal Market

The Saudi informal private market is dominated by a phenomenon called *tasattur* (business concealment) in which a Saudi citizen allows a foreigner to run a business under their name in return for a fixed amount of income. In 2019, the Saudi Ministry of Commerce estimated the size of this market at 300–400 billion riyals ($80–107 billion) and the percentage of concealment in some sectors, such as grocery stores and barbershops, at nearly 100 percent.

The tasattur market was a product of two intertwined labor systems. First, the Saudi labor market is segregated: As of 2021, 3.1 million of the 9.8 million workers in Saudi Arabia were citizens, but 1.2 million of them worked in the public sector, which comprised 96.3 percent of the workforce. On the other hand, non-Saudi workers comprised 77.4 percent of the workforce in the private sector.

The second system is the *kafala* system in which non-Saudi workers are governed by a separate set of legal rules and administrative practices that tie them to specific employers who serve as their "sponsor"—limiting labor rights and mobility. An unintentional effect has been that some Saudis avoid actually starting and running a business (and using sponsored labor) but instead hand management to sponsored labor, merely lending their name to the business and collecting a fixed income from the sponsored. The foreigner is not allowed to start and run this business or replace his sponsor. The sponsor may withdraw sponsorship—likely causing deportation—and is disincentivized not by law but only by the need to find an alternative. These arrangements led to the emergence of a large, interconnected informal market that is neither legible nor regulated.

In 2015, the government announced a comprehensive National Transformation Program. It included an initiative dedicated to combating tasattur. It brought ten government agencies to collaborate in rewriting laws, increasing costs associated with tasattur, and, most innovatively, enhancing technological surveillance and tracking.

Indeed, it was increasing legibility through technology that marked the real innovation. In December 2021, the Zakat, Tax, and Customs Authority launched an electronic invoicing initiative where all businesses in Saudi Arabia are required to record their financial transactions in an electronic invoicing system. Starting in January 2023, those transactions were electronically linked to the general authority's system, allowing the government to track, analyze, and surveil all the financial transactions—and likely detect tasattur businesses easier. Another anti-tasattur program, a six-phase, fourteen-month plan to discourage cash transactions, started in July 2019 and requires businesses to install electronic point-of-service (POS) equipment. This initiative increased the amount of POS equipment from 303,464 in 2017 to 1,013,141 in 2021, and the number of POS transactions increased from 708,000 in 2017 to 5 million in 2021.

These initiatives complement a third initiative called the Wages Protection System, which has been in place since 2014. This program requires business establishments to open bank accounts to all of its employees and pay them their wages electronically in a way that is legible and monitored by government agencies. It started with large establishments, and through a six-year gradual process it began to include smaller ones. In July 2020, the minister of human resources announced the launch of a new digital platform called Mudad that allows small and medium-sized businesses to manage their payroll and comply with the Wages Protection System.

Electronic Transactions and Monitoring in Egypt

Like Saudi Arabia, much of Egypt's economic activity takes place in an informal manner. It is not that the state is absent from the economy—far from it. But many economic transactions take place in cash and in a manner that makes monitoring and compliance difficult. Official regulation has coped with this in two ways, both of them a bit crude in their operation and effects.

First, state bodies regulate what they can, sometimes through what might seem like a presumption of noncompliance. Egyptians have become accustomed to requirements to show documentation with appropriate signatures, seals, and stamps to prove that they have paid a fee, followed a procedure, fulfilled qualifications, or attained a credential. Even entry into some public buildings requires presentation of an official identification card; application for public employment must be accompanied not merely with proof of degree but also one bearing an official stamp.

Second, officials can be induced to look the other way for those who wish to avoid such steps, either through resignation, lack of capacity, or corruption. Construction can take place on land with an uncertain title; workers can be employed off the books; an electricity meter reader can be manipulated to record a low usage number. The result is not merely burdensome but inefficient, demoralizing, and stultifying.

And, as in Saudi Arabia, economic activity is being slowly reassembled on an electronic basis. For a quotidian example, Egyptian electricity bills are now prepaid online, so that those who do not comply in time are rendered quite literally powerless.

In 2019 a law was issued that gently described itself as "organizing" noncash payments. It actually required them for transactions involving state bodies and most major transactions for private entities. And in 2022, the state moved more assertively to regulate the private fintech sector. It has also made plans to tax e-commerce. The effect is not merely to regulate but offer opportunities, since provision of electronic and technological services to state bodies is a lucrative opportunity for private business.

All kinds of routine transactions—updating an address, paying a fee or fine, or completing any bureaucratic interaction—can be (and is often required to be) electronic in nature. The Ministry of Interior appears to most citizens today not merely as the enforcer of regime, state, and public security but also as a vanguard organization in the march toward electronic government.

There are three features of such a conversion from paper and informality to electronic transactions. First, compliance itself is relatively painless or at most annoying—and it is also advisable. In 2015, the Minister of Interior negotiated with MasterCard to link all national identification cards to an electronic payment system; mobile telephone users have reported being required to re-register their numbers to connect them to their national identification (and indeed, such a step is now required for all new mobile numbers). In 2022, the age for mandating a national identification card was lowered to fifteen (from sixteen), and over the same period, the minister of interior made many routine procedural steps (including securing a national identification card) available online.

Second, the conversion makes it more difficult to evade compliance and monitoring. When transactions are electronic and impersonal, rather than on paper and face-to-face, there is much less room for slippage, evasion, omission, mistakes, and, of course, forgery and bribery. Many citizens seem to continue to prefer cash transactions in many settings, perhaps out of a legacy of mistrust. Anecdotal evidence, for instance, suggests that most Uber passengers pay in cash rather than electronically. But the fact that an electronic option is available and a legal and regulatory framework now exists for ridesharing services suggests that the chaotic informality of Egypt's taxi system a couple decades ago is slowly on the way out.

Third, because information is now available in electronic form, it is easy to collect, share, analyze, monitor, and move. And this last feature makes governance feel quite different. On the one hand, there are undeniable benefits. Ordinary citizens no longer have to take an afternoon off and trudge from one window to another paying petty fees, collecting stamps, and submitting papers. And investors have been promised construction of a "golden ticket" system to render compliance with regulations and obtaining permissions simple and swift.

But the system also can tighten compliance. Salaries paid through banks can be taxed far more easily and reliably. Importers can be required to operate through the formal banking system, where they can be required to show the legitimacy of their foreign currency holdings—an additional step that has led to complaints about delays, especially at times (most notably over the past year) when finance officials were seeking to control the flow of dollars due to a liquidity crisis caused by the necessity to service massive international debts.

Over the long term, the effect seems to be offering new policy tools and options, not merely to monitor citizens on security grounds but also to steer economic policy and manage public finances. And it is making possible a restructuring of the state's operations in important areas: Monitoring and reporting for the taxation system was overhauled in 2020. The value-added tax (VAT) received similar attention in 2022. Senior officials now generally speak of addressing Egypt's fiscal needs not by raising taxes but by monitoring and enforcing compliance more effectively—and thus more fairly. A recent overhaul of the health insurance sector also was presented in terms of streamlining, filling gaps, and increasing efficiency.

Real estate poses the most complex problem, as Egypt's long-standing system for registering property and assessing value is full of loopholes and evasions. Any attempt to reform it will be costly to many—and indeed, Egypt's normally compliant Parliament balked at a government attempt to enforce a tax on real estate transactions early in 2022.

A Rocky Start: Deploying New Techniques in a Hurry

The techniques being rolled out in Saudi Arabia and Egypt are subtle enough to escape much political analysis, but their effects are felt daily.

The initial signals are mixed: the COVID-19 pandemic forced states to adjust in a hurry. Both countries rushed the tools they had developed into action, but Saudi Arabia had simply gone much farther in being able to monitor individual behavior. For leaders in both countries, the lesson was not that increasing legibility was ineffectual; instead, the lesson was that it had not proceeded fast enough. But Egypt's greater level of fiscal burden and lesser amount of resources have meant that it is still scrambling, relying more on diplomacy and taking on debt than on managing its economy and society more effectively.

Concerns about plagues, pilgrimage, and international travel were powerful factors in shaping political systems in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And in both cases, the provision of public health became a major burden assumed by states, especially in the second half of the twentieth century—however unevenly the burden was met. So, both states have a long institutional history related to public health, particularly in the area of infectious disease. But the recent changes left them in different positions to respond when hit with the rapid emergence of the coronavirus pandemic.

Saudi Arabia had a very recent experience with Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (MERS-CoV), a global health challenge that arose and was concentrated in the country—leading it to build up systems for monitoring and responding quickly to outbreaks. The Saudi state had recently built a host of surveillance systems and greatly centralized decisionmaking in the hands of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who had just undertaken several initiatives to dismantle large ministries and increase mid-level communication and coordination.

Egypt's most recent outbreak experience, by contrast, was with hepatitis C. (The outbreak itself seems to have been caused by an earlier attempt to eradicate bilharzia by mass inoculation—re-used needles may have caused the new challenge). The official response to hepatitis focused on testing and treatment. But just as the government was declaring victory, the coronavirus hit, leaving the authorities with a set of public health tools that focused on disease eradication rather than prevention or monitoring. To address the new threat, the government certainly did increase surveillance: after being caught flat-footed in the 2011 uprising, security services had learned quickly how to monitor social media and cell phones. But despite the COVID-19-related public health messaging, the focus seemed almost exclusively on repressing opposition and preventing popular mobilization rather than combating contagion.

The contrast showed. Both countries worked quickly to decree various closures of public spaces, but Saudi Arabia had a variety of tools to enforce and patrol closures and distancing; Egyptian enforcement tended to break down after a short period. Both countries could distribute vaccines when they became available, but Egypt all but abandoned attempts to track the disease and enforce changes in behavior after a few months.

The pandemic suggested that the most pressing questions for governance now are not how to defend against military threats but how to manage public space more generally, deal with economic dislocation, and build governance systems that can expect the unexpected. Such changes are not simply a matter of repurposing old structures but building new ones—or more precisely, building mechanisms that allow officials to insert state authority into everyday life, involving routine actions and transactions. Again, Saudi Arabia is a step ahead with greater resources and a society that is already operating, even in informal ways, in a manner amenable to state penetration. But Egypt is following closely behind in inventing ways to render compliance virtually automatic and involuntary through electronic means.

One-Way Legibility: We Know About You but You Don't Know About Us

New governance techniques are working slowly and unevenly, but they are progressing to increase state capacity for ensuring monitoring and compliance. However, they are laid on top of—and do not address—a fundamentally autocratic order. And that can lead to severe problems and even disastrous outcomes.

Old patterns of governance were based in part on meeting perceived needs of the regime and state security—and when they were focused on economics, regime and state security were always part of the equation. That has not changed. But what has changed is where the threats to security come from: microbes, global supply chains, climate change, and distant human decisions and projects (like the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, and the fracking revolution) that cause real or unexpected challenges. States throughout the world have already found themselves scrambling to repurpose old tools or invent new ones. In Egypt and Saudi Arabia, these tools fall under the broad umbrella of legibility, which is rarely named as such but is felt every day by residents of both societies as their small-scale interactions come under state gaze.

The past few years suggest that increasing legibility does offer regimes more effective tools for implementing policy, but it does not address structural problems and exposures. Egypt's moves toward targeted subsidies and monitoring economic activity can allow its rulers to impose taxes, counteract some inefficiencies, and enhance compliance—but they still find themselves scrambling to manage debt, attract investors, and meet the public's basic needs. They have targeted consumption and may rapidly improve tax collection, but the scope of their fiscal needs and existing debt still leaves them very dependent on deep-pocketed international friends. Such dependence means turning to the International Monetary Fund, exhausting the patience of friends, and allowing fiscal needs to drive foreign policy. Increased legibility will likely help Egypt meet the commitments it makes to its financial supporters, but it cannot make those commitments less onerous. Saudi Arabia, with its greater resources, can escape some of Egypt's burdens. And again, it can devise new policies and implement old ones to ensure greater compliance, but the country still must cope with the long-term challenges of managing what is still a petroeconomy in a turbulent market and security environment.

Furthermore, states are not reciprocating the turn toward legibility; they are not providing increased visibility for citizens into state functions. Increased legibility works one way. And if there is an Achilles' heel in this construction of legible societies, it is this. Of course, governance is not completely opaque. Official websites provide a more accessible source for most prosaic information—like regulations, performance, and statistics—than was available in the past. And there is a publicly viewable legislative process in both countries that is generally—but not always—invoked when concrete legal changes are required.

But much remains behind state curtains. And three interlinked matters stand out in this regard. First, security bodies—and even their budgets and economic activity—remain beyond public scrutiny and even beyond the bounds of permissible public discussion. Second, critical policy directions are decided by the leader of the regime with no clear decisionmaking process. Events in Yemen or Egyptian exchange rates are widely discussed, but momentous steps are taken without any clarity about who was consulted and how. Third, both regimes have undertaken megaprojects such as entirely new cities, including the smart city NEOM in Saudi Arabia and the new administrative capital in Egypt. While the projects themselves serve as major showcases, almost all aspects remain unknown save for breathless official pronouncements, videos, brochures, and websites. Indeed, most of the projects associated with the government's capital—such as Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund or Egypt's less ambitious Tahya Misr and Sovereign Fund—remain effectively outside of official budgetmaking processes and oversight and are closely and personally identified not merely with the regime but with the ruler.

Yet if the governments' inner workings are invisible, the implications for citizens and state finances will not be. And there is a worrying historical analogy that carries warning signs.

A century and a half ago, there was a very similar pattern of rulers who greatly expanded state services, capacity, and market involvement but did so in a highly autocratic fashion that mixed ruler self-interest with social benefits and led to unmonitored fiscal commitments and recklessness in some areas. The results set off a string of fiscal, political, and international crises in the Ottoman Empire, Tunisia, Egypt, and Iran as states found themselves unable to meet their payment obligations on debts that had been incurred to finance ambitious development and infrastructure projects, a considerable portion of which lay in the hands of the individual rulers or narrow groups around them.

Today, pandemic and war have set imposing challenges for regional governments, and those with fewer resources—like Egypt—have been placed under enormous strains. But leaders who hold those challenges responsible for economic crises are missing part of the point. Yes, climate change is a new challenge; pandemic is an older one, although the coronavirus outbreak came in a more dramatic and sudden way than its predecessors in previous centuries. But if the sources of stress are daunting, the new techniques of governance allow for more precise and subtle responses. The new tools for governance were unimaginable in earlier decades, but they cannot deliver one commodity that rarely emerges in economic analyses: wisdom. The decision to embark on a massive program of infrastructural development has already transformed physical landscapes, but it has done so in a way that will deeply affect future generations. With its financial buffer, Saudi Arabia may be able to make more mistakes than Egypt, where the pattern of decisionmaking has led the country into one of its worst economic crises.

In Egypt today, a majority of the state budget is devoted to debt repayment—and borrowing finances just under half of the annual budget. In Saudi Arabia, oil revenues put it in a relatively better position, but still the debt-to-GDP ratio has increased from 5.8 percent in 2015 to 30 percent in 2021. Both proportions are growing. The situation is not inherently unsustainable, but it does appear to expose the governance systems in both countries to real domestic risks (such as insolvency, political unrest stemming from possible austerity measures, suspicions of corruption, and the reality of unaccountability) that could be aggravated by international risks (such as a reliance on donors and creditors and internationally imposed austerity).

Residents of the region report alarming levels of food insecurity and clearly feel the existing regimes do not meet their needs. When citizens are accountable to rulers but rulers remain opaque, governance can be effective over the short term while leaving the longer term hazy indeed.

CHAPTER 8

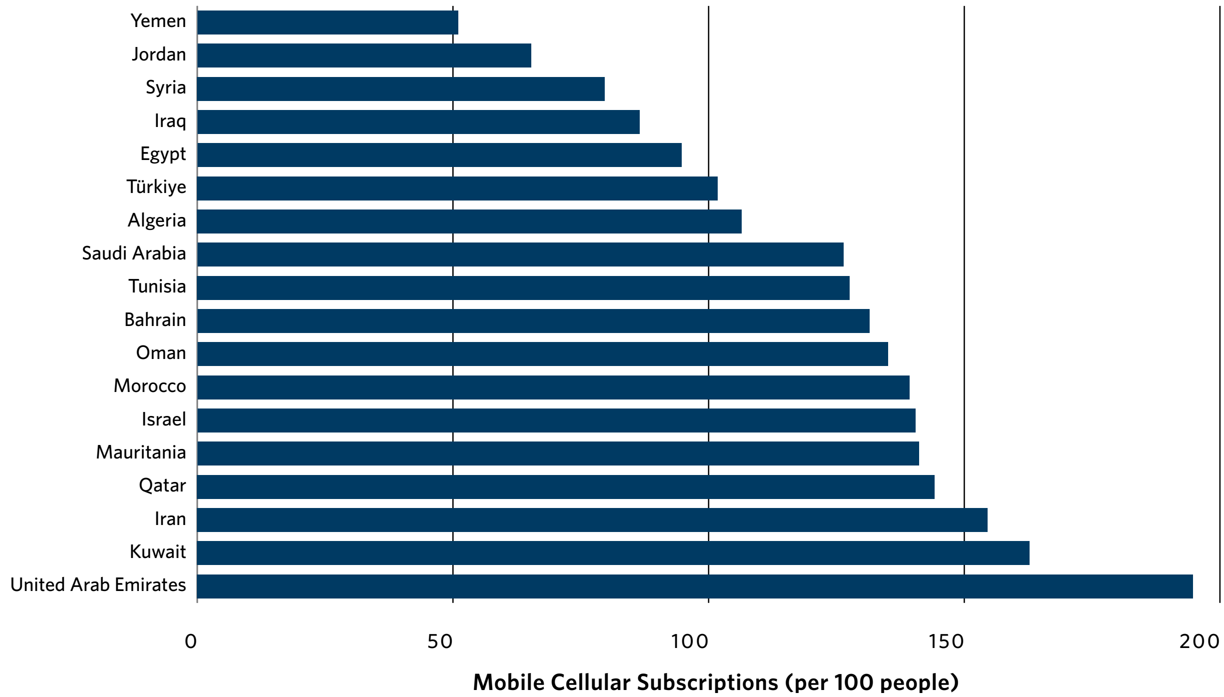
The New, Unsustainable Order of Arab Digital Autocracy

Marc Owen Jones

The Middle East has experienced rapid, albeit asymmetrical, digitalization over the past twenty years. Despite the benefits of technology, there is increasing evidence that it is being used to engage in new practices that fundamentally alter the repressive capacity and reach of the state. Here authoritarian states are shifting to emergent totalitarian states.

Despite significant disparities in access to and utilization of digital technology across the region, the past decade has seen a rapid increase in smartphone prevalence, social media usage, and internet adoption in the Middle East. Although countries such as Yemen have the slowest internet speeds globally, wealthier governments in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have embraced 5G technology and are among the world's pioneers in its adoption, highlighting a pronounced digital divide. Mobile cellular subscription rates in 2021 in Yemen were about 51 per 100 people, while for Qatar, Bahrain, and the UAE, rates were 144, 131, and 195 respectively (suggesting that many people have more than one cellular subscription) (see figure 1). In terms of the internet, Egypt has a 70 percent adoption rate, while GCC countries frequently hover around 100 percent. Indeed, Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE have among the highest rates of internet adoption in the world. In terms of the political environment, Arab media and information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure operate in comparable authoritarian ecosystems, but their digital capacities vary significantly.

Figure 1. Mobile Cellular Subscriptions, 2021



Source: World Development Indicators, "Mobile Cellular Subscriptions (per 100 People)," accessed April 18, 2023, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.CEL.SETS.P2?end=2021&most_recent_year_desc=true&start=1960&view=chart.

Liberating Potential of Technology

From Bahrain to Egypt, new technologies have been seen as a key tool in the struggle against decades of autocratic rule. Mobile phone cameras, combined with the internet as a means of broadcasting, have subverted state-controlled media and challenged the dominant, centralized information ecosystem. Even though there is debate about whether digital technologies are effective at sparking and maintaining political mobilization, their sociopolitical impact on the region has been significant. The years 2010 and 2011 were turning points in the Middle East's use of mobile digital technology. The early stages of the Arab uprisings that began in 2010 were filled with optimism, in small part due to technical utopianism. This occurred after the 2009 Green Movement in Iran, during which bloggers and activists leveraged technology such as Twitter to orchestrate demonstrations and document the regime's abuses for global audiences.

The capacity to record heinous state actions against their populations has been one of digital technology's most significant effects on mobilization. The killing of twenty-six-year-old Iranian protester Neda Agha-Soltan was recorded on a mobile phone, making it perhaps one of the most widely viewed instances of a state-sanctioned killing in human history. Agha-Soltan's tragic death showed that a novel form of citizen-led, bottom-up regime accountability had been brought about by digital technology. That previously concealed acts of governmental cruelty were now broadcast around the world gave credence to the notion of "liberation technology."

On a very fundamental level, new technologies mediated and became the basis for transnational solidarities. Images of protesters in Cairo and Tunisia waving signs bearing the Facebook or Twitter logos reified the optimism of social media in the various uprisings. Many believed that platforms were crucial in igniting the hope and the drive required for social change. This was particularly relevant for the region's large youth population. The role of the youth has been and will be a fundamental driver of change in the region. As much as 40 percent of the population in some Arab countries is under the age of fifteen, with Sudan, Yemen, Iraq, and Palestine having the largest numbers of youth as a proportion of total population.

Arab youth are growing up as digital natives through the use of mobile phones, the internet, and digital media. In Egypt, for instance, around a third of the population was under the age of fifteen in 2010. Despite the country having a relatively low internet penetration rate, the "young of the internet" were and are adept users of social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook, spreading footage of government brutality both domestically and overseas. This is not to say digital technology, used by young people, is the key driver of social change. It is more likely that the coordinated protests were primarily driven by the deteriorating economic situation, which was further fueled by the persistent efforts of a central group of devoted attorneys, human rights champions, and other civil society organizers.

Indeed, digital technology is just one element within a preexisting ecosystem that itself contains functioning power nodes. Knowledge and understanding of Middle Eastern and North African politics is also shaped by an assemblage of established media networks, including Qatar's Al Jazeera and Saudi Arabia's Al Arabiya. These networks can serve as both catalysts and obstacles of revolution and/or counterrevolution. For example, while Al Jazeera has been viewed as a supporter of most Arab uprisings, media outlets with ties to the UAE and Saudi Arabia, such Al Arabiya, have protested against what they regard as the democratic empowerment of Islamists in Egypt. These networks, which are amplified across their multiple digital platforms, whether on Facebook, TikTok, or Instagram, are very much part of a state's digital clout, even if many such media struggle to gain traction among the region's youth.

The Dark Side: Digital Authoritarianism

Despite this liberating potential of technology, the Arab uprisings have failed to achieve Western-style liberal democracy. The role of technology in this so-called failure is perhaps a result of unrealistic expectations. The excessive veneration of technology is, to some extent, a result of a post-industrial era in which technology has become synonymous with progress. Technology has created a myriad of benefits in domains like healthcare and transport. However, while there are times when technological developments seem utilitarian in their benefits, contextual elements like political economy, regime type, and socioeconomic peculiarities serve as a reminder that technological determinism does not always lead to untrammeled benefits to humanity. Social constructivism—that is, the interaction of technology with particularistic social and political contexts—is also a key driver of technological outcomes.

In authoritarian settings such as the Middle East, the interplay between social constructivism and technological determinism often yields particular results. Resources, methods, and technologies are frequently employed in manners that uphold the existing power structures. Technologies that were initially presented as means for social interaction and connecting with others have been repurposed as means of surveillance, propaganda, and intimidation by governing bodies. Indeed, digital authoritarianism is the term used to describe how states engage digital technology for political repression and control, whether through intrusive surveillance or the mass distribution of pro-regime propaganda via networks of robot accounts (bots) on social media. So while the liberating potential of technology in the Arab Spring was partially realized, it also drew government attention to a pressing new priority—the use of digital technology for protest.

Digital technology and its despatializing powers have created new functionalities for dominant regional powers. The digital revolution in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has also ushered in digital superpowers. Digital superpowers are states that can project digital media power domestically, regionally, and internationally. Whereas traditional media power emanates from institutions such as radio, television, and newspapers, digital media power is the symbolic force that is channeled through digital platforms and resources. As I have argued elsewhere, "social media power is the ability of entities or regimes to utilize those platforms to extend their hegemony domestically and internationally. To be effective in this use of power through digital resources, ownership of infrastructure, whether directly or through investment, is critical." For example, large media conglomerates like MBC GROUP are owned by Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia was already a "media superpower," but it, along with the UAE, has become a digital superpower whose media outlets have the largest followings in the Arabic-speaking world.

Combined with authoritarian tendencies, this extensive power results in the ability to engage in digital repression. Even in a global setting, several Middle Eastern countries stand out for their repressiveness in the digital ecosystem. The Digital Repression Index ranks around 180 countries for their use of digital technology as a form of political repression. Of the twenty lowest-ranked countries, five of them are in the Middle East, including the UAE, Iran, Syria, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia. In Freedom House's Freedom of the Net 2021 index, seven MENA countries are ranked among the worst twenty countries for freedom on the internet. These include Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Türkiye. Twitter also published the number of accounts suspended by the company between 2018 and 2021 for links to state-backed information operations. Second only to China in terms of accounts suspended for state-backed manipulation are the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. Again, this reflects that Middle East digital superpowers are hardly minnows in their pursuit of manipulating the digital space.

Global Politics and Authoritarian Alliances

Deterministic arguments about the liberating potential of technology are also modulated by global geopolitics. In the MENA region, where authoritarian regimes' stability relies on external patronage, international media attention is essential to create the necessary political pressure for challenging regime resilience. Depending on the government in question, this could manifest in various ways: In Syria, Russia and Iran supported Bashar al-Assad's dictatorship, leading to a prolonged and tragic conflict. But in Egypt, Hosni Mubarak's popularity in the West declined, and the democratically elected president Mohamed Morsi was promptly followed by General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who is sometimes called Mubarak 3.0. While the use of social and digital media has increased under Sisi, it has not brought about fundamental changes to the authoritarian rule, as evidenced by continued repression.

The context in which the Arab uprisings took place also reflected a more conducive political environment to challenging authoritarianism in the Middle East. While former U.S. president Barack Obama's administration avoided overt attempts at democratization, as had occurred under his predecessor George Bush, it did emphasize advancing human rights as a foreign policy objective—much to the chagrin of the United States' authoritarian MENA allies. The increasingly brittle relationship between many MENA states and the Obama administration was soured further by the numerous viral videos and accounts of brutality committed by U.S.-allied Middle Eastern states. Such videos, often broadcast or shared on U.S.-based social media platforms and Western media outlets, were received in a U.S.-Middle East political environment that seemed conducive to progressive change, even if only superficially.

The election of Donald Trump in 2016 marked a sharp reversal of authoritarian fortunes. Under Trump's transactional style of presidency, Middle Eastern states quickly demonstrated less inhibition in their willingness to violate human rights. For example, shortly after Trump was elected, Bahrain executed political prisoners for the first time in six years despite issuing a number of death sentences to protesters arrested as a result of the 2011 Uprising. Trump also indulged domestic hawks, as well as more reactionary forces in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel, by tearing up the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal). He brought the region nearer to conflict by greenlighting the four-year blockade of Qatar by Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Indeed, this changing dynamic revealed the limitations around the liberation paradigm of technology; that is, activists often require a sympathetic and attentive political environment for their activism to gain traction. While Obama never threatened to challenge support for autocratic alliances in the region, his administration offered far more than Trump in at least moderating the worst excesses of authoritarianism.

Trump's newly discovered alliance with the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, was believed to be one of the key factors that encouraged them to proceed with their isolation of Qatar in 2017. This action gave rise to unparalleled digital disinformation campaigns. Due to the dramatic geopolitical changes, massive amounts of money were (and still are) spent on propaganda and astroturfing to sway public opinion in favor of possibly controversial or radical policies.

The United States also leveraged digital resources to intervene in the digital disinformation space. Under Trump, the U.S. State Department's Global Engagement Center came under fire for funding information campaigns that targeted U.S. journalists and activists for not being harsh enough in their criticism of Iran. On the other hand, journalists reporting on Iran have also frequently been targeted by large, anonymous Twitter mobs that assail them whenever they express any form of criticism. Iran has also created its own extensive disinformation networks to advance its goals, reflecting the problem called "upward equalization" in information warfare, where disinformation begets disinformation.

Having said this, a solely state-centric strategy is problematic in the globalized and despatialized era of technology. Authoritarianism should be seen as an assemblage of actors with aligned interests that transcend national and political boundaries. Big tech firms are becoming an important hub for the expression of authoritarian policies. The fact that private enterprises outside the MENA region are responsible for moderating the public sphere introduces new transnational elements to the articulation of dissent or other forms of expression. Whistleblowers have revealed how social media companies such as Facebook demonstrate less vigilance in monitoring (dis)information in countries where they are less likely to encounter negative publicity. This has been evident in how major tech firms have dealt with the Israel-Palestine conflict. Curation algorithms on social media have tended to suppress pro-Palestinian content, which reduces the exposure of Palestinians online. The fact that social media corporations are supporting an occupying state poses severe ethical concerns but also reflects how U.S. big tech policies often mirror (whether intentionally or not) U.S. foreign policy.

Strategies of Narrative Control

Trump's election, and the corresponding decline in regard for human rights or political reform, also came six years after the Arab uprisings. Regimes take time to adjust to new mobilization strategies, putting them on the back foot when it comes to fresh political challenges. This lag between the uptake of new technologies and effective policing strategies can be termed a "honeymoon period." The organizational ability of movements can be efficiently built and maintained in this way, as was partially the case in Bahrain, Egypt, Syria, and Tunisia in 2010 and 2011. But by 2016, the honeymoon period had already come to an end, and regimes had begun to get a handle on digital repression.

Power over digital resources has also given certain Gulf states a regional advantage in asserting hegemony in the Arabic language social media sphere. The social media power of Gulf nations and the widespread use of Arabic in a vast, multistate region have given rise to a predominance of Saudi and Emirati policy perspectives. This has been evident from Lebanon to Tunisia. Saudi Arabia and the UAE's foreign policy narrative was the prevailing framing in Arabic on Twitter when Tunisian President Kais Saied overthrew the government in a self-coup in 2021, an action that Arab Twitter users, especially from the Gulf, justified as necessary to confront increasing Islamism. As a result of Gulf states' domination over social media discourse, those seeking information about Tunisia in Arabic would likely encounter a foreign policy narrative that centers on the Gulf, raising concerns over informational autonomy in countries with limited social media influence.

Similar concerns were raised in Algeria, where bots appeared to be trying to encourage people to participate in elections widely seen as illegitimate. Two of the most explicit hashtags in this regard were #Algeriavotes and #notinmyname, which sought to denounce the protests and urge people to head to the ballot box. In 2020, when an explosion rocked Beirut, Twitter was dominated by narratives from the Gulf, which promptly blamed Hezbollah and Iran (although the actual cause was likely a combination of corruption and mismanagement in the port where the ammonium nitrate was being stored). The porous nature of the digital public sphere meant those with resources could attempt to sway public opinion through interventions in the supposedly grassroots digital square.

On the domestic front, when faced with their own political scandals, regimes mobilize their digital resources to find a way to militate against the liberating potential of social media. At the time of Jamal Khashoggi's assassination in October 2018, the dominant narrative on Arabic Twitter was the false Saudi version of events that had been prevalent since the month's start. Paradoxically, Khashoggi's name trended the least in Saudi Arabia of all Arabic-speaking countries at the time.

Silencing Critics

Other countries resort to cruder methods. Iran and Türkiye, for example, have shown a willingness to block access to social media and even the internet during political instability. The nature of specific digital infrastructure can also facilitate more bespoke solutions to censorship. States are able to localize internet shutdowns around "problem zones" depending on the state and ICT infrastructure, as Bahrain did in 2016 when one small town saw an online curfew for a full year. So while states generally are willing to engage in internet censorship, they do not necessarily all do it in the same way, pointing to shades of digital repression.

Social media has also played a significant role in the spread of censorship, harassment, and hate speech. Human rights activists, academics, and journalists in the region have been the focus of vicious digital disinformation campaigns. Many individuals have either been doxed, threatened, or targeted by various prominent people in the region. Thirty-six journalists from Al Jazeera alone were targeted with Pegasus spyware, which is made by the Israeli company NSO Group. Currently, this is the single largest-known attack on one news organization. The very real threat of incarceration or death, as shown by Khashoggi's killing, adds a potent legitimacy to these online threats, contributing to a chilling effect. After all, for many journalists or netizens in the region, nothing is off-limits if the murder of a U.S.-based journalist could be carried out in such a bold manner with seemingly no substantial consequences for those involved.

This chilling effect creates a dissent vacuum on and offline, which is then filled by progovernment or apolitical influencers praising the establishment and, in many cases, warning potential critics of the repercussions of dissent. All of this occurs in a legal context where vague laws that prohibit bringing the state into disrepute can be used to silence critics, whether online or on legacy media. With alarming frequency, critics appear to be periodically scapegoated with a chilling effect on free speech. In 2022, Salma al-Shehab, a Saudi student studying in the UK, was sentenced to thirty-four years in prison for tweeting criticism of the Saudi regime. This case also raised concerns that al-Shehab was reported using a mobile phone application designed to facilitate reporting crimes in Saudi Arabia. This crowdsourced surveillance also highlights the kind of endemic monitoring and reporting evident in totalitarian regimes.

Automating Propaganda and Populism

While the merits of artificial intelligence and automation are widely known, they have also been deployed for purposes of narrative control and censorship. The growth of bots, which swamp the digital public sphere with proregime content, is also threatening to undermine the potential for a deliberative democratic change. Millions of automated accounts throughout the Gulf region have commandeered online conversations, quashing authentic discourse and creating the impression of public debate. This practice, known as astroturfing, aims to supplant genuine public discussions with artificial, regime-sanctioned, and ideologically sanitized messaging, manipulated from the top down. Bad actors can also exploit such technologies for spreading harmful agendas. Thousands of bots affiliated with state-sanctioned news outlets (such as Saudi 24) have tweeted anti-Shia sectarian language and hate speech, often amplifying existing sectarian television programming.

Personalism and authoritarian populism are powerful dynamics in the Middle East, more so than single-party rule as seen in other authoritarian contexts such as China. Hypernationalism, often demonstrated through symbolic displays of loyalty to leaders, has resulted in a lot of Twitter content. While very real, these new nationalisms, especially in the Gulf, have been spurred on by thousands of fake accounts. Hundreds of thousands of bots and trolls have been used over the past five years to glorify Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and UAE President Mohamed bin Zayed, to support Trump's anti-Iran tweets, and to cover up the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. In 2018, for example, thousands of accounts falsely claiming to be Saudis were deployed to demand maximum pressure and even war with Iran, using hashtags such as "Trump Will Destroy Iran."

Despite being very simple computer programs, bots are useful for amplifying pro-authoritarian propaganda because of their capacity to raise the popularity of URLs and other types of information. Of even greater concern is the rapid advancement of natural language processing technology, exemplified by tools such as ChatGPT, which can already generate highly convincing and credible-sounding content. The same trend can be observed with deepfake images and videos, which have already been utilized to deceive editors worldwide into publishing anti-Iranian and pro-Emirati content.

Surveillance and Emergent Totalitarianism

The process of authoritarian adaptation to digital technology has spawned the term "digital authoritarianism." While the term "authoritarianism" has displaced terms like "totalitarianism," which fell out of fashion after the demise of the Soviet Union, there is a renewed conceptual relevance due to the functionalities permitted by digital technology. As Hannah Arendt described in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, a key aspect of a totalitarian society was the absence of privacy. Under totalitarianism, whether through passive or active surveillance, personal privacy and therefore liberty is subsumed under broad securitization projects enabled by ever more insidious and expansive forms of surveillance. In fact, the abuse of digital technology may itself be a fundamental aspect of changing regime type. Totalitarianism invades and asphyxiates private life, promotes deistic-like qualities to the leadership, stifles pluralism, limits corruption, and prompts an increased presence on the international stage.

Totalitarianism also requires leaders with messianic visions and a desire to establish themselves on the international scene and invoke a permanent state of mobilization of their citizenries against perceived or constructed external and internal enemies. One doesn't have to look far for examples. Mohammed bin Salman (colloquially known as MBS) and Mohamed bin Zayed (called MBZ) reflect this new generation of leaders. MBS in particular has shown a totalitarian proclivity to invade the personal space of his subjects or enemies: Recently, a U.S. jury found former Twitter employee Ahmad Abouammo, an American and Lebanese citizen, guilty of spying for a foreign state (Saudi Arabia). He was found to have received gifts, including money and a luxury watch, in exchange for passing private Twitter data about Saudi critics directly to members of the Saudi royal family and close advisers to the crown prince. A file sent from a WhatsApp account belonging to MBS was also reported to be the vector in a hack of Amazon owner Jeff Bezos's phone. Leading up to the hack, the *Washington Post*, owned by Bezos, had been a fierce critic of MBS following Khashoggi's murder.

In and of itself, this shows how important Riyadh and the new leadership under MBS see the threat and utility posed by these digital platforms. Their willingness to devote resources and stake international reputational capital for the purposes of espionage on the soil of a close ally indicates a bold new approach to repression. The most profound consequence of infiltrating Twitter was perhaps the fact that the spying sent a message to activists anywhere, but especially in Saudi Arabia, that they were never safe. Digital totalitarianism makes possible an almost permanent sense of anxiety induced by the omniscience of technological surveillance.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE are also customers of Pegasus. Morocco is also reported to use the software. The spyware, which essentially turns infected targets' mobile phones into advanced listening devices, has been deployed against politicians, activists, and journalists spanning the globe. Along with very drastic shifts in the established order, these new digital forms of monitoring are also serving as a crucial foundation for new digital authoritarian coalitions in the region. Israel's advanced capabilities in the fields of cybersecurity and disinformation have fostered a novel form of explicit collaboration in this domain. By selling invasive surveillance software to states that broadly support Israel's foreign policy objectives, Israel increases its influence and power in the region through the use of proxy policing. This spyware diplomacy serves as a reminder of how control technologies are fostering regional alliances and bolstering a regional order that is supported by the UAE and Saudi Arabia, two of the Gulf's most powerful nations on the outside. More recent revelations have also shed light on how a growing number of companies run by former Israeli military officials, including Percepto International and Team Jorge, specialize in social media operations designed to influence elections or smear humanitarian not-for-profits.

In this regard, selling the most invasive forms of surveillance technology to states with a demonstrable disregard for privacy laws or freedom of speech highlights the importance of seeing emergent totalitarian governments as an assemblage of actors bound together by mutual security interests. The potential for totalitarianism is not unique to the Middle East. The operations of Cambridge Analytica as well as the Edward Snowden revelations about extensive eavesdropping by the U.S. National Security Agency highlight how greater government intrusion into personal lives is a universal problem. Terms like "authoritarian" and "hybrid" regimes sometimes conceal the fact that all governments, whether monarchical, theological, autocratic, or democratic, participate in behaviors that might be viewed as essential elements of totalitarian societies. However, in totalitarian or emergent totalitarian regimes, there is very little recourse for holding regimes responsible for ever-growing surveillance.

Naturally, citizens and members of civil society have limited ability to resist such incursions. There are few safeguards against the state's arbitrary use of power in the Middle East's current political systems, most of which involve one-party dominance, co-opted judiciaries, and an absence of rule of law. An essential component of an effective democracy is the safeguards that citizens have against an arbitrary state. Privacy mechanisms (like the EU's General Data Protection Regulation) are not available, nor are they even conceivably possible in the near term, given the absence of robust or accountable democratic federalist structures. Indeed, totalitarianism can only be achieved through a near absence of accountability.

Conclusion

Citizens and activists attempting to resist and push back against digital authoritarianism have encountered a number of crucial obstacles, including extant authoritarian structures, authoritarian learning, and changing geopolitics. In the context of authoritarian political systems, digital technology is frequently repurposed to facilitate surveillance, regulation, and oppression. In effect, the political structures of many MENA regimes have changed very little over the past few decades, merely changed form. Even Tunisia, widely considered a success story of the Arab uprisings, has fallen back to autocracy, a fact cheered on by some of the Gulf states, who continue to exert their influence over the wider Middle East.

In light of this, the digital shift in the MENA area is more likely to support authoritarianism than to confront it. However, technology also provides new functions that broaden repressive methods and even change the very essence of a regime type. As digital technologies become increasingly pervasive, the authoritarian governments of the region face the danger of descending into totalitarianism as they pursue absolute security. This situation is exacerbated by political structures that prioritize regime security over individual privacy. As things stand, wealthy Gulf states with high digital penetration rates are becoming digital superpowers—states able to project their influence or control domestically, regionally, and internationally. The transition from digital authoritarianism to emergent totalitarianism will be facilitated by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, especially if they continue a strategic shift to other digital authoritarian superpowers such as China, Israel, and Russia.

CHAPTER 9

Consolidation and Fragmentation in Arab Security Sectors

Eleonora Ardemagni

Over the last decade, many Arab states have been facing institutional crises as stark social inequalities and eroded state capacity have paved the way for contested political legitimacy. At the same time, the crisis of the Arab state has intersected with a series of events that have occurred since the 2010s in the Middle East and internationally. The 2011 Arab uprisings and subsequent civil wars have profoundly reshaped security institutions. Power competition between Middle Eastern states and global powers' intermeshing in the region have added another layer to an already divided landscape. These evolving power dynamics have forged a new security mosaic in the Arab world that deeply affects security sectors and civil-military relations.

Myriad causes have accelerated the Arab security transformation: the rise and fall of the self-proclaimed Islamic State; the bolstering of Iranian proxies and allies in the Middle East; the real and perceived U.S. disengagement from the region; the gradual penetration of Russia and China; the fallout of the coronavirus pandemic; the Abraham Accords; the implications of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, comprising its effects on geopolitics, energy, and food security; and widespread debt crises and inflation. Security sectors will also be increasingly affected by shocks including the looming end of the oil era, climate change, and the rise of new technologies like artificial intelligence. In such a context, security sectors are mirroring state capacity and cohesion. This new security mosaic is the outcome of different paths: multiple centers of political-military power (such as in Yemen and Libya); segmented security landscapes (like in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria); top-down reforms (such as states in the Gulf Cooperation Council, or GCC); authoritarian downturns (in Egypt and Tunisia); and authoritarian restructuring (in Algeria, Morocco, and Jordan). In all these cases, security sectors and civil-military relations are dealing with changing power dynamics in the state, as well as *with* and *between* regional and international players. The current scenario reveals new actors and power balances.

Transformations in Armed Forces and Armed Groups

The regional transformations generated since the 2011 Arab uprisings have led to a deep evolution in Arab armed forces, as well as in the armed groups that have proliferated due to widespread state fragmentation and collapse.

One trend of the post-2011 security mosaic is that most defense structures no longer primarily rely on armies. In reshaped defense structures, the army is no longer the military pivot, and in security structures, police forces are less central. In states with multiple power centers and segmented security landscapes, eroded state legitimacy and internal contestation lead to constrained sovereignty or even institutional collapse.

Consequently, remnants of regular armies and police forces are increasingly complemented by or coexist with armed groups. These armed groups have emerged from the battlefield (bottom-up) or were established by governments as auxiliaries (top-down). They play a fundamental role in the survival of the state military and its varied interests (political, economic, social, and religious). For example, in Yemen, a large part of the southern forces were organized by the recognized Yemeni government and the UAE to counter the Houthi movement's military penetration into southern regions. But, over time, the southern forces became institutionalized groups (such as the Security Belt Forces and the Hadhrami Elite Forces) that supported only formally the interior ministry or the army. Conversely, the Presidential Protection Brigades were created by former interim president Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi to protect personal and presidential buildings.

In states with stronger institutional capacities, governments tend to complement the armies and police forces with other coercive entities, such as militarized police/gendarmerie or elite units. This setup forges agile tools for internal security that can also be useful for external purposes. In the first case, militarized police can rapidly become a deployment force able to cope with public order management. For example, Jordan's Darak forces (officially the General Directorate of Gendarmerie) were established in 2008 and also fulfil a social cohesion function, allowing Jordanians of Palestinian descent to enlist. In the second case, elite units are expeditionary forces that receive highly specialized training and equipment. This is the case for the Presidential Guard of the UAE, established in 2011 and deployed in Yemen in 2015–2019 as part of the Saudi-led coalition.

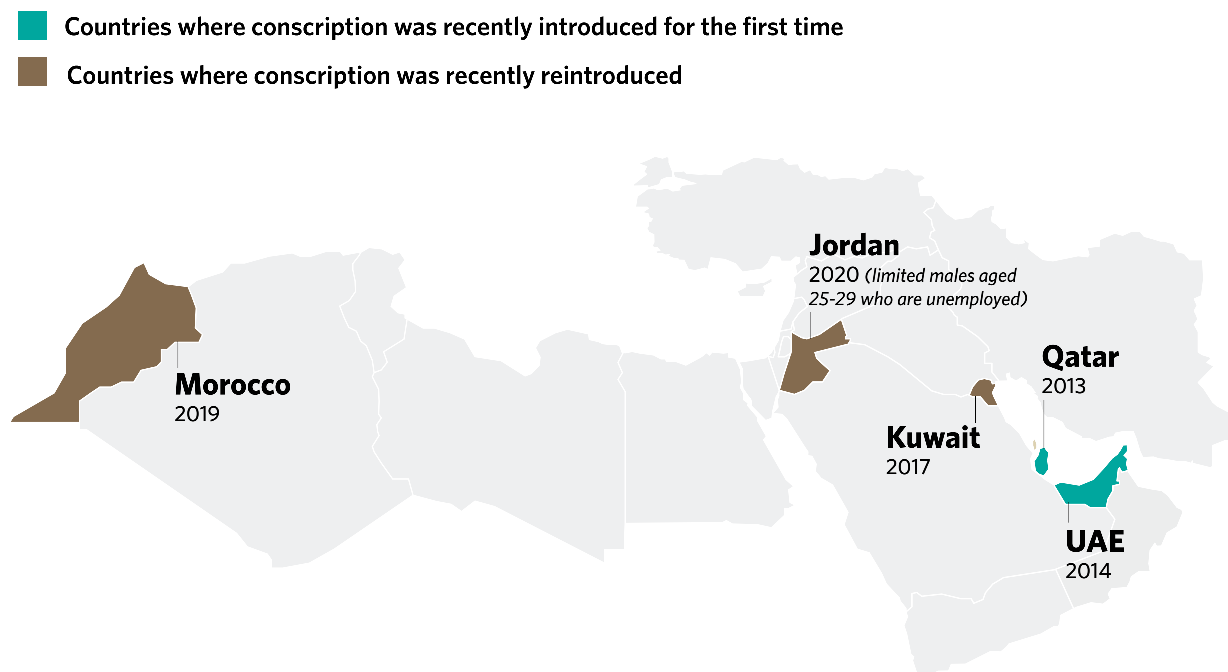
As the importance of armies has decreased, the centrality of armed groups has conversely risen in the Arab region. In Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, today's armed groups can no longer be identified simply as hybrid forces. The hybrid model—where regular and irregular security forces coexist, cooperate, or even merge—has been key to understanding the complex forms of security provision that have emerged in the Arab world, especially after 2011. To a certain extent, the critical hybrid approach to armed actors and orders has been gradually incorporated into mainstream analysis and policymaking, acknowledging the limits of state-centered considerations. However, the fragmentation and, later, the informal and then legalized hybridization between segments of the armies and armed actors have shaped new military entities that go a step further than hybridity. These entities can be framed as regenerated military forces. Regeneration here refers to the outcome of an ongoing process that includes, in many cases, formal integration of fighters and groups in armies' ranks. Today, military forces differ from previous hybrid umbrellas formed in the first phase of civil wars in Yemen, Libya, and Syria, as well as in Iraq post-2014.

Regenerated military forces are governance-oriented and play a significant role in welfare provision at the local level and in the illegal and informal economy. These forces lack an agreed-upon, unified chain of command, blending the armies' hierarchical structure with the decentralized, horizontal organization of bottom-up groups. Regenerated forces combine military capabilities with militarized police tasks, thus contributing to the erosion of boundaries between internal and external duties, boundaries that were also corroded by the increased influence of external state actors.

To further complicate things, governments have gradually provided top-down recognition to some armed groups, thus offering institutional legitimacy to forces that acquired popular legitimacy from the battlefield. In Yemen, the Presidential Leadership Council appointed three prominent leaders who were directly or indirectly tied to armed groups among its eight members: Aidarous al-Zubaidi of the Southern Transitional Council (whose affiliated armed groups control many southern governorates), Tareq Saleh of the National Resistance forces, and Abdulrahman Abu Zara'a al-Muharrami of the Giants Brigades. In Libya, the Presidential Council of the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord appointed Abdel Ghani al-Kikli (also known as Ghneiwa), leader of the armed group Abu Salim Central Security Force, as head of the new Stability Support Authority (which reports directly to the president). Therefore, as hybrid actors permeate state institutions and armies are consistently restaffed through the integration of former fighters and groups, the concept of hybridity itself is overcome by facts, looks aged, and must be revisited, as suggested here with the adoption of regenerated military forces.

In some countries, armies have fragmented and armed groups have proliferated. But in others, the perception of the army as a national symbol has strengthened, and conscription has returned (see figure 1). In some Arab countries, the army is enhancing its public role, with an implicit revision of civil-military relations. This is a top-down strategy to shape patriotism and national identity in the UAE and Qatar and tighten social cohesion in Jordan and Morocco, while in Tunisia it is the outcome of changing political balances. Many Arab countries such as Qatar (in 2013) and the UAE (in 2014) have introduced for the first time compulsory military service for male citizens. Kuwait (in 2017), Morocco (in 2019), and Jordan (in 2020) have reintroduced conscription, although in Jordan's case the draft is limited to males aged twenty-five to twenty-nine who are unemployed. For the GCC states, conscription doesn't have a strict military purpose but rather a pedagogic one: instilling social cohesion, civic responsibility, and a sense of duty in times of socioeconomic transformation. For the UAE and Qatar, conscription is a cultural tool to forge a stronger national identity; as both Abu Dhabi and Doha underwent a late-state formation, they have demographically young societies in which nationals are a minority at home. In Morocco and

Figure 1. Conscription Plays a New, Larger Role in Arab Militaries



Source: Author's compilation.

Jordan, conscription is a strategy to mitigate unemployment. However, Moroccan authorities have also stressed the nation-building intent, emphasizing the need "to promote patriotism" and "the correlation between the rights and responsibilities of citizenship."

The case of Tunisia is quite different. Despite adopting a neutral stance, the Tunisian army has gradually strengthened its operational role since 2011—and has also tripled its budget—shifting away from its traditionally neutral policy. During the 2017 protests, the army was unprecedentedly deployed to protect critical infrastructures vis-à-vis Tunisians who took to the streets. It has stepped up its involvement in counterterrorism and border security. Then, the army was at the forefront of implementing public health measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. But President Kais Saied's authoritarian downturn since July 2021 has represented a turning point for the army, paving the way for a subtle but constant increase of its political weight. Obeying the presidential order, the army deployed outside the closed parliament and protected the president's building; meanwhile, civilians are often prosecuted in military courts, mostly for alleged crimes of opinions.

Currently, the army's social cohesion role is unthinkable in countries that are deeply divided at the political level. Moreover, many security sectors are also financially unsustainable, and security personnel don't receive regular, fair salaries. In Lebanon, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, state security sectors are affected by a deep financial crisis, in terms of budget and salaries. National currencies' collapse and inflation have worsened an already precarious situation: These states are no longer able to pay fair wages to soldiers and police officers, nor to do so on a regular basis. For instance, after the Syrian pound's devaluation, the salary of soldiers in the country now stands below the poverty line, so many of them also work as agricultural laborers or receive food support in deployment areas. Unpaid soldiers' protests are frequent in Syria and Yemen. This adds to deep-seated structural issues in the security sectors such as politicization, cronyism, and corruption.

Unequal economic dynamics are also developing in territories held by armed groups, affecting their relationships with local communities. Most armed groups have indeed opted to reproduce former state mechanisms, adopting what I define as armed neopatrimonialism. Since the 1960–1970s, neopatrimonialism—the practice of governing through the arbitrary distribution of wealth—has plagued post-colonial Arab states and their unequal modernization paths, leading to the fall of many regimes in 2011. In neopatrimonial states, revenues were arbitrarily distributed by rulers in exchange for loyalty through formal institutions and personal informal networks, with huge repercussions for social inequalities and corruption. However, neopatrimonial practices are showing great continuity and adaptability in post-2011 Arab states. In territories under their control, armed groups are reproducing, on a smaller scale, neopatrimonial mechanisms through interactions with formal institutions and local populations.

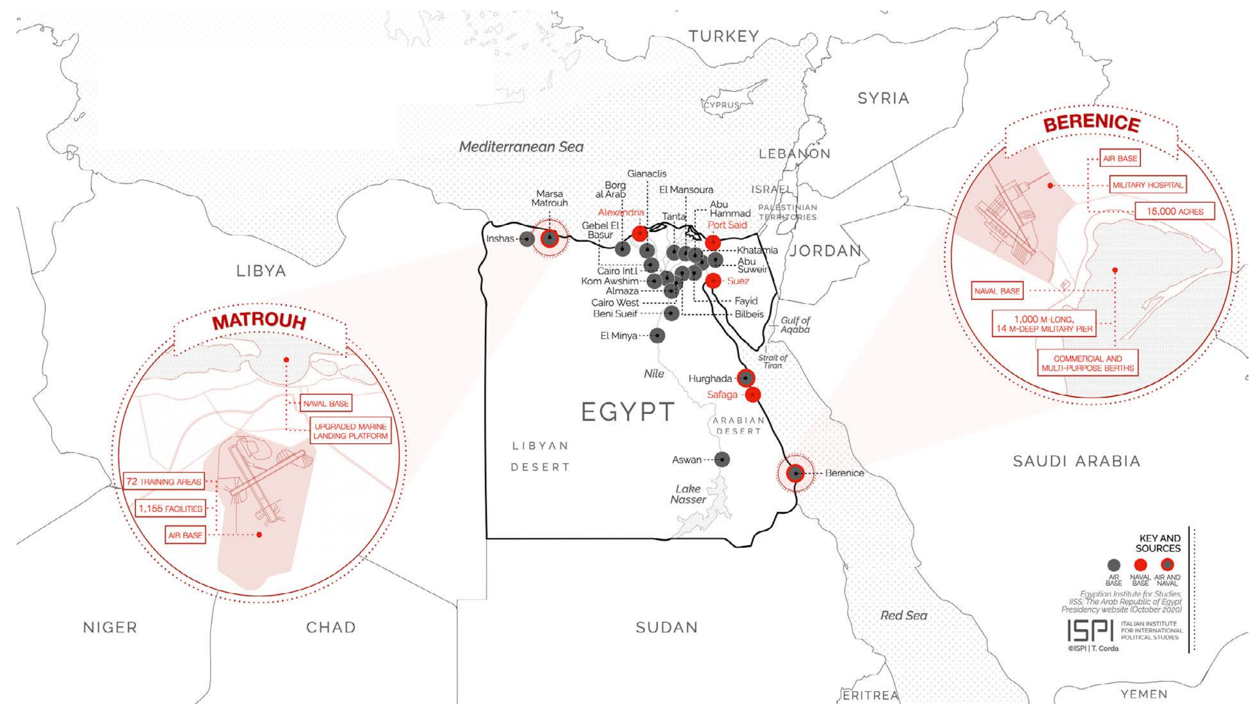
Armed neopatrimonialism is most often carried out by warlords who rule territory through personal, informal, and lucrative logics of power—the same logics that were previously applied, on a larger scale, by authoritarian state leaderships through formal institutions. In Libya, General Khalifa Haftar and his sons Saddam and Khaled (respectively the informal commanders of the Tariq bin Ziyad Brigade and of the Libyan National Army's 106th Brigade), have shaped a tribal patrimonial network in Cyrenaica. Such networks can also be seen at play in Yemen as the officials of the armed group–based governorates of Marib, Hadhramawt, and Mahra are developing personal wealth networks through the appropriation of revenues—from energy in Marib and Hadramawt and from customs duties at ports and crossing points in Mahra—"without any effective control" by the Central Bank in Aden.

These phenomena emphasize the rising multitasking nature of armed groups, which now play many roles in society. In countries with collapsed or fractured armies, volunteerism has become the predominant form of recruitment. Volunteers join armed groups for different reasons including enhanced economic outcomes, territorial belonging, ideology, and social identity. Often, armed groups are largely homogenous geographically, ethnically, and religiously. As armed groups proliferate, armies are paradoxically turning in some countries into "subnational entities" centered around community and social representation, thus losing their cohesion role. In many Arab countries, armed groups have also gradually become economic, social, and political actors, playing direct or indirect roles in education and religious bureaucracies: alongside fighting activities, they are multitasking.

In this way, warlords have not only increased their political legitimacy vis-à-vis local populations and external players, but also, they have contributed to the blurred boundaries between the civilian and military spheres. As a result, it may no longer be possible to talk about civil-military relations in fractured states, as armed groups perform multiple roles contemporarily. For instance, in Iraq, most of the armed groups belonging to the Popular Mobilization Forces (al-Hashd al-Shaabi), legalized in 2016, have transformed from simply nonstate armed actors to multifaceted holders of territory and providers of local governance. This trend has occurred without solving the hybrid dilemma, where forces that are formally part of the regular security sector but operate autonomously, exploiting their legal standing.

Finally, to cope with rising hybrid threats, many Arab states are modernizing and strengthening their navies, developing a sea power 2.0. In this context, navies, naval bases, and asymmetric maritime warfare are increasingly important. The goal is not only to secure coasts and infrastructure (such as shallow/brown littoral waters), but it is also to project naval power in the overseas (blue-water capabilities). This projection of power involves opening new naval bases and enlarging existing bases, as well as promoting joint or multinational maritime drills to strengthen expertise and interoperability (see figure 2).

Figure 2. Egypt's Military Under Sisi



Source: Italian Institute for International Political Studies. Reprinted with permission.

In some cases, this effort isn't strictly related to national security but rather to national prestige. In the Red Sea, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are enhancing maritime cooperation. This is especially triggered by Riyadh's Vision 2030, which involves development on Saudi Arabia's west coast including post-oil economic projects like the smart city called NEOM and investments in tourism capacity. Red Sea maritime cooperation is also triggered by increased oil exports from the Saudi terminal in Yanbu, built to circumvent the Strait of Hormuz. This increase, combined with an upgraded attention to security, has multiplied threats to coastal, oil, and trade security.

Since the war in Yemen began in 2015, maritime security has deteriorated in the Red Sea and in the Bab el-Mandeb choke point, arguably due to destabilizing activities by Tehran. Initially limited to ground insurgencies and guerrilla warfare, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC, also known as *pasdaran*) and Iranian-affiliated armed groups have gradually developed air and maritime asymmetric warfare capabilities with drones, missiles, and waterborne improvised explosive devices. This is the case with Hezbollah's and Hamas's speedboats and unmanned remote-controlled submarines, as well as the Houthis' waterborne improvised explosive devices, all of which can hijack operations and sea mines. The Mediterranean Sea and the southern Red Sea could easily become flashpoints.

Transformations in Security Sectors' Patterns

These transformations have occurred not only for armed forces and armed groups but also for security sectors such as the ways they are structured and integrated in society and their relationships with external state powers. For one, security governance now tends to rely on multiple players. Despite stark differences between countries, security governance often involves at least two actors in addition to the traditional role played by the army. In some cases, central state institutions are not able to secure the sovereign control of a given territory (bottom-up fragmentation), while in others, central state institutions opt for institutional duplication (top-down fragmentation) to counterbalance forces and maximize power. In socially divided countries, security governance develops a network structure: It is localized and decentralized, with some armed groups holding and ruling a territory in a horizontal way, according to the shifting lines of deployment areas. In Yemen, for instance, Shabwa Governorate was co-controlled until July 2022 by army units, tribal militias affiliated with the Islah party—rallying the Muslim Brotherhood and a Salafi segment—and the Islah-loyalist special security forces of the governorate. In August 2022, these forces were militarily defeated and replaced in security governance by the local Shabwa Defense Forces and the Giants Brigades coming from the Yemeni western coast. Both groups are secessionists and backed by the UAE.

In cohesive countries, such as the GCC countries, forms of institutional fragmentation are instead implemented top-down to further centralize security governance, thus protecting the status quo. This occurs, for instance, in Kuwait, where the army staffs many contract soldiers and is counterbalanced by the National Guard in which only citizens can serve. In Bahrain, the Bahrain Defence Force and the National Guard both deal with regime protection, although in different ways. Also, in states where the armed forces play a leading role, and in which the army still stands at the center of the defense structure, other armed players can be involved from above in security governance. For instance, local tribal militias in Sinai are financially and materially backed by the Egyptian army to perform military operations—independently or as the army's auxiliaries—to quell insurgencies in the peninsula.

As more and more new players compete for security roles, security sector reform and governance (SSR/G) has become more politicized, competitive, and externally driven. SSR/G is always a political process despite the technical nature of its operations, which aim to enhance the provision of state and human security in order to create a secure and stable environment. In divided countries, these competing projects produce segmented forms of SSR/G in the territory, depending on the external states that try to influence the process, further reducing prospects of (re)construction for national security sectors. The main risk to the effectiveness and national cohesion of a reform stems from its politicization: this trend especially emerges in Libya, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and, to a lesser extent, Lebanon. On SSR/G, Western players mainly focus on medium-to-long-term state and institutional (re)building, working to comply with the rule of law and good governance principles. Conversely, non-Western players pursue short-to-medium-term stabilization goals mainly for geostrategic gains, dealing directly with local armed groups through train-and-equip programs. Non-Western players also display differentiated patterns of security assistance.

Iran follows a *network approach* vis-à-vis local armed groups: Tehran stands at the center of interconnected armed groups that share (although with nuances) quite convergent ideologies, common regional threat perceptions, and similar operative goals in the Middle East. Examples abound, from Hezbollah in Lebanon to Syrian militias and Iraq's Hashds. Houthis in Yemen remain the most external ring of the Iranian armed constellation. The UAE, Türkiye, and Russia have opted for a *pyramidal approach* with respect to armed groups, with an adjacent focus on contractors and private military companies. For instance, the Emirati Armed Forces directly organized territorially based armed groups in the southern regions of Yemen; in Syria and Libya, the Turkish-backed forces were placed under Türkiye's command on the ground; and the Russian command in Syria directly crafted military formations or integrated irregular groups into the local army.

The presence of so many players taking on roles in security assistance emphasizes how power and security relations have become more regionalized, meaning driven by regional players. This is mostly related to two interconnected dynamics. First, the United States has reduced its political engagement and military presence in the area (and, to a lesser extent, in the Gulf), while neither Russia, China, nor the European Union is able and willing to play the role of security provider. Second, since 2011, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Türkiye, and Qatar have followed ambitious foreign policies, using military ventures to gain leverage abroad for power-politics purposes. From the Gulf monarchies' perspective, this strategy aims at security autonomy prompted by Washington's perceived retrenchment. In the past years, Gulf monarchies have not only invested in military hardware and expensive procurement but have also developed local expertise in the defense industry and arms maintenance.

This adds to investments in military education and training, for instance with the opening of national defense colleges and academies and the proliferation of thinks tanks in GCC states that analyze security and regional issues. The shaping of an emergent endogenous order in the Middle East, backed by the United States, builds upon the Abraham Accords' framework, with Israel and the UAE as the main axes in terms of foreign policy and military capabilities. This axis also encompasses Bahrain, Egypt, and Jordan, the other states that signed normalization agreements with Israel. However, the Abraham Accords' security purview extends beyond signatory states: this is outlined, for instance, by the participation of Saudi Arabia and Oman in the 2022 U.S.-led maritime drill in the Red Sea that also involved Israel.

Implications and Outlooks: What Threatens Arab Security Sectors' Sustainability

Threats to the sustainability of Arab security sectors mainly come from institutional and political fragmentation, limited economic resources, and geopolitical competition. The crisis of many Arab states deeply affects security sectors in the region, with implications for civil-military relations. In countries like Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, different and rival sources of security assistance further trigger competitive violence on the ground and crystallize political-military rifts between local players. Impoverished and fractured security sectors are no longer tools of social welfare. Overstaffed and segmented armies cannot mitigate unemployment as they used to. Consequently, the lack of economic resources can favor youth recruitment by armed groups, with the possible rise in extremist and jihadist formations in the medium and long term. In many cases, armed groups can rely instead on wider, more lucrative sources of funding than the army and police forces, from the predation of the state economy to smuggling and trafficking to external financing. This not only increases disaffection and desertion in armies' ranks but also tightens Arab security players' dependence on foreign aid from international organizations and donors. For instance, Lebanon's dramatic economic crisis and currency devaluation has further reduced resources for budget and personnel salaries. Since 2022, skyrocketing inflation and energy prices have made Lebanese defense and security forces even more dependent on international and foreign assistance, including for basic goods such as food and transport fuel.

Arab security sectors' lack of economic resources not only paves the way for controversial forms of train-and-equip programs by foreign powers, but it also results in diminished attention to good governance principles. In fact, internally, narrow defense budgets are predominantly used to buy weapons and to pay salaries and basic duties (like food and transport fuel), with limited investments in accountability and human rights education and programming. In a broader way, SSR/G—especially the adaptation of the security-military apparatus to new global challenges—is affected by the lack of sufficient economic resources. For instance, economic constraints are going to impede many Arab states' goals of reducing armed forces' greenhouse gas emissions, while the impact of the armed forces on climate change is gradually acknowledged as a reality to be tackled through ad hoc initiatives. This is likely to produce some sort of "green divide" between richer and poorer countries internationally and within the Arab region.

Limited economic availability is also an obstacle for fighters' integration into regular security sectors. The proliferation of armed groups impedes the implementation of traditional disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) strategies by Western stakeholders, for whom good governance is a relevant component. Reintegration is also an expensive process. States and security institutions must be able to financially support former fighters and their families, sometimes even their tribes, in the transition phase from insurgency to the regular security sector. In other cases, states must provide prospects and incentives for fighters' integration into civilian life, such as vocational training.

From a cultural perspective, Arab security sectors mirror the "state of nationhood" in each country: In Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, the plurality of conflicting armed players reflects a contested and fragmented national identity. But in the GCC states as well as in Jordan, Morocco, and to a lesser extent Tunisia, the army and its connected values of service, responsibility, and patriotism play, albeit differently, a role in building and/or strengthening national identity. Because of the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the United States and Western states and organizations like NATO and the EU find themselves in varying degrees facing a strategic dilemma pertaining to the preservation and enhancement of their influence in MENA despite diminished resources. As the United States and NATO redirect their focus on emerging threats coming from Russia in Europe and from China in the Indo-Pacific, Western actors risk losing further leverage in MENA.

Simultaneously, many Arab states are destabilized by acute economic and institutional crises. And non-Western states within and beyond MENA are tightening their military and political influence in the area, disregarding local security players' human rights and accountability records. Western countries and organizations started to cooperate with capable Arab military partners (such as Jordan and the UAE) to balance their resources and geopolitical interests. The United States will likely continue to reduce its direct engagement in MENA, in both political and military terms, while NATO has prioritized deterrence and defense, not cooperative security and defense capacity-building, in its 2022 Strategic Concept. The concept document gives special attention to the organization's eastern flank; however, it does not mention NATO's southern partnerships, the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, nor does it mention the 2022 Madrid Summit Declaration. The focus on the eastern flank only reiterates the Atlantic alliance's effort to enhance capacity-building support to MENA partners. Similarly, the most recent British defense strategy, the 2021 UK Integrated Review, reduced the number of mentions for the Middle East and the Gulf. This is a noticeable gap as Russian hybrid political-military penetration also involves Syria, the eastern Mediterranean, Libya, and Africa. This implicitly highlights that NATO and its member states, including the United States, acknowledge that they have narrow resources for defense capacity-building in the region, especially after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Therefore, for Washington, the most sustainable policy includes supporting regionalized security in MENA in order to preserve stability and Western influence while countering Russian and Chinese penetration in the area.

Integrated deterrence stands at the core of the 2022 U.S. National Defense Strategy, which outlines an approach in which Washington relies on allies and partners to develop and implement deterrence. For the United States, a partnership-oriented strategy in MENA means supporting the creation of an endogenous regional order, a process begun with the Abraham Accords. However, this strategy also presents risks for Arab security players and civil-military relations. Outsourcing MENA security to the Israel-GCC axis could increase regional misalignment from American and Western interests, thus provoking new tensions with Iran and its armed allies. For this reason, the recent restoration of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran is also good news for American and Western interests in the region, as it could pave the way for a broader, stability-oriented restructuring of the MENA order. However, two political questions are still on the stage. First, although Saudi Arabia and Iran decided to avoid a direct confrontation, their rivalry is going to indirectly last in the region. In this context, the political behavior of Iranian-related players vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia and the UAE is still to be tested, also given nonstate armed actors' growing governance role and agency in national landscapes. Second, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and all the GCC states openly follow a parallel partnerships policy, along with Israel to a lesser extent. This means they are cultivating nonexclusive ties with the United States but also with Russia, India, and China: the outcome is that GCC countries have less predictable policies than they did before.

Conclusion: Arab Security and War in a Fast-Changing Scenario

The current mosaic of security in the Arab world is marked now more than ever by dynamism, given a domestic, regional, and international scenario that is still in flux. However, hierarchies and networks clearly develop on intersected levels: within states, between states and regional players, and between regional actors and international powers. In other words, current security balances in the Arab region build on the accelerated transformation of power relations on a multilevel basis. First, there is a renewed relationship between security sectors—more broadly, the state—and armed groups: many defense structures are no longer centered on the armies; hybridity as an analytical lens is obsolete and needs to be revisited to better grasp the governance dimension of current armed players; armed groups have turned into multitasking actors; and security governance is increasingly multipolar even in stable countries.

Secondly, in some states, the armed forces now have an enhanced political and representative role: conscription and national service programs were unprecedentedly introduced or reimplemented; armies' budgets and visibility have increased; and investments in navies and naval bases at home and abroad have grown. Third, economic relations are reshaped with regard to the boundaries among formal, informal, and illicit networks: many security sectors are financially unsustainable and face problems and delays in salary payments; and most of the armed groups have adopted the neopatrimonial practices that once marked unequal, ineffective, and corrupted state institutions. Fourth, some Middle Eastern states (such as the GCC states, Iran, and Türkiye) have growing leverage in fractured Arab countries; at the same time, American and Western influence in MENA declines while Russian and Chinese penetration rises. In some countries, externally driven SSR/G and train-and-equip programs are competing, and the regionalization of security is shaping an endogenous order in the Middle East built upon the Abraham Accords and now, likely, on the Saudi-Iranian detente.

Against this backdrop, Arab security sectors and their international partners, first of all the United States, have to cope with threats that are increasingly multidomain, combining, for instance, direct and remote warfare or the use of drones and missiles against maritime targets. This scenario requires defense capacity-building and the advancement of interoperability *within* the countries and *between* partners. Moreover, it entails further efforts to integrate multidomain capabilities, which NATO defines as "the orchestration of military activities, across all domains and environments, synchronized with non-military activities." The rebalancing of the U.S. security engagement "from hardware to holism" with Arab states follows this strategic direction: for Washington and other Western actors, presence now means support, capacity-building, and access rather than deployment and basing. This choice was first triggered by political and economic reasons, but it also allows greater adaptability to new warfare and its dynamics and actors. In fact, multidimensional threats in the Arab region and its neighborhood come both from states (like Iran) and nonstate armed actors (like Hezbollah, some Iraqi militias, and the Houthis), thus requiring an upgraded level of coordination between local players and Western partners. However, the intermeshing of armed actors with states institutions (such as in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria) affects not only the future of security sectors and civil-military relations but also the future of war.

Armed groups increasingly penetrate state structures in countries with declining institutional legitimacy, and states increasingly rely upon paramilitaries (as the Kremlin does with the Wagner Group). Given this complex and gray background, interstate wars could make a comeback in the future. Armed groups tend to bring their militia practices into the state rather than adapting to institutional codes, while gaining full access to the state's military resources. But at this point, disentangling state from nonstate components of Arab security sectors would be a senseless exercise. The United States and other Western players must take this scenario into account to better support Arab partners and regional stability, while promoting, through agile presence and partnerships, their long-term interests in the Arab world.

CHAPTER 10

Arab De-escalations and Realignments Amid Multipolarity

Dalia Dassa Kaye and Frederic Wehrey

The Middle East is in once again in a state of dramatic flux. The turbulent, post-2011 era of civil wars, adventurism, and proxy rivalries appears to have peaked. Regional insurgent and terrorist groups, namely the Islamic State, have been severely degraded. The strength of transnational political Islam has faded as well and, with the consolidation of power by President Kais Saied in Tunisia, so too has the prospect of democracy taking root and spreading. Meanwhile, the region's long-standing external hegemon, the United States, has ended its "forever wars," abandoning its predilection for ambitious, transformative projects in favor of an approach that largely accepts the status quo as it shifts its attention to Asia and, more recently, the war in Ukraine. Previously interventionist Arab states have largely forsaken military means for backroom dealmaking, economic ties, and soft power diplomacy.

A conventional view of this dynamism, especially the trends in de-escalation, posits that developments in Washington, DC, are the underlying catalysts behind it all. The United States is disengaging from the Middle East, the argument goes, and is seen as an unreliable guarantor with a long list of deficiencies. With its unpredictable electoral cycle and its general domestic disarray, Arab partners have long viewed the United States as a fickle and demanding ally. It has imposed irritating conditions on arms sales, courted troublesome nonstate groups such as the Houthis and the Muslim Brotherhood, and naively negotiated with Iran while being slow to defend its Arab partners against Iranian proxy and missile attacks. It is seen as making unreasonable, with-us-or-against-us demands in the face of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, while ignoring the hypocrisy of its own interventions in the Middle East.

So, unsurprisingly, Arab partners of the United States in the region are taking matters into their own hands, pursuing their own de-escalation and peace initiatives while also diversifying their partnerships as a hedge against American unreliability. In many respects, this trend is not new: postcolonial regional powers throughout the Cold War were adept at playing great powers against one another, and the trend received new momentum with the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. Over the last decade, it was accelerated by the dramatic rise of China, which has surpassed the United States and Europe as the Gulf's biggest trading partner. For its part, Russia has also been a major player in the region. While it lacks Beijing's economic clout and has taken a battering from its ill-fated Ukraine invasion, Moscow is still seen as a major vendor of conventional arms for the region with few strings attached and, in the case of Syria and Libya, an active intervener on behalf of wobbly dictators and aspiring warlords.

And yet, this U.S.-centric explanation of change in the Middle East is only part of the story. To begin with, Washington is not really "exiting" the region: it still retains a sizeable diplomatic and military footprint, though policymakers are revising that presence and are consumed with other priorities, not least domestic ones. More importantly, though, there is another factor at work: Arab governments' perceptions of security, legitimacy, and stability at home. With the demise of the Arab Spring and the tumult that followed, the existential ideational, security, and political threats to Arab regime identity and survival have also diminished. Oppositionists and especially Islamists have been weakened or eliminated through Arab regimes' brute-force suppression, sophisticated surveillance, and co-option, or due to internal fissues with these dissidents' ranks. As a result, Arab autocrats are no longer compelled to gravitate into defensive blocs and feel more confident engaging with rivals in the region. Relatedly, Arab regimes' growing ties with countries like China and Russia have as much to do with their similar outlooks for world order—a vision that is authoritarian, antidemocratic, and antipluralistic—as with their desires to balance their relationships with the United States.

As the essays in this collection demonstrate, this notion of an authoritarian-led consolidation in the region and a durable period of stasis is belied by continuing dynamism and deepening socioeconomic problems within Arab states. Whether and how these afflictions lead to future instability will depend on how regional governments navigate current and looming challenges, especially the transition to the post-oil era, through comprehensive and inclusive reforms. Absent such a governance overhaul, the region could face renewed unrest, especially within weaker and poorer Arab states, potentially causing embattled Arab regimes to once again project their insecurities onto their rivals and neighbors, unraveling the current trend of interstate rapprochement.

Arab Realignments and De-escalation—and Their Limits

Regardless of their drivers, recent shifts in the regional landscape are certainly significant. At the broadest level, the post-2011 ideological, intra-Sunni, interdynastic cold war between an anti-Islamist bloc of states led by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt against Türkiye and Qatar has ended. This played out in a number of arenas. By mid-2020, a battlefield stalemate in Libya, effected by the intervention of Türkiye and Russia in support of warring local forces, led the UAE and Egypt to dial back and abandon their militarized meddling in favor of dialogue and backroom dealmaking. In tandem, rulers in the UAE, apparently concerned about post-pandemic development challenges and competition with Saudi Arabia, sought to engage Türkiye while recognizing that Islamists across the region were circumscribed by national boundaries and, therefore, less of a threat to the Gulf. This was accompanied by a simultaneous nationalization of the Islamist parties and their internal dissolution and weakening. For its part, by late 2020 and early 2021, Türkiye, a backer of Islamists and the Muslim Brotherhood, embarked on new shift in bridge-building, marked by rounds of diplomatic talks and high-level visits with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

Most significantly, though, Saudi Arabia in 2021 lifted its blockade against Qatar, which had been in place since 2017. Very quickly thereafter, Egypt began talks with the Muslim Brotherhood, reportedly brokered by Qatar, while Türkiye and Egypt began intelligence exchanges on the extradition of Islamists and the closure of Turkish pro-Brotherhood media outlets. By the fall and winter of 2022, signs of the warming had become even more pronounced. Egypt's onetime archrival Qatar deposited $1 billion in the Egyptian central bank, and the sidelines of the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar offered further glimpses of remarkable, personalized fence-mending among previously hostile rulers. For example, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi shook hands with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Qatar's emir cheered the Saudi football team's victory over Argentina. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman even donned a maroon Qatari national scarf at the opening ceremony. And the famously anti-Islamist ruler of the UAE, Mohamed bin Zayed, engaged in a similarly high-level gesture of rapprochement by visiting Doha during the World Cup—his first visit to Qatar since the imposition of the blockade.

Beyond the Sunni Muslim world, the historic Abraham Accords normalized ties between Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain, followed shortly thereafter by Morocco and Sudan. The accords led to an expansion of ties in a wide range of sectors, including trade, transportation, energy, technology, and military cooperation, particularly between the UAE and Israel.

Longtime Arab foes of Iran also began softening their antagonism, beginning with a growing inclination by smaller Gulf states to keep lines of communication open with Tehran and desist from a strictly confrontational approach. As early as 2019—following Iran's targeting of oil facilities in the Gulf in the aftermath of the U.S. withdrawl from the nuclear agreement the previous year—Emirati and Iranian officials began talks on maritime security. By the summer of 2022, the UAE had reinstated its ambassador to Tehran. Similarly, in 2019, Saudi Arabia reached out to Iran via interlocutors in the Iraqi government, and by April 2021, Saudi Arabia and Iran had begun direct talks (hosted in Baghdad with later facilitation by Oman). That paved the way for an announcement in March 2023 that Riyadh and Tehran were formally restoring diplomatic relations and reopening their embassies after a seven-year freeze—a move that surprised the world, especially since it had been secretly brokered by China, a great power that had hitherto refrained from active involvement in the region's disputes.

The Saudi-Iran deal is certainly a major, welcome step toward resolving one of the Middle East's most destabilizing feuds, which has left its toxic imprint on the region's geopolitics, domestic affairs, societies, and cultures. That said, uncertainties remain about the deal's durability and scope. To begin with, the agreement is unlikely to completely bury the rivalry between the two longtime claimants to Islamic and Middle Eastern leadership who have advanced sharply different visions of regional order. At its core, the deal is an agreement to restore normalized ties that previously existed, and it is contingent on crucial pledges being upheld, particularly a promise from Iran to cease attacks on Saudi Arabia and cut off aid to Iranian-backed Houthi forces in Yemen. Moreover, it is important to take the long view of the Saudi-Iran bilateral relationship, which has always incorporated elements of dialogue and engagement, even as the two states sought to subvert and parry each other's influence across the region.

Elsewhere, the limits to this de-escalation are already becoming apparent as regional dialogues have run up against old animosities. Reconciliation between Türkiye and Egypt has foundered over the fractured, conflict-wracked state of Libya, where Ankara and Cairo find themselves backing contending political constellations and presidential aspirants. Türkiye, to Sisi's dismay, still fields thousands of military advisers and Syrian proxy forces in the environs of Tripoli, the Libyan capital. On the Abraham Accords, recognition of Israel has not helped the Palestinians, while two Gulf states that have long engaged with Israel, Qatar and Oman, have so far desisted from joining. Israel's most prized Arab partner, Saudi Arabia, has offered some limited gestures but to date remains committed to the Arab peace initiative that requires the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict before the normalization of ties. More recently, the rise of extreme, right-wing Israeli parties and figures in the coalition government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in late 2022 and the resulting crisis in early 2023 over Netanyahu's proposed overhaul of the judiciary further complicated the normalization process. Israeli actions in Jersualem, particularly raids at Al-Aqsa mosque during the Ramadan holiday in 2023, inflamed regional tensions, widening the divide between Arab leaders who have embraced normalization and Arab publics who remain largely hostile to it.

China: A Challenger but not a Hegemon

Against the backdrop of these local initiatives and dialogues, a rising outside power looms, one that historically was not involved significantly in the Middle East's affairs but is now leaving an indelible mark on its future trajectory. In many respects, it is impossible to understand the new foreign policy orientations of Arab states without an appreciation for the increasing role that China is playing in the region. China's tech, cyber, and data activities in particular are challenging perceptions of unchecked U.S. supremacy in the region—and are also provoking U.S. moves toward decoupling and demands from U.S. officials that American partners across the world effectively need to choose sides. China's prominent role in the Iran-Saudi normalization deal—even if it was capitalizing on the regional thawing already underway and previous mediation by Oman and Iraq—was a visible sign of its aspirations for a larger diplomatic role to augment its already robust economic relationships. But, at the same time, China's ability to fully supplant and displace the United States' presence, especially on security issues, is greatly exaggerated.

China's launch of its Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 did indeed boost the Middle East's importance for Beijing, with the region becoming a key land and sea corridor for China's growth. Its investments in regional infrastructure and technology subsequently skyrocketed. By 2021, China's trade with the region had reached $284.3 billion, compared to just $15.2 billion in 2000. China is now Saudi Arabia's top trading partner and Saudi Arabia is China's leading oil supplier. Indeed, the Middle East provides nearly half of China's crude oil supplies.

China is also the top foreign investor in the region. Chinese companies were contracted to construct the main stadium where Qatar hosted the World Cup in 2022, built a high-speed rail to connect Jeddah with Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia, and invested in and operate a port terminal in Haifa, Israel, to name just a few examples of China's expanding reach. Huawei, China's leading telecommunications firm, is expanding its 5G networks throughout the region, including with countries that are close American security partners, sparking concerns among U.S. officials that such technologies could jeopardize American personnel and lead to other cyber and intelligence risks for U.S. interests.

While China's relationship with the region is primarily economic, American policymakers are increasingly concerned that commercial ties will transform over time into deeper strategic and military relationships and increase Chinese political influence in Arab states. In an August 2022 testimony to Congress, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Barbara A. Leaf argued that China's expanding economic relationships in the Middle East also create "conditions where [China] can coerce countries on UN votes and support for its positions on issues like Taiwan, the Uyghurs, and Russia's brutal war in Ukraine. Not to mention a host of others that go to the rules-based order that we have worked assiduously since WWII to build and maintain."

But some China watchers question whether Beijing is interested in competing with the United States' military positions in the region or whether high-level visits, such as Chinese President Xi Jinping's December 2022 trip to Saudi Arabia for a series of Arab summits, is about the United States at all, as a number of Western accounts framed the meetings. Indeed, China analyst Jonathan Fulton noted that Xi's visit was the fifth state visit by a Chinese head of state to Saudi Arabia and continued the pattern of deepening Chinese relations with Arab states that view China as a critical global power, energy market, and investor in its own right, not just as a hedge against the United States. It thus should come as little surprise that Saudi Arabia welcomed China's backing for its normalization agreement with Iran, particularly given Iran's own expanding ties with China as a buffer against increased economic pressure from the West as the nuclear agreement languishes.

Nonetheless, with continued U.S. military dominance and superior equipment and training, China is not likely to outcompete the United States anytime soon. As China lags well behind the United States in its military relationships, Arab states will thus need to balance closer ties with China with continuing dependence on U.S. security assistance. Still, Arab states' interest in China's drone and missile technologies is growing. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are among the top buyers of Chinese drones, providing another example of Arab states' desire to leave the door open to China even as they maintain close military ties and cooperation with the United States.

But the regional welcoming of expanding Chinese engagement is not only about increasing leverage against Washington or hedging to prepare for a future where the United States is a less dependable security partner. Arab leaders are also attracted to the Chinese model of economic development without political reform and welcome an external partner that is not interested in interfering in domestic affairs or focusing on human rights abuses. This tracks with Arab leaders own repressive methods of dealing with political opposition and curtailing expression.

China is less a regional bully than a regional model for Arab leaders. Meanwhile, Arab publics maintain more favorable views of China than they do of the United States, even if support for expanded economic engagement is waning and Chinese products are viewed as inferior to those from the West. The protests across China in late 2022 against the government's Zero COVID policy may further taint China's image, at least among Arab publics. But Arab leaders may embrace Chinese surveillance technology as an effective means to maintain a grip on their own populations. And Arab states may start turning to China as the preferred mediator in regional disputes, as the Saudi-Iran agreement demonstrated—though whether Beijing meets with greater success than other powers remains to be seen. The uncomfortable reality for American policymakers is that Washington's key partners in the region are increasingly illiberal states that share a natural affinity with Beijing and, for that matter, Moscow.

Russia: Battered, but Still a Player

The Soviet Union throughout the Cold War was a player in the Middle East, but in the past decade, Russia has reasserted its influence through military adventurism, diplomatic offensives, energy and trade deals, and propaganda blitzes. This activism is not driven by a deliberate, preplanned strategy but rather by the opportunistic exploitation of power vaccums and missteps by the United States and other Western powers. In addition, Moscow caters to Arab autocrats' insecurities about the United States vacating the region and neglecting their security needs.

With relatively few commitments and costs, Russia's investment in the region has reaped strategic gains for the Kremlin. In Syria's civil war, for example, Russia's military intervention bolstered the embattled government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and resulted in Russian forces obtaining a foothold across the country, particularly at air bases and ports. Arms sales are another major pillar of Russian influence: Algeria and Egypt are among the top five global purchasers of Russian weaponry. In the Gulf, U.S. security partners Saudi Arabia and the UAE have drawn closer to Russia through energy and arms deals and on a shared approach to certain regional crises and conflicts, most notably in Libya. Here, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and Moscow were aligned in their political, financial, and military support to one of the warring factions in the country's 2019–2020 civil conflict, the faction headed by militia commander Khalifa Haftar. While some of this alignment constitutes hedging against U.S. capriciousness and a genuine convergence of specific economic interests, it also stems from the fact that these Arab governments share with the Kremlin a common preference for an authoritarian-led, non-Islamist regional order. And yet, for all of their outreach to Russia and assertions of autonomy and nonalignment, the United States' longtime Arab security partners are likely aware of the limitations of Russian support, compared to the assistance, assurances, and gurantees they've come to expect from Washington.

In the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Arab states have deferred on Washington's efforts to forge a global consensus against the war. While some of this reflects a genuine embrace of multipolarity and the aforementioned convergence of interests with Moscow, it also represents a way to convey discontent to U.S. policymakers with what Arab and especially Gulf states feel is a neglect of their security requirements. Beyond this, economic self-interest has played a role. Most famously, Saudi ties with Russia converged with hostility to U.S. President Joe Biden's administration. And, in conjunction with the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, Mohammed bin Salman snubbed Biden's request to maintain its oil production, a request made in hopes of keeping global prices stable after Russia cut its production. Some Congressional critics maintained that Saudi Arabia's move was a vote in favor of Russia's war in Ukraine, and other analysts saw it as an effort to lead a global economic nonaligned movement. Regardless, the message from the Saudi leadership was clear: Russia is still a player in the Middle East, and the old parameters of the Arab-U.S. partnership no longer apply.

United States: Not Retreating but Reconfiguring

As both China and Russia continue to build their influence, there is no doubt that U.S. interest in the region is declining. After two decades of costly wars with unclear payoffs, Middle East fatigue set in across Washington. Incoming senior Biden administration officials proclaimed a desire to scale down America's ambitions in the Middle East as sights shifted to a rising China and away from a nearly two-decade-long focus on counterterrorism. The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 was among the more dramatic markers of the shift, but the shift was long coming. The region took notice and perceived the United States to be in retreat.

The reality is, of course, somewhat different. The United States played an active role in providing arms and other military support in regional conflicts including those in Yemen and Libya, often at great costs given the high civilian death tolls inflicted by partners using American weaponry. Even as these conflicts appear to be winding down, the U.S. military footprint in the region remains extensive and far surpasses Russia's and China's still limited military involvement in regional affairs. The Biden administration's global posture review has not translated into a significantly reduced U.S. military presence in the Middle East.

But America's Arab partners are looking for more than just the stationing of U.S. forces—they want to see those forces respond more quickly and robustly to Iranian-backed attacks. They see the lack of an American response to attacks on Saudi oil facilities in 2019 and subsequent missile and drone strikes from Iranian-backed militias in Yemen as an indication of a reduced U.S. commitment to their security. Less discussed are other U.S. military actions directed against Iran, including the killing of Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps commander Qassem Soleimani during U.S. president Donald Trump's administration and a series of U.S. strikes against Iranian-backed militias during the Biden administration, such as recent counterattacks in Syria. The United States also increased military support for the UAE in early 2022 in response to Houthi missile strikes and scrambled fighter jets amid warnings of an imminent Iranian-backed attack on Saudi Arabia in late 2022.

Nonetheless, the limited nature of U.S. strikes to avoid a wider war with Iran has reinforced the narrative of a United States in retreat. This view remains the prevailing one across Arab capitals, despite active efforts by the Biden administration to double down on U.S. security ties to reassure American partners of its "ironclad" commitment to their security. This posture is embodied in what White House Coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa Brett McGurk called "back to the basics," where the focus is on "building, maintaining and strengthening our partnerships and alliances," including "strengthening the defensive capabilities of partners."

Underpinning this approach is a buildup of military capabilities of Arab partners that can reduce the need for direct U.S. military engagement. Human rights are not at the center of the Biden administration's policies when it comes to Middle East defense relationships, an outlier to the administration's wider strategy to bolster democratic alliances globally. Biden administration officials appear to view these partnerships as too important to compromise by pressing accountability concerns, believing that doing so will only move Arab partners closer to China and Russia. American concerns about China or Russia selling arms to Arab partners if the United States does not has amounted to a free pass on accountability. Massive U.S. arms sales have resumed despite little to no improvement on domestic and transnational repression of opposition. The United States remains the top arms supplier to the region. The war in Ukraine has only given Arab states more leverage in the great competition game given tight global oil supply and rising energy costs.

Moreover, Arab states also recognize that normalizing relations with Israel, or leaving the door open to normalization, is another way to keep Washington engaged in the region and wary of pressing regional leaders on issues such as human rights. Indeed, the Biden administration is making investments in the Trump-brokered Abraham Accords to further expand Israel's integration into the region. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken hosted the Negev Summit with Arab and Israeli leaders in Israel in March 2022 to advance the normalization process and Arab-Israeli regional cooperation. Israeli integration into the region emerged as a major theme of Biden's first trip to the region as president in July 2022.

Arab states and Israel have many reasons to cooperate for their own interests, including common concerns over Iran and growing Arab interest in Israeli technologies and missile defense capabilities. But the predominant view in Washington remains that maintaining close security relationships with even unsavory Arab leaders who may not always be aligned with U.S. interests is necessary for the sake of advancing their acceptance of Israel or keeping them out of China's orbit. Forming an anti-Iran and pro-American alignment in the region among Israel and friendly Arab states is an overriding U.S. focus, though Saudi officials' decision to mend ties with Tehran may have tempered such aims. With Israel now included in the U.S. Central Command, talk of a Middle East defense alliance to contain Iran is nonetheless still popular in Washington, even if regional views of such an arrangement were always far more cautious.

Arab partners no doubt recognize that American priorities on Israel, Iran, and China can play to their advantage, allowing them to reap security benefits without feeling the pressure to conform to U.S. asks, whether it be increasing oil outputs or breaking off ties with Beijing (or, in the case of Saudi Arabia, taking more than symbolic steps on normalizing ties with Israel). Arab states also continue to engage Iran, understanding that they will ultimately pay the highest price for military escalation given their proximity and vulnerabilities to Iranian attacks. Survival is the paramount concern, and in a regional environment where Arab leaders now feel more secure at home and more assured about their varied external relationships, there is little reason to see this pattern shifting anytime soon.

While it is no secret that a number of Arab leaders, particularly in the Gulf, preferred the Trump administration's friendly and transactional approach, they understand how to leverage their influence in Washington to maintain close relationships even with an administration that has framed its wider foreign policy strategy as shoring up democracies to combat the rising tide of global authoritarianism. The Biden administration's policies have demonstrated that there is a Middle East exception, and now that regional states have weathered an initial period of uncertainty, they are more confident that U.S. policies are not likely to reverse.

The long-standing American playbook continues—the backing of authoritarian but pro-American leaders to maintain stability, to keep the oil flowing and its competitors out. Arab states may not be counting on the United States as the predominant power as in the past, and they are certainly keeping their options open with their external relationships. But neither are they spurning American assistance. The result is that the U.S. role, even in or perhaps because of a more crowded playing field, reinforces the status quo regional order.

The Darkening Horizon Ahead

For all of the welcome news of de-escalation and rapprochement in the Middle East, the apparent consolidation of authoritarian-led stability and growing multipolarity is hardly grounds for unqualified triumphalism or long-term optimism. As this collection has demonstrated, the demands for accountability, rule of law, an end to corruption, and better social services that fueled the Arab Spring are still present, as evidenced by the fierce protests that rocked several of the region's states in 2018–2019. To be sure, economic growth in many states has recently benefited from a Ukraine war–induced spike in oil prices, but the coming years are projected to see a sharp downturn that will worsen social and economic stratification and raise the likelihood of instability in poorer, less-endowed Arab states. These same countries are already struggling from rising interest rates and debt, and they will likely feel the ripple effects from the projected economic slowdown in China, the United States, and the European Union. Meanwhile, public services and social safety nets in many instances remain woefully inadequate. Even in the supposed islands of prosperity—such as the UAE—unemployment has reached the level of a "national crisis," while expectations of taxation in preparation for the post-oil era have triggered new levels of foreboding.

What remains unclear is whether, how, and when these mounting grievances could be directed into activism against Arab governments. The region's rulers have certainly learned lessons from 2011, deploying new forms of social control and technology to prevent another moment like Tahrir Square. But just as governments have learned, so too have activists and dissidents. And unlike the uprisings of 2011–2012 and 2019, Arab governments entering the post-rentier era will have less to spend to maintain citizen quiescence and build consensus among often-divided elites. Taken in sum, it is not unreasonable to expect that, despite the current lull in regional tensions, Arab regimes could once again face serious unrest, if not threats to their survival, within the coming decade.

The current moment of multipolarity, with its attendant increase in overtures from China, Russia, and even a rising India, may be welcomed by the region's rulers. They might see this moment as an opportunity to carve out more maneuverability and extract benefits without exclusive commitments or unwelcome demands. But these outside powers, for all of their allure, cannot offer a lifeline for the Arab world's coming socioeconomic and demographic challenges. Nor, necessarily, can the United States—though it alone among the great powers still retains the capacity to make the sort of sustainable human capital investments that will benefit the region's citizens, not just its rulers and their favored elites, and potentially stave off instability in at-risk countries.

The question now is whether policymakers in Washington have the will and foresight to move in that direction, beyond the overly securitized approach that has defined the U.S. presence in the Middle East for decades.

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