



# ARAB HORIZONS

Pitfalls and Pathways to Renewal

Joseph Bahout | Nathan J. Brown | Perry Cammack | Michele Dunne  
Intissar Fakir | Marwan Muasher | Maha Yahya | Sarah Yerkes

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# CONTENTS

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<b>About the Authors</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>About the Contributors</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>xii</b>
<b>Summary</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1</b>	
JOSEPH BAHOUT AND PERRY CAMMACK	
<b>Arab Political Economy: Pathways for Equitable Growth</b>	<b>7</b>
Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, Jane Kinninmont	23
What Comes Next? Rebuilding the Middle East, Jihad Yazigi	25
How Not to Share the Wealth: A Broken Social Contract, Steffen Hertog	26
Regionalism, the End of Rentierism, and Growth in the Middle East, Ishac Diwan	28
Trends in Digital Transformation in the Middle East, Fadi Ghandour	30

## CHAPTER 2

INTISSAR FAKIR AND SARAH YERKES

### **Governance and the Future of the Arab World** **33**

Whither Egypt's Judicial Independence?, Sahar Aziz 48

A New Era in Saudi Arabia: Limiting Reforms and Silencing Reformers, Hala Aldosari 49

From Civic Activism to Institutional Politics: Lessons From Lebanon, Jean Kassir 51

Governance in Gaza, Omar Shaban 53

## CHAPTER 3

MARWAN MUASHER AND NATHAN J. BROWN

### **Engaging Society to Reform Arab Education: From Schooling to Learning** **55**

How Does Arab Education Measure Up? Interview With El Houcine Haichour 70

Constructive Citizenship and School-Based Reform Interview With Rima Karami-Akkary 72

Pedagogy for Citizenship Interview With Maher Hashweh 74

Reforming Saudi Education Interview With Mohammed Alzaghibi 76

A Tunisian Model? Interview With Dina Craissati 79

Humanities and Social Sciences in Jordan Interview With Wafa Al-Khadra 81

Technology and Education Reform Interview With Sami Hourani 82

## CHAPTER 4

MAHA YAHYA AND MARWAN MUASHER

### **Refugee Crises in the Arab World** **85**

Potential Solutions in Historical Agreements, Dawn Chatty 100

The Repatriation of Syrian Refugees, Ibrahim Awad 101

Lessons From Lebanese Municipal Responses to the Syrian Refugee Crisis, Joanna Nassar 104

**CHAPTER 5**

PERRY CAMMACK AND MICHELE DUNNE

**Fueling Middle East Conflicts—Or Dousing the Flames 107**

Syria: Marking a Pyrrhic Victory  
Interview With Kheder Khaddour 122

Yemen: Empowering Local Civil Governments  
Interview With Amat Al Alim Alsoswa 123

Libya: Reconciling Grievance and Greed  
Interview With Tarek Megerisi 125

Iraq: Searching for Competent Governance  
Interview With Maysoon Al-Damluji 127

Russia in Syria: Preventing Regime Change, Buying  
International Influence  
Interview With Marianna Belenkaya 129

The United States in Syria: Defeating the Islamic State,  
Blocking Chemical Weapons  
Interview With James Carafano 131

Iran in Syria: Securing Regional Deterrence  
Interview With Hassan Ahmadian 133

The UAE in Yemen: Supporting the Legitimate Government  
Interview With Mohammed Baharoon 135

**Notes 137**

**Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 150**



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# SUMMARY

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Perry Cammack

The Arab Middle East faces unprecedented socioeconomic, political, and institutional challenges. Amid burgeoning conflict and economic stagnation, trust has eroded between governments and their citizens. In most Arab countries, authoritarian bargains developed in recent decades, wherein leaders traded social services and government jobs for citizens' quiescence. But the rentier economic systems that undergirded these bargains failed to keep pace with rising demands from growing populations.

Thus, the old order is breaking down with no clear articulation of what comes next. With few exceptions, Arab governments are turning to coercive measures to maintain control as well as to influence developments in other countries. In some places, such as Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, the results have already been catastrophic. Elsewhere, such as Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, the warning signs of rising popular displeasure are flashing. Four challenges loom particularly large.

**Regional conflicts have caused the wholesale collapse of state institutions and a catastrophic regional migration crisis.** While Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen have been particularly impacted, no Arab country has been unscathed. These conflicts—fueled by regional competition, unfettered brutality, and skyrocketing arms sales—have created tremendous headwinds for efforts to address pressing domestic challenges.



**Arab countries generally lack rules-based systems.** Effective states require effective institutions. In most Middle East countries, accountability is lacking, and government services are inadequate in many states. Economic development efforts are unlikely to succeed without increased citizen participation and the rule of law.

**Arab economies seem unable to generate the tens of millions of jobs necessary in the coming decade.** Public sectors are no longer capable of keeping pace with population growth. Crony capitalism, corruption, and bureaucratic impediments in most Arab countries have resulted in anemic private sectors that are incapable of dynamic job creation.

**Too many Arab states treat citizens as threats to be managed rather than as resources to be nurtured.** The enemy of bad governance is an informed and engaged public. But few Arab states invest sufficiently in their nations' human capital. Thus citizenries are insufficiently equipped to address the urgent socioeconomic and political challenges facing their societies.

## FRAMEWORKS FOR ACTION

The 2011 Arab uprisings and ensuing conflicts demonstrate that piecemeal reforms are not enough and that military interventions seldom produce positive outcomes. “Arab Horizons” is based on the premise that citizens and states need to forge new social contracts to address massive challenges. The chapters in this report attempt to offer possible new policy frameworks for five, interrelated challenges facing the region: political economy, governance, education, migration, and regional conflict.

### CHAPTER 1

#### Political Economy

Beyond the cascading conflicts, ongoing strife in post–Arab Spring countries, and the lingering strain of the 2014 collapse in oil prices, the Middle East faces a more fundamental economic challenge: the rentier model of natural resource extraction, upon which Arab economies were built, has unraveled. Constructing a new economic order will require states to begin confronting the patronage systems and crony networks that have distorted economic outcomes and suppressed job creation.

While different states face different circumstances, certain fundamental elements are clear: new, successful Arab political economy models will require leaders to prioritize youth and women; new standards of accountability will require fair and transparent rules-based regulatory frameworks.

## CHAPTER 2

### Governance

The 2011 uprisings resulted in a fundamental shift in relations between Arab leaders and citizens. While the initial euphoria quickly faded, the anger and frustration that led to revolution, protest, and war remain. Across the region, citizens have grown impatient with governments they perceive as ineffective, corrupt, and unaccountable.

Three issues are paramount: access to decisionmaking, effective service provision, and combating corruption. There are no quick fixes to any of these challenges. But governments, civil society, and the international community can work together to achieve incremental progress. By empowering local actors, states can help rebuild trust while improving service delivery. Participatory mechanisms, such as town halls and referenda, can begin to engage publics. International actors can support such initiatives while promoting transparency.

## CHAPTER 3

### Education

Existing Arab educational systems do not—and are not designed to—foster a genuinely democratic and engaged citizenship. They produce graduates with credentials but not the range of skills necessary to deal with the political, economic, and social challenges facing their societies. With such profound challenges, technocratic solutions will fall far short.

But if states take a holistic approach, involving actors from across their societies in educational reform, there is much room for progress. All actors—not just schools and ministries—must be encouraged to develop visions for education. Such efforts must empower agents for positive change throughout existing systems: educators who care deeply about their work, officials who devise innovative solutions, and students who display imagination and aspirations.

## CHAPTER 4

### Refugees

Forced displacement of people has become a hallmark of the contemporary Middle East. In Syria, more than 11 million people have been forced abroad or displaced internally. Millions more have been displaced in Iraq, Sudan, and Yemen. In response, Arab governments have sought to return refugees to their countries of origin. Previously open borders have closed, fueling human smuggling networks.

Engaging with this crisis requires a transformative vision and a real commitment by international donors to promote solidarity with displaced people and sharing burdens across

neighboring countries, such as Jordan and Lebanon, which have been the most effected. This requires rethinking current governance structures and devolving decisionmaking to local actors. Protecting the right of refugees to return to their homes should be a cornerstone of any discussions about a post-conflict settlement.

## CHAPTER 5

### Regional Conflict

In the Middle East, hard power and military might prevail. Ongoing civil wars in Syria and Yemen, as well as in Libya and Iraq, seem intractable. Regional power struggles, such as the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, are widely understood to be complicating factors. But there are also broader dynamics at work.

The regional balance of power has become highly uncertain following the 2011 uprisings and perceptions of U.S. disengagement. Local disputes have become the stage on which regional rivalries are fought. Arms imports to the region have skyrocketed, further fueling conflict. Lastly, the Middle East suffers from a dearth of regional dispute resolution mechanisms. Although progress is likely to be incremental and slow, there are steps that regional and international actors can explore to address these factors and mitigate the risk of further escalation.

## RENEWING SOCIAL CONTRACTS

If any semblance of regional order is to return, citizens and states must forge new social contracts that establish accountability and energize systemic political and economic reform. This means new power dynamics that create checks and balances and submit rent-seekers to genuine competition. Because the challenges facing the region are deeply interrelated, top-down and piecemeal reform efforts have generally not been successful. What is needed is a new, holistic approach based upon broader partnerships and citizen engagement at all levels.

Every state will need to find its own way. There are no quick fixes, and progress is likely to be incremental and uneven. However, as leaders and their citizens grapple with these challenges, there are four principles that could be considered as elements for a more prosperous and vibrant social contract.

### New Investments

In the twenty-first century, success will be measured not by resource wealth but by human capital. Citizens are vital stakeholders in the transformation of their societies, not subjects to be controlled. New frameworks should invest in citizens, especially the youth, women, and minorities, and they should demon-

strate solidarity with those affected by conflict. This requires that educational systems be redesigned into learning systems that emphasize critical thinking and analysis over rote memorization. It also requires robust legal protections for all citizens, including full citizenship and civil and human rights.

### **New Accountability**

Where political power and economic power are jointly concentrated in the same narrow elite, corruption and cronyism are almost inevitable byproducts. Arab societies will need new norms of accountability, both within states and between them, to become prosperous. Achieving these norms requires confronting the patronage networks that dominate many Arab societies. Doing so will demand rules-based regulatory frameworks, an independent judiciary, and specialized bodies to promote transparency and prosecute corruption.

### **New Institutions**

To be effective, Arab governing institutions need to build capacity, improve efficiency, and increase transparency. New arrangements are necessary to allow local governments greater latitude in managing their own affairs. Most Arab states seek to permeate citizens' lives but have limited capacity to do so. Rightsizing Arab governments can help to mobilize underserved communities as well as promote local initiatives and policy innovation. Regional structures are also needed to reduce the likelihood and scope of conflict as well as to deal with transnational challenges such as the migration crisis.

### **New Incentives**

New incentive structures are needed that promote new norms of state behavior. This means rewarding merit, innovation, and initiative over personal connections and nepotism. Constructing a new order requires states to begin to confront the patronage and crony networks that distort economic outcomes and suppress job creation.

There is a symbiotic relationship between regional conflicts and local political challenges. States that construct more stable social contracts will be less prone to internal disorder and more resilient against outside interference. To the extent that conflicts can be contained, reduced, and resolved, leaders will have greater leeway to focus on their own citizens' pressing needs.

It is easy to be pessimistic about the Middle East's prospects. Authoritarian leaders seem unlikely to loosen their grip on power. Entrenched economic interests will resist efforts at reform. The turbulence of recent years has narrowed Western interests in the region to security, at the expense of the deeper socioeconomic failures. Those countries unwilling to begin creating more accountable political systems are likely find themselves on the wrong side of history. In many countries, the prospects for reform seem remote.

But pockets of hope remain, which the following chapters will explore. Actors outside the region can support positive developments when they occur and support fragile states so that they do not become failing ones, while increasing efforts to ensure that assistance efforts are not captured by the very elites they are trying to circumvent. Every Arab country will have its own preferred pathway to success, some of which are more viable than others. Until governments and their citizens begin to articulate visions of more dynamic societies, their countries will likely continue to languish.

# ARAB POLITICAL ECONOMY: PATHWAYS FOR EQUITABLE GROWTH

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Joseph Bahout and Perry Cammack

## INTRODUCTION

Despite immense hydrocarbon wealth, strategic location, and a youthful workforce, the Middle East faces profound economic challenges. The immediate geopolitical risks are obvious: cascading conflicts in Syria and Yemen, ongoing strife in post-uprising countries such as Egypt and Tunisia, and the lingering financial strain of the 2014 collapse in oil prices. But these pressing issues mask a more fundamental challenge facing the region: the rentier model and its redistribution mechanisms, upon which Arab economies were built, have unraveled.

In a rentier system, the state uses rents—payments received for the use of fixed factors of production<sup>1</sup>—to fund vast networks of patronage and provide social services to its people. For years, rentierism derived from oil sales or other sources maintained the political and economic status quo in the Middle East. But lower oil prices, increased global competition, and growing populations have rendered this model unsustainable. This becomes even more apparent when compared with geographic regions that have experienced sustained, dynamic economic growth in recent decades, such as Southeast Asia.

As the old systems collapse, there has been no clear articulation of what will replace them. Besides the unescapable macroeconomic reorientations, constructing a new order requires states to begin confronting the patronage system and crony networks that distort economic outcomes and suppress job creation. The economic challenge is thus not merely technical, but profoundly political as well.

Each Arab country faces unique challenges in building productive institutional frameworks. Each state will need to find its own innovative sources of wealth and value production, improve their distribution of economic resources, and construct appropriate political institutions. But certain common elements are clear: New, successful Arab political economy models will require that leaders meaningfully invest in traditionally marginalized constituencies, such as youth and women. These models will also need to create rules-based regulatory frameworks that are fair and transparent to promote new standards of accountability. And any new system will need to create checks and balances that submit rent-seekers to genuine competition.

## THE UNRAVELING OF RENTIERISM

After World War II, the Arab development model paired an emphasis on domestic production and trade protectionism, also known as import substitution industrialization, with strong nationalist undertones. In the early decades after the war, most Arab states achieved positive economic growth. Many made tremendous gains in life expectancy, literacy, and public health. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Middle East was the fastest growing region in the world, aided by the 1973 oil embargo.<sup>2</sup> That event permanently altered the structure of international energy markets and paved the way for the phenomenal hydrocarbon revenues to come. Over time, Arab states developed authoritarian bargains—implicit social contracts between governments and citizens, in which social welfare, jobs, and security were exchanged for political complaisance. The oil-exporting states, and the Gulf monarchies in particular, began to enjoy unprecedented wealth.

Every economy makes some use of rent, whether derived from property, tourism, natural resources, or other “gifts of nature.” But a rentier state is dependent on revenues generated from the extraction and sale of state-owned natural resources.<sup>3</sup> In one of the oil-exporting states of the Middle East, only 2 or 3 percent of the workforce might be involved in oil extraction. But the revenue generated might account for 80 percent of government income.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the prosperity of a Middle East rentier has depended far less on prudent fiscal management or the success of its private enterprises than on the price of crude oil.

While Arab elites enjoyed the benefits of the rentier system, they struggled to keep pace with soaring populations and the rapid movement of rural populations into cities. Most countries in the region responded to the resulting labor glut by transforming hydrocarbon rents into public sector jobs. This proved only a short-term solution. By the 1980s, the Arab

republics, unlike their wealthier Gulf neighbors, found it increasingly difficult to generate the hard currency necessary to maintain their generous welfare systems. Facing growing urban poverty, unsustainably large public sectors, and severe fiscal strains, they gradually attempted to adopt liberal market reforms with the support of International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank structural adjustment loans. In labor-abundant, resource-constrained countries like Egypt, Jordan, and Tunisia, public sectors were deregulated and privatized, marginally downsized from their peaks in the 1970s, and trade barriers were reduced.

But economic liberalization in the absence of meaningful political reform gave rise to crony capitalism. Privileged elites captured much of the gains of privatization, macroeconomic growth, and increased trade.<sup>5</sup> As countries like Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia shifted to export-led growth strategies, the authoritarian bargain adapted to neoliberal economic policies. Because the private sectors remained dependent upon—even commingled with—government authority, they rarely developed as independent power centers.

Foreign investment remained low and high-productivity sectors, such as manufacturing, stagnated, while declining resources limited the ability of public sectors to accommodate young, educated job seekers. These trends resulted in a structural shift toward the informal and low-value service sectors, which provided generally unproductive, low-wage jobs.<sup>6</sup> Middle East employment statistics are notoriously unreliable. However, according to some estimates, by 2010, only 10 to 15 percent of the labor force in Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia, and even fewer in Iraq and Yemen, worked in the formal private sector (as distinct from the informal sector).<sup>7</sup> At least until the recent drop in oil prices, public spending in the Gulf states remained buoyant and as many as 90 percent of economically active citizens in Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar were estimated to work in the public sector.<sup>8</sup>

***The prosperity of a Middle East rentier has depended far less on prudent fiscal management or the success of its private enterprises than on the price of crude oil.***

Bloated state patronage networks have resulted in endemic levels of corruption. In Transparency International's 2017 Corruption Perceptions Index, sixteen of the twenty-one Arab countries surveyed scored below the global mean of 43 (on a 0 to 100 scale).<sup>9</sup> More than one hundred Arab thought leaders surveyed by Carnegie in 2016 found corruption to be the second-most pressing regional challenge, behind only authoritarianism.<sup>10</sup> While corruption and economic capture are difficult to quantify, the World Bank has found evidence that politically connected firms enjoy economic privileges in a number of Middle Eastern countries, hampering the growth of younger, smaller firms that should act as engines of job creation.<sup>11</sup> In the decade prior to the 2011 Arab uprisings, macroeconomic indicators were generally positive.<sup>12</sup> But this economic growth came with heightened expectations for the



governments of the region. With growing perceptions of corruption, festering poverty and underemployment, and continuing political stagnation, the explosion of public discontent was likely inevitable.

TABLE 1  
Middle East and North Africa Countries' Corruption Score

2017 Corruption Perceptions Index (0-100 scale)			
UAE	71	Bahrain	36
Qatar	63	Algeria	33
Saudi Arabia	49	Egypt	32
Jordan	48	Lebanon	28
Oman	44	Iraq	18
Tunisia	42	Libya	17
Morocco	40	Sudan	16
Kuwait	39	Yemen	16
		Syria	14
<b>Global Average</b>	<b>43.1</b>	<b>Arab Average</b>	<b>35.6</b>

**Note:** 100 represents very clean and 0 highly corrupt.

**Source:** "Corruption Perceptions Index 2017," Transparency International, February 21, 2018, [https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption\\_perceptions\\_index\\_2017](https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2017).

Rentier patterns have played out differently in different contexts. The Gulf monarchies account for more than half of the Arab League's combined gross domestic product (GDP) despite making up only 15 percent of its population.<sup>13</sup> The combination of immense oil revenues, small populations, and, arguably, the political legitimacy that authoritarian one-party republics lack has allowed them to historically favor co-optation over coercion. Authorities redirect tremendous oil wealth into generous social welfare systems and government jobs, built on a foundation of tribal patronage. But the 2014 collapse in oil prices brought tremendous strains, particularly in Bahrain, Oman, and Saudi Arabia, which may, going forward, struggle to keep pace with high population growth.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and, most significantly, Bahrain, have responded to the ongoing regional turmoil with increased repression against any form of political dissent.

The oil-exporting Arab republics—Algeria, Iraq, and Libya—also derive significant income from resource rents. Syria and Yemen were formerly oil exporters, but revenues have collapsed amid a combination of war, dwindling production, and declining prices.<sup>15</sup> In these five countries, oil revenues have been disproportionately spent on repression and the military as well as captured by cronyism and corruption. The results are underperforming economies and particularly grievous failures in governance. Not coincidentally, these five states have been among the most conflict-ridden Middle Eastern countries in recent decades.

Poorer semi-rentier states make up a third category. Recent gas discoveries in the eastern Mediterranean might eventually create significant new revenue streams for the Levant.<sup>16</sup> Egypt's gas extraction is growing quickly, but with a population of nearly 100 million, it derives far less hydrocarbon revenues per capita than its richer peers. For now, Lebanon and Palestine have no hydrocarbon production, while Jordan and Morocco have marginal productions. Sudan and Tunisia, too, have modest but generally declining energy extraction industries. These states contain more than half of the region's population but account for only one-quarter of its GDP. But despite low levels of hydrocarbon endowments, the rentier model permeated these countries as well. Rents took various forms, including Gulf investments, remittances, and alternative natural resource endowments, such as the Suez Canal in Egypt, potash in Jordan, and phosphate in Morocco. Their wealthier neighbors used oil revenues not just to purchase domestic political allegiance, but also across borders to buy loyalty from these poorer countries. Jordan, Egypt, and Palestine in particular benefited from foreign largesse from the Gulf and the United States, in return for diplomatic quietism. Remittances aside, these income streams accrue directly to governments, which then redistribute them among local patronage networks—through public sector jobs, preferential contracts to political insiders, or, in the case of Jordanian tribes, direct financial support.

## **THE MIDDLE EAST VS SOUTHEAST ASIA: A CASE STUDY IN DIVERGENCE**

In the early 1960s, the Middle East and Southeast Asia were both struggling with bitter colonial legacies that had already spawned a series of destructive regional wars and localized insurgencies. In both regions, countries attempted to overcome low levels of human development by embracing protectionist import substitution models. Egypt, led by Gamal Abdel Nasser, a charismatic military officer, bore some resemblance to Thailand, which was also led by a former military officer who had recently seized power.<sup>17</sup> In 1960, the two countries were comparable in population (27 million people apiece) and per capita GDP (\$631 and \$571, as measured in 2010 dollars).

After seizing power in 1956, Nasser promptly nationalized the Suez Canal, sparking a geopolitical crisis. His ensuing political victory won him a widespread regional following, inspiring leaders from Libya to Iraq and beyond. His vision of a unified Arab world

under Egyptian leadership combined the political appeal of pan-Arabism and anti-imperialism under an authoritarian socialist political model. To the terror of conservative monarchies, Nasserism seemed primed to become the favored political economy model for the Arab republics.

But after Egypt, and the broader Arab world, suffered a catastrophic defeat in the Six-Day War of June 1967, Nasser and his vision were immediately discredited. In the 1970s, as Arab societies struggled to cope with their defeat, an oil boom provided easy wealth for many governments. Yet despite economic advancement, political development lagged behind, and Arab states became increasingly repressive. Authoritarian republics went to great lengths to stage-manage a veneer of electoral legitimacy for their presidents-for-life.

Arab authoritarianism has sometimes coincided with important socioeconomic gains. Between 1970 and 2010, no country in the world made more progress on the human development index—a composite measurement of income, life expectancy, and education—than Oman.<sup>18</sup> Iraq's most impressive human development improvements coincided with the onset of Saddam Hussein's despotic rule after 1969. Egypt made significant macroeconomic progress in the 2000s, before the corruption of then president Hosni Mubarak gave way to the January 25 revolution. But apart from these occasional success stories, Arab states have struggled and failed to articulate a coherent political economy model since the collapse of Nasserism.

This long period of political and economic stagnation in the Arab world is evidenced by the six-decade divergence between the fortunes of the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Today, Egypt and Thailand are again led by former generals who came to power in coups. But Thailand's per capita GDP has ballooned to twice that of Egypt's. Yemen and Vietnam, both agrarian societies devastated by decades of civil war and political division, have long been among the poorest countries in their respective regions. But, in recent decades, Vietnam has quietly begun to stabilize and grow. Its per capita GDP has tripled in size since 1980 and it has emerged as a regional hub for electronics manufacturing. Yemen, meanwhile, has descended further into misery and its per capita GDP has shrunk to half what it was four decades ago.

No Arab country has averaged more than 3 percent per capita GDP growth during the last half century (see table 2). By contrast, only two Southeast Asian countries have failed to do so—one of which is Brunei, East Asia's only petro-state and an absolute monarchy whose economy bears a greater resemblance to the Gulf monarchies than to its neighboring states.

What accounts for this tremendous divergence?

In the era of modern nation states, regional political economy models have tended to evolve with the region's most powerful and successful states.<sup>19</sup> Southeast Asian countries surely

TABLE 2  
PER CAPITA GDP GROWTH, BY DECADE (1970–2017)

	Country	Total Annual Growth	Annual Growth by Decade				
			1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s
ARAB LEAGUE MEMBERS	Iraq	2.87%	8.60%	2.00%	0.55%	0.44%	3.02%
	Egypt	2.71%	4.17%	2.72%	2.26%	2.93%	0.97%
	Tunisia	2.66%	4.93%	0.94%	3.04%	3.26%	0.56%
	Morocco	2.53%	2.84%	2.46%	1.37%	3.69%	2.16%
	Palestine <i>h</i>	2.16%	--	--	--	-0.07%	0.92%
	Sudan	1.96%	0.26%	-0.54%	2.75%	3.94%	4.12%
	Jordan <i>b</i>	1.60%	--	-2.06%	1.42%	2.73%	-1.81%
	Algeria	1.25%	3.01%	-0.20%	-0.03%	2.34%	1.12%
	Oman	1.19%	0.70%	4.17%	2.29%	0.31%	-2.50%
	Lebanon <i>e</i>	0.70%	--	--	4.78%	2.76%	-2.92%
	Qatar <i>l</i>	0.45%	--	--	--	1.45%	-0.96%
	Bahrain <i>c</i>	0.12%	--	-1.65%	2.50%	-1.02%	0.93%
	Mauritania	0.01%	-1.24%	-1.16%	-0.20%	1.89%	1.17%
	Saudi Arabia	-0.13%	5.13%	-6.83%	0.14%	0.53%	1.10%
	Kuwait <i>i</i>	-0.96%	--	--	--	0.73%	-1.95%
	Libya <i>j</i>	-1.01%	--	--	--	3.06%	-6.96%
	UAE	-2.15%	--	-5.06%	-0.73%	-5.67%	2.34%
	Yemen <i>f</i>	-3.07%	--	--	1.59%	1.41%	-14.64%
	Syria	--	--	--	--	--	--
ASEAN MEMBERS	Vietnam <i>d</i>	4.92%	--	--	5.84%	5.58%	4.93%
	Myanmar	4.72%	2.22%	-0.69%	5.81%	11.03%	5.99%
	Singapore	4.66%	7.42%	5.24%	4.18%	3.38%	2.47%
	Laos <i>d</i>	4.36%	--	--	3.82%	5.44%	6.13%
	Thailand	4.09%	4.21%	5.95%	3.29%	3.91%	2.72%
	Malaysia	3.89%	5.64%	3.18%	4.45%	2.61%	3.47%
	Indonesia	3.63%	4.78%	3.33%	2.30%	3.80%	4.12%
	Cambodia <i>g</i>	3.39%	--	--	--	6.18%	5.40%
	Philippines	1.79%	2.99%	-1.00%	0.52%	2.85%	4.47%
	Brunei <i>a</i>	-0.86%	--	-4.60%	-0.31%	-0.18%	-1.63%

**Notes:** This table calculated by authors using World Bank data in constant 2010 U.S. dollars. Comoros, Djibouti, and Somalia have been omitted. Except as noted, the table contains data from the period 1970–2017.

a - since 1974; b - since 1975; c - since 1980; d - since 1984; e - since 1988; f - from 1990 – 2016; g - since 1993; h - since 1994; i - since 1995; j - since 1999; l - since 2000

benefited from their proximity to Japan and, later, China, successively serving as models to (and fierce competition for) their neighbors.

There was no single Southeast Asian recipe for success. Like in the Middle East, Southeast Asian countries have spanned a wide range of political systems—parliamentary republics, constitutional monarchies, one-party communist states, a military junta, and an authoritarian city state. They have generally avoided a reprise of the catastrophic military conflicts of the 1960s and 1970s. In the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), they created a competent regional institution capable of promoting regional trade and global economic integration as well as regional stability.

But at the core of the half-century Asian “economic miracle” is a series of pro-growth policies adopted by the broader East Asia region. These policies were initially promulgated by Japan in the aftermath of World War II and then successively adopted and refined by South Korea, Taiwan, numerous Southeast Asian countries, and, eventually, China. These new policies encouraged strong education systems, high levels of domestic investment, macroeconomic stability, robust legal and regulatory frameworks, and meritocratic competition that created a cadre of talented technocrats generally insulated from political pressures.<sup>20</sup> In the 1960s, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand were resource-based economies, dependent on timber, rubber, and rice exports, respectively. But, unlike the Arab states, these Southeast Asian nations gradually moved toward economies based on manufactured exports and free trade.

## **NASCENT REGIONAL MODELS?**

If the Arab world has lacked dynamic engines of economic growth, it is in part because Egypt and Saudi Arabia—the largest Arab economies and most geopolitically important Arab states—failed to become dynamic economic powers in their own right.

Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 program, launched in April 2016, is arguably the most important socioeconomic modernization experiment in the Middle East. Borrowing directly from the UAE’s Vision 2021, which was released in 2010, the Saudi plan aims to reduce oil dependence and diversify its economy.<sup>21</sup> A significant, and decades overdue, cultural and social opening is apparent in Saudi Arabia, the roots of which are already evident thanks to a new generation of Saudi women and men who are better educated, better traveled, and better connected to the world. But the challenge of creating a post-oil Saudi state, with a dynamic private sector and the capacity to meet the demands of its youthful workforce, is daunting. Success will depend as much on shrewd political management as it will on economic management. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the driving force behind Vision 2030, is a brash, charismatic, and energetic leader. But though his vision may be a more modern Saudi Arabia, it is not a liberal one. He has been an erratic leader who seems intent on consolidating power and unwilling to tolerate dissent, which may bode poorly for Vision 2030’s prospects.

In Egypt, the picture is more grim. Egypt has witnessed a sharp move toward brutal repression and authoritarianism. Although Cairo has undertaken some difficult economic reforms—most notably by floating the Egyptian pound, implementing a value-added tax, and reducing energy subsidies—the country is heavily indebted and continues to suffer from grinding poverty. It has favored large-scale, military-led megaprojects that do little to address human development deficiencies. Under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Egypt has become significantly more repressive than it was in the years prior to the popular revolution that overthrew Mubarak.

Despite these challenges, the Middle East is not devoid of relative economic and political successes. The question is whether these successes can serve as broader models for the region.

The UAE has emerged as the most dynamic economy in the Arab world. Although it is a federation of increasingly authoritarian family-ruled emirates, it nonetheless enjoys a reputation as a country of economic opportunity, meritocratic accountability, and relatively liberal social norms. Unique among the Gulf monarchies, the UAE has made significant progress in diversifying away from hydrocarbon rents.<sup>22</sup> Among the Arab states, the UAE consistently ranks near the top in human development and economic indicators.<sup>23</sup>

But just as Singapore and Hong Kong play unique roles as high-end East Asian entrepôts, the UAE economic model may be of limited applicability to most other Arab states, which have much larger and more diverse populations. With the world's eighth-largest oil reserves and a population of barely 1 million citizens, the UAE (like its archrival, Qatar) has benefited from the governance failures of its neighbors by capitalizing on comparatively sound governance structures. But these advantages do not appear so impressive against its economic peers in Asia, Europe, or North America, which the UAE lags behind significantly in most governance metrics.<sup>24</sup> The collapse, earlier this year, of one of Dubai's premier private-equity firms (the Abraaj Group) has highlighted concerns over corporate governance and conflicts of interests.<sup>25</sup>

Tunisia, meanwhile, has been cited by many Arabs as a potential political model. With high standards of women's emancipation, an educated population, and a strong middle class, Tunisia is the only Arab Spring country to create a democratic constitutional order on the basis of consultation, political compromise, and citizen participation.<sup>26</sup> Nearly two-thirds of the participants in Carnegie's 2016 Arab expert survey on Arab governance cited Tunisia as having the most effective governance in the Arab world.<sup>27</sup> But seven years after the Jasmine Revolution, the country remains in a state of near-permanent political crisis.

***[Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman] has been an erratic leader who seems intent on consolidating power and unwilling to tolerate dissent, which may bode poorly for Vision 2030's prospects.***

Corruption is endemic, economic growth remains lower than it was in 2010, and Tunisia has not yet proven that it can fulfill the economic aspirations of its people.

## TOWARD A NEW ARAB SOCIAL CONTRACT

Of all the economic challenges facing the Middle East, two stand out: the urgent and related needs for job creation—especially among the burgeoning number of unemployed youth—and for sustained, equitable macroeconomic growth.

Broadly speaking, there are four aspects of successful economic policymaking: supporting macroeconomic stability, building human capital, promoting international trade, and encouraging private enterprise.<sup>28</sup> While every Arab country faces a unique set of economic challenges, the broad contours of policies generally associated with equitable economic growth and job creation have been articulated in the academic literature and a series of international reports.<sup>29</sup>

**Supporting macroeconomic stability** includes controlling government deficit and debt levels and maintaining low inflation and stable interest rates. Oil-exporting countries have the added challenge of responsibly managing government spending across boom and bust commodity cycles. Several of the region's poorer countries, including Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon, rank among the most indebted countries in the world, hampering their long-term growth prospects.

**Building human capital**, first and foremost, is about providing citizens with the tools to compete in the twenty-first-century knowledge economy, through the creation of dynamic education systems. Qatar, the UAE, and Tunisia, for example, are pursuing noteworthy improvements in education. Ensuring adequate legal protection for workers, including migrant workers across the region, is also critical.

**Promoting international trade** can be accomplished through policies that expand the export-oriented segments of the economy, manage the exchange rate effectively, and remove obstacles to trade, such as tariffs, duties, licenses, and quotas. Oman and Lebanon impose low import tariffs and are relatively open to foreign investment. While Morocco has made progress integrating itself into global supply chains to European consumer markets, the Maghreb subregion remains one of the least economically integrated in the world.

**Encouraging private enterprise** is critical if job creation is to reach its potential. This ultimately requires shifting the economy from oil-based and state-dominated to non-oil-based and private sector-oriented. Steps that have been articulated to generate private sector job creation, especially among small and medium-sized firms, include reducing onerous bureaucratic impediments to private enterprise; enacting flexible hiring and firing practices;



reducing subsidies for politically connected and state-owned firms; increasing the transparency of procurement standards to reduce corruption; and expanding access to the 70 percent of Arab citizens who lack bank accounts through financial technology and micro-finance. The UAE scores highest among Arab countries in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business ranking—twenty-first out of 190 countries—which considers variables such as permitting, infrastructure, credit access, and legal environment. No other Arab country ranks in the top sixty, highlighting the detrimental impact of protectionist policies, rentierism, and crony capitalism.<sup>30</sup>

These policy priorities are easy enough to articulate but they can be extraordinarily difficult to implement. Economic reform is no mere technocratic exercise but a political process that gets to the heart of the division of spoils in a society. Economic reform and diversification have been catchphrases for at least two generations of Arab policymakers, especially during energy market bust cycles. But such reform efforts have consistently fallen short.

When crude oil reached a peak price of \$115 per barrel in June 2014, the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, with the notable exception of the UAE, were not discernibly less dependent on oil revenues than during the first oil boom of the 1970s.<sup>31</sup> Egyptian economic reforms during the 2000s coincided with a period of relatively robust macroeconomic growth, even as half the population continued to languish on \$2 a day. The resulting public anger at corruption and inequality helped create the context for the January 2011 public uprising.<sup>32</sup> In Jordan, successive attempts since the 1990s to move the country toward meritocratic institutions have been thwarted by political and economic elites.<sup>33</sup>

The reasons for these and other failures are complicated and diverse, but a common thread runs through them. These failed efforts at reform were carefully calibrated to not fundamentally alter the central power dynamics of the prevailing elite bargains. As a result, they did not engender genuine economic or political competition. Leaders spoke of the need for reform, but their states continued to dominate economies and determine the winners, the losers, and their shares. Business elites continued to depend on government access for profits; in some cases, private industry, outside of the informal sector, evolved into an organic appendage of the state. Thus, the political economy of most Arab states became self-reinforcing, even amid successive reform efforts, as rentierism permeated most aspects of economic and political life.

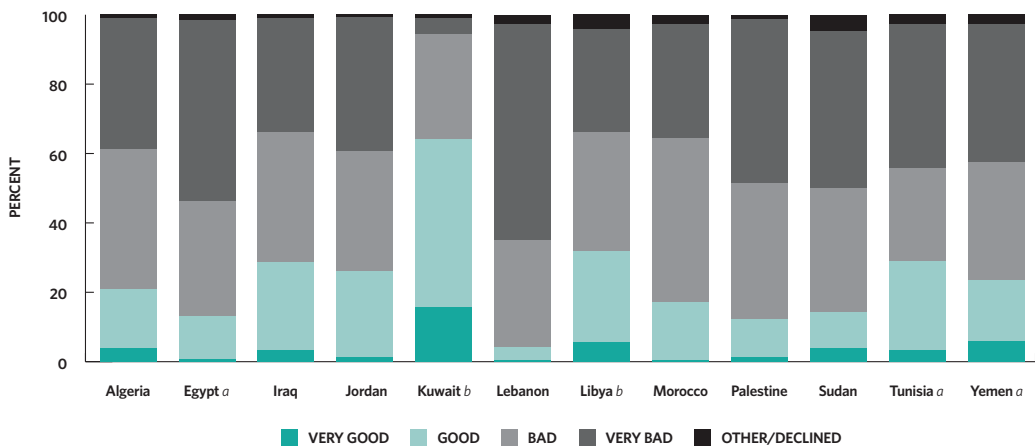
*The long history of Middle East reform efforts suggests that without taking on deeply entrenched beneficiaries of the rentier model and reversing the convergence of economic and political power into the same hands, meaningful change will be impossible.*



The long history of Middle East reform efforts suggests that without taking on deeply entrenched beneficiaries of the rentier model and reversing the convergence of economic and political power into the same hands, meaningful change will be impossible. Patron-client networks cannot be addressed—let alone unwound—without deep structural changes, which requires new relationships between governments and citizens in the Arab world.

FIGURE 1  
ARAB BAROMETER

“How would you evaluate the current government’s performance on creating employment opportunities?”



**Note:** Survey data is from 2016, except as noted: *a* is from 2013, *b* is from 2014.

**Source:** Arab Barometer, “Arab Barometer Wave IV,” conducted 2016–2017, <http://www.arabbarometer.org/waves/arab-barometer-wave-iv/.z>. Arab Barometer, “Arab Barometer Wave III,” conducted 2012–2014, <http://www.arabbarometer.org/waves/arab-barometer-wave-iii/.z>.

## New Constituencies: Mobilizing Youth, Women, and Minorities

The changing demographics of the region provide some hope for breaking old barriers and bringing new dynamism. But this will require governments to treat citizens as integral partners in national projects and to invest them with the skills necessary to compete in knowledge-based industries.

This challenge is not unique to Arab governments. Southeast Asian economies faced, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, conflict, restive populations, and religious and ethnic divisions. However, these countries generally adopted “shared growth” as a fundamental

development principle, which dictated that states had a responsibility to involve non-elites in political growth. Indeed, political leaders in Malaysia, beginning in 1969, and Indonesia, in the 1980s, tied their own legitimacy to the shared growth principle.

If Middle East populations are to mobilize toward economic modernization projects, two constituencies are particularly important: youth (the fifteen- to twenty-nine-year-old cohort) and women. Together, they account for roughly two-thirds of the populations of most Arab societies. Yet they do not have significant political influence in any Arab society. The age gap between young populations and aging leaders is dramatic in the Arab world. Although the region's median age is only about twenty-four,<sup>34</sup> six countries are led by presidents or kings over eighty years old (Algeria, eighty-one; Kuwait, eighty-nine; Lebanon, eighty-three; Palestine, eighty-two; Saudi Arabia, eighty-two; Tunisia, ninety-one).

More significantly, Arab youth unemployment is estimated to be 25 to 30 percent, the highest regional rate in the world.<sup>35</sup> In several countries, including Egypt and Tunisia, graduate unemployment rates are higher still, evidence of significant squandered human capital. This unemployment challenge mirrors the region's broader unemployment trends.

Addressing it requires chipping away at impediments to job creation, such as corruption, labor market restrictions, infrastructure deficiencies, and anemic financial systems.

It also requires efforts to enhance youth skills development. In addition to improved educational systems, vocational training has been found in other contexts to reduce youth unemployment. In several Southeast Asian countries, for example, governments helped to retrain low-skilled workers for more productive positions, thereby increasing both wages and exports.<sup>36</sup> Morocco has had a vocational training program in place since the 1980s, with hundreds of thousands of participants. Although the program has been administered by a monopoly service provider whose trainings are of uneven quality, studies suggest that participants have lower unemployment rates than Moroccan youths overall.<sup>37</sup>

Two generations ago, the majority of Arab women were illiterate; today, they are the majority of university students in almost every Arab country.<sup>38</sup> However, their socioeconomic achievements have not been translated into economic or political power. The landmark 2002 Arab Human Development Report found that factors contributing to the economic and political marginalization of women in most Arab countries include traditional social and cultural norms, the undervaluation of women's household economic contributions, rentier economic norms, reliance on foreign labor, the gender pay gap, and labor practice biases.<sup>39</sup>

Although female labor force participation rates in Kuwait and Qatar are approaching levels found in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, they have stagnated elsewhere. In the region as a whole, female labor force participation has risen only 1.5 percent since 1990, to 20.9 percent—the lowest level in the world.<sup>40</sup> Clearly, superficial

gestures are not enough. For Arab countries to perform to potential, governments must open doors for women at every level of society.<sup>41</sup>

For youth and women to better realize their economic potential, governments must internalize the need to promote the equality of all citizens. Many Arab countries are already deep into demographic transitions. Bahrain, Lebanon, and Qatar are approaching demographic maturity with sub-replacement fertility rates and median ages above thirty years old.<sup>42</sup> Declining fertility rates mean that, in decades to come, the Arab countries could benefit from a demographic dividend as the working age population swells and the number of dependents, both old and young, narrows. In recent decades, Southeast Asian economies used such a dividend to springboard their economic development. However, should Arab countries fail to create meaningful economic opportunities, this dividend could become a demographic burden that hampers long-term prospects for growth.

### **New Incentives: Accountability and the Rule of Law**

In the years ahead, achieving equitable economic growth and dynamic job creation will require that Arab governments move toward clear, transparent, and uniformly implemented regulatory frameworks. Each country faces unique sets of conditions and constraints. But it is indisputable that Arab countries need rules-based systems if they are to thrive in an increasingly competitive world. In post-rentier economies, new incentive structures will be needed to promote entrepreneurialism and human fulfillment. But this, too, requires that leaders subject entrenched economic elites to increased competition.

*Achieving equitable economic growth and dynamic job creation will require that Arab governments move toward clear, transparent, and uniformly implemented regulatory frameworks.*

While those born to privilege enjoy substantial benefits in every society, intergenerational social mobility is notably low in Arab societies. The culture of *wasta*—an Arabic term referring to social connections willing to intervene to provide privileges, such as employment—can be pervasive and is widely perceived as unfairly impeding the prospects of those lacking powerful

patrons. According to Arab Barometer polling data, the majority of citizens in six out of ten countries surveyed believe that family and tribal identities or political affiliations are at least as important as qualifications and experience in securing public sector employment.<sup>43</sup> A recent World Bank survey found that 50 percent of the employment inequality in Egypt can be attributed to circumstances beyond an individual's control.<sup>44</sup> While there are as many as 150 initiatives across the region to promote entrepreneurialism,<sup>45</sup> they have generally under-delivered.

The favoritism, cronyism, and corruption inherent to most rentier economies create perverse incentive structures. If private sector opportunities are anemic, it can become rational to hold out for public sector employment, even at the cost of unemployment. There is little incentive for entrepreneurial risk-taking where bureaucratic impediments are high and failure, in some cases, could even result in imprisonment.

With improved labor markets, the private sector will become incentivized to hire and promote based on merit. Tax incentives and other subsidies can be shifted from mature firms to startups and young firms, which are likely to account for the majority of new jobs. Within government agencies, more proactive measures are needed to increase hiring on the basis of merit rather than on personal or political connections, though these measures may engender resistance from tribal and political elites, especially as governments are gradually reduced in size through attrition.

### **New Priorities: Institutions and Power Dynamics**

Most Arab states are both pervasive and shallow. That is, they seek to permeate citizens' lives but have limited ability to do so, in large part due to weak institutions that have repeatedly thwarted political and economic progress. More effective institutions would be built around capacity, efficiency, and transparency, giving municipalities and local communities greater latitude in managing their own affairs.

Amid the fraying of the old Arab social contract, citizens across the region are being told to expect increased taxes and decreased access to government jobs. As they are asked to do more for their governments, they will naturally ask what benefits they will receive in return.

The global technological revolution will be every bit as disruptive in the Middle East as elsewhere. In an era of big global data, governments that fail to promote economic transparency in all of its aspects risk being left behind. Citizens should be able to easily access information about laws and regulatory requirements, and governments should publish comprehensive information about who benefits from things like government contracting, subsidies, privatizations, and public land transactions. Outside donors—including the United States, Europe, the IMF, and the World Bank, which have often focused on macroeconomic indicators—should prioritize transparency and anticorruption measures in deciding the form and function of aid and loans.

A central conundrum of Arab political economy is how to reform a system that is deeply resistant to the solutions it desperately needs. All political systems are resistant to change, but competitive politics offers, at the least, vectors for pursuing reform. In most Arab countries, those who stand to lose the most from changes to the status quo are best positioned to oppose such reforms. Thus, the power structure of the Arab states must be understood as a central impediment to economic development. This configuration distorts economic

incentives, impedes the emergence of a middle class as a plausible counterweight to the political elite, and results in socioeconomic stagnation. Ultimately, new economic models require innovative political arrangements that create checks and balances and submit rent-seekers to genuine competition.

## CONCLUSION

The emergence of Middle East crony rentierism was not inevitable. Rather, it was the result of calculated behavior by an entrenched political and economic elite seeking to maximize its own interests. Where political and economic power is dispersed among various competing constituencies, institutional checks and balances and more equitable distributions of power can develop.<sup>46</sup> In most Arab states, the confluence of rentier economics and authoritarianism has led to a commingling of political and economic power. This is true in monarchies and republics, in oil exporters, and in the resource-poor.

The Arab Spring articulated a clear demand for political freedoms. But it was unable to articulate a coherent economic vision. How do Arab citizens and governments work to reconcile demands for both social protections and political freedoms? It requires a deep rethinking of the social and political pact between state and society, and necessitates the building of a new collective political culture apart from the traditional relationship between rulers and the ruled that has dominated the Arab world for decades.

Any comprehensive economic reform program naturally has winners and losers. Measures like improved transparency, advancements in the rule of law, and improved incentives for entrepreneurialism and private sector job creation will, with time, improve economic performance and reduce unemployment. But such reforms will naturally face resistance from the existing elite, whose ability to capture economic rent will necessarily decline as a result of the same measures.

The impediments to reform are substantial in the Middle East. To transcend them may require that Arab states, and their reformers, embrace new models that emphasize inclusive growth and give more responsibility, as well as more rights, to participating citizens.

If leaders both understand the urgent challenge of building modern economic institutions and are willing to take the necessary political steps to get there—in creating accountability, in subjecting rentiers to market competition, in confronting corruption, and in investing fully in their own citizens—then there are pathways toward dynamic, equitable, and sustained economic growth for the Arab world.

## SAUDI ARABIA'S VISION 2030

### Commentary by Jane Kinninmont

Vision 2030 is the latest and most ambitious iteration of Saudi Arabia's policy for economic diversification, intended to adapt one of the world's most oil-dependent economies for a transition to a post-oil future. Despite never explicitly mentioning politics, it has profoundly political implications. If it were to be actually implemented, Vision 2030 would seem to dismantle the political economy model of the rentier state, where the state's primary economic function is to allocate unearned wealth in return for political acquiescence.

***Ambitious promises will only materialize if international investors can be persuaded to fund them.***

The rentier state model is a caricature that has a point. Oil wealth enables Saudi Arabia to have one of the lowest tax burdens in the world, at around 4 percent of gross domestic product. Citizens expect the state to pay for services, subsidies, and public sector jobs, while poorly paid non-nationals do most of the private sector's work. Oil revenues have also enabled royals to dispense patronage directly to allies. This patronage economy has shaped the nature of state-citizen relations for decades.

But now, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has introduced Vision 2030—a glossy, consultant-heavy plan to make the private sector the engine of growth and jobs.<sup>i</sup> There are two main drivers of this change. One is that the old model has become economically unsustainable. Even with the recent recovery in oil prices, the government cannot afford to maintain the current benefits for its 20 million citizens, nor can it act as the main driver of growth in any sustained way. Second, the crown prince has a window of opportunity to cut the state's economic provision with seemingly limited political costs—at least for now. Saudis who might have called for political reform have been demoralized by the results of uprisings elsewhere in the region.

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i Similar policies have been pursued in the past but have never met their targets. This repeated failure to implement diversification is largely attributable to a lack of sustained political will to overcome resistance in a society that is accustomed to extensive state economic provision, and in a bureaucracy that is inefficient, silo-ed, and not incentivized to push through change. The crown prince has sought to build confidence in Vision 2030 by throwing his own political weight behind it, and by restructuring the governance of economic policymaking, with an overarching economic policy committee reporting directly to him and Vision Realization Offices deployed across ministries to generate “key performance indicators.”

Instead, Mohammed bin Salman seems to be emulating the Emirati model, whereby economic liberalization is accompanied by social, not political, liberalization. Investing heavily in private opinion polls, focus groups, and social media surveillance, bin Salman has identified a critical mass of young people who want the strict social rules to change. In turn, they support his political push to disempower religious clerics and conservatives—a politically diverse group that has provided both support for the ruling family and a breeding ground for opposition.

The crown prince is also promising this young constituency future jobs and opportunities created by a newly thriving and innovative private sector. He has announced vast megaprojects, like the high-tech city Neom. But the government does not actually have the financial capacity to fund these projects, a fact that is often ignored. These ambitious promises will only materialize if international investors can be persuaded to fund them. However, in 2017, private investment in Saudi Arabia contracted by 6 percent. Local investors are struggling to cope with the disruption to their traditional business models as the government cuts their contracts and imposes new labor fees, and international investors are unconvinced by the risk-reward ratio when growth is slow and uncertainty is high. The dramatic, populist move of last year's Ritz-Carlton episode worried investors, who want more predictability and transparency, and clearer, institutionalized governance.<sup>ii</sup> Concerns about transparency are also an obstacle to internationally listing Saudi Aramco's proposed initial public offering. Questions remain about how the government can reconcile the need for more institutionalized economic governance with its authoritarian political system.

This dilemma could become more acute in the coming years if job opportunities do not improve—the same youth who are currently cheering Mohammed bin Salman could turn against him.

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ii Vivian Nereim et al, "Crackdown on Billionaires and Other Top Officials Shakes Up Saudi Arabia," Bloomberg, November 5, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-11-05/crackdown-on-billionaires-top-officials-shakes-saudi-arabia>.

## WHAT COMES NEXT? REBUILDING THE MIDDLE EAST

Commentary by Jihad Yazigi

Before planning for what comes next, we need to understand the consequences of economic policies implemented in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region before 2011.

These policies—including a reduced role for the state, lower fiscal deficits, and foreign trade liberalization—were largely liberal in nature and helped generate relatively high growth rates. However, they also had negative consequences. Fewer, not more, jobs—in Syria, the labor participation rate fell from 52.5 percent in 2002 to 42.7 percent in 2010; increased income inequality; and a continued brain drain. Since 2011, the destruction of several Arab countries has cost hundreds of billions of dollars, which has only added to the region’s woes.

***The young men and women of this region must be put back to work under terms that raise their incomes and preserve their dignity.***

Better governance and an improved business environment, as is often recommended by international institutions, may generate higher growth. But if growth does not create jobs or reduce inequality, how will that solve our problem? The MENA region must rethink its economic development model by challenging orthodox views and well-entrenched economic and business interests.

Three broad policies must be pursued:

Investing in governance through state institutions will be key for the successful reconstruction of Arab countries. The role of the government should be maintained not decreased. The fabric of Arab societies has been largely destroyed and the populations brutalized and impoverished. The state, as a guarantor of public interest, should continue to play a leading role in the economy, particularly through investment in capital-heavy infrastructure projects, education, and health as well as spending on safety nets. In addition, only central states have the capacity, means, and legitimacy to manage the massive financial and human efforts that will be required to rebuild these countries.

Ambitious industrial policies, in particular focusing on labor-intensive sectors, should be pursued through a combination of infant industry policies, favorable taxation (in many MENA countries, taxes on financial revenues are much lower than those on busi-



ness profits and wages), and support for investment, for instance through subsidized loans or research and development. The industrial sector provides significant added value and is potentially a major employer of qualified individuals, which will help reduce the brain drain. Investments in that sector also tend to be more stable, with a longer-term outlook.

The income distribution between capital and wages must be rebalanced. Competition should not be a reason to push for ever-lower labor costs and flexibility in the management of the workforce. Higher wages and more stability and protection for the workforce means more incentive to spend in the economy and save, which encourages investment. In many countries in the region, wage earners pay income taxes at a higher rate than businesses. Fairer taxation and better collection only ensure more revenues and legitimacy for governments.

For economic development in the Arab region to succeed, the young men and women of this region must be put back to work under terms that raise their incomes and preserve their dignity.

## **HOW NOT TO SHARE THE WEALTH: A BROKEN SOCIAL CONTRACT** **Commentary by Steffen Hertog**

Economies in the Arab world remain deeply penetrated by the state. In comparison with other countries in the Global South, most Arab states distribute wealth and welfare on a fairly broad basis, both through useful channels, such as education and health-care, and in highly distortive ways, namely through excess public employment and energy subsidies. With persistent fiscal deficits across much of the region, both forms of distribution have come under severe strain. While the provision of public goods should be protected and improved, the provision of insider benefits through patronage jobs and subsidies needs to be dismantled, albeit in a way that minimizes social disruption.

Most Arab countries have undertaken at least partial reforms of energy subsidy systems that usually provide disproportionate benefits to richer households. But, often, these reforms happen in the last minute and under severe budgetary pressure, leaving little fiscal wiggle room to replace subsidy systems with modern social security and safety nets to protect poorer households. (The region's monarchies, with a relatively

smaller legacy of state intervention, have been somewhat better at providing such compensation.)

Public employment remains an even larger challenge. International Labor Organization statistics and national sources show that while emerging market economies on average employ 10 percent of their workforce in the public sector, the share in Arab countries typically lies between 20 and 40 percent, significantly above governments' actual needs.<sup>iii</sup> Functioning as a wealth distribution tool for a relatively privileged minority, excess public employment is usually provided for life and creates rigid insider-outsider divides on the labor market, to the detriment of the younger generation. As important, the cost of the public payroll crowds out other, more inclusive forms of social spending.

No Arab regime has yet found a formula to move away from fiscally unsustainable public job guarantees to a broader-based welfare system. As fiscal

***The old system of wealth distribution is broken yet its vestiges prevent the emergence of a new social contract.***

strains increase, the risk of forced adjustments rises: countries face the fate of Egypt, where current and fiscal account imbalances have led to a collapse of the exchange rate, resulting in large losses in real income for most households. Devaluation makes tourism and the (usually small) export-oriented manufacturing sector more competitive and can improve fiscal accounts, but at the cost of pauperization for both insiders and outsiders.

Forced adjustment can create an opening for long-term development but at the expense of the old social contract that, albeit unevenly, did provide basic livelihoods for a large number of citizens. Arab governments should think proactively about how to re-route money currently spent on subsidies and bloated bureaucracies into universal welfare mechanisms that benefit the poor—options include direct cash payments, minimal pension guarantees, unemployment benefits, and training grants.

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iii "Employment by Sex and Institutional Sector (Thousands)," International Labor Organization, 2017, [https://www.ilo.org/ilostat/faces/oracle/webcenter/portalapp/pagehierarchy/Page27.jspx?subject=EMP&indicator=EMP\\_TEMP\\_SEX\\_INS\\_NB&datasetCode=A&collectionCode=YI&\\_afLoop=1659070066185027&\\_afWindowMode=0&\\_afWindowId=119b3ziux\\_174#!%40%40%3Findicator%3DEMP\\_TEMP\\_SEX\\_INS\\_NB%26\\_afWindowId%3D119b3ziux\\_174%26subject%3DEMP%26\\_afLoop%3D1659070066185027%26datasetCode%3DA%26collectionCode%3DYI%26\\_afWindowMode%3D0%26\\_adf.ctrl-state%3D119b3ziux\\_230](https://www.ilo.org/ilostat/faces/oracle/webcenter/portalapp/pagehierarchy/Page27.jspx?subject=EMP&indicator=EMP_TEMP_SEX_INS_NB&datasetCode=A&collectionCode=YI&_afLoop=1659070066185027&_afWindowMode=0&_afWindowId=119b3ziux_174#!%40%40%3Findicator%3DEMP_TEMP_SEX_INS_NB%26_afWindowId%3D119b3ziux_174%26subject%3DEMP%26_afLoop%3D1659070066185027%26datasetCode%3DA%26collectionCode%3DYI%26_afWindowMode%3D0%26_adf.ctrl-state%3D119b3ziux_230).

Moving away from the use of public employment as a welfare tool is needed, even for countries that have gone through forced adjustments and where bureaucrats have experienced reductions in their real incomes yet state employment remains excessive. Mass public employment is not only fiscally costly and distorts labor markets; it also reduces the quality of public administration at a time when public anger with failing state services is at an all-time high. The old system of wealth distribution is broken yet its vestiges prevent the emergence of a new social contract.

## **REGIONALISM, THE END OF RENTIERISM, AND GROWTH IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

**Commentary by Ishac Diwan**

In the past fifty years, the Arab region has been integrated into the world economy through two main channels: labor migration and oil sales. But migration will almost certainly never again boom as it did, and oil rents are expected to go down sharply as attention to climate change rises.

In the same fifty years, Arab countries' attempts to integrate into the global system of trade in goods and services have yielded modest results. Exports have not been a dynamic source of growth, and local conditions have not been favorable to competitiveness as the emergence of crony capitalism weakened the private sector's dynamism. Although increased competition from Asia and Eastern Europe means that an export-led strategy is more challenging now, there seems to be no alternative to finding ways to fit into the evolving international division of labor.

An optimistic scenario for the region would be an "Arab factory" that takes advantage of proximity to high-income Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and European markets, the complementary relationship between Gulf capital and the young, increasingly educated labor force in middle-income countries, and their common language and culture. In addition to making the business climate in these countries much more attractive, three major constraints need to be overcome in order to achieve this vision: (1) Arab markets for goods and services must be unified; (2) GCC subsidies for local production must be eliminated; and (3) the terms of the Euro-Mediterranean trade agreements must be improved.

The most important goal of regional trade integration is increasing the region's appeal for foreign direct investment (FDI)—foreign companies moving their production to the region in order to lower their costs of serving regional markets. Low integration of the Arab market has reduced the region's attractiveness to foreign companies. In a fragmented regional market, the development of free trade with Europe or the United States actually encourages firms to operate from a location abroad where they can serve the region better. The effort to establish a region-wide unified market was boosted by the 1997 Greater Arab Free Trade Area Agreement. But, although eighteen countries have ratified it, it remains limited in scope. Ongoing efforts to establish an Arab customs union will be at the heart of making the region's economy more dynamic.

GCC policies have become a dominant part of the regional economy. But unfair competition by GCC producers is an important constraint to regional integration.

Huge subsidies and an open labor

market have advantaged production in GCC countries. As a result, GCC private sector production has risen quickly. But this performance is unsustainable. In the future, national labor will not be able to be wholly employed by the public sector unless the number of expats seeking jobs is seriously curtailed. If this happens, the GCC production advantage will be reduced, turning it from a low-cost to high-cost producer and creating incentives for GCC capital to be invested in more labor-abundant parts of the region.

The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, initiated in 1995, was meant to connect the Arab region to European markets. But it has failed to make a difference and must be substantially improved. European Union enlargement, which brought Eastern European countries that compete with Arab exports into the European market, superseded the Euro-Mediterranean agreements. More balanced Euro-Mediterranean trade agreements should be similar to those signed with Eastern Europe, and they should support Arab efforts to meet quality standards and implement proactive training programs to upgrade skills. The main goal should be to encourage European FDI beyond the search for low-wage jobs and toward more sophisticated activities that can serve the larger Arab market.

***The most important goal of regional trade integration is increasing the region's appeal for foreign direct investment.***

## TRENDS IN DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

### Commentary by Fadi Ghandour

The advent of new economic sectors is transforming the way we think about economic development, not just in the Arab region but across the world. The Middle East and North Africa is clearly witnessing a technological revolution, which, in turn, is reshaping traditional sectors of the economy. Technology is no longer a discrete sector in and of itself but rather is an agent of change within the economy at large, affecting many sectors at an increasingly rapid pace. Two areas in particular warrant further discussion: financial services and entertainment.

Financial technology, or FinTech, allows the region to bypass the typically slow evolution of the financial sector. For example, alternative lending platforms hold the promise of acting not only as a new source of employment and economic activity but also as a solution to deeply embedded structural faults in our region's financial system that have hindered the development of vibrant small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in our economies. One of the most significant inhibitors for the development of SMEs in the region is their inability to access debt capital markets effectively. The region has a significant credit gap estimated between \$200 billion and \$240 billion where otherwise-credit-worthy firms are unable to access debt capital, inhibiting their growth and limiting their contributions to overall economic growth. Companies such as Liwwa in Jordan and Beehive in the UAE are building alternative lending platforms that are helping to bridge this gap.

Another sector that is of particular interest is entertainment and content creation. Technology effectively democratizes both the creation of original content and its subsequent distribution and monetization. The tools needed to produce high quality content, particularly in video, have become more accessible to budding young creative talent yearning to tell their stories. New technology also allows for the instant distribution of content to a wide audience and its monetization on third-party platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. Two countries in the region, Qatar and the UAE, boast the world's highest levels of social media penetration,<sup>iv</sup> with users hungry for original content that is not being fulfilled by traditional media. Companies such as Telfaz 11 and Kharabeesh, which provide co-production support and content management services

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iv Simon Kemp, "Digital in 2017: Global Overview," We Are Social, January 24, 2017, <https://wearesocial.com/special-reports/digital-in-2017-global-overview>.

to creatives, are emerging at a rapid pace with a particular focus on the Saudi market. The Saudi government has recently prioritized the development of its entertainment sector, and creative entrepreneurs, with the help of companies like Kharabeesh and Telfaz11, will usher in a new era of content creation that resonates with the local market in a way that foreign imports simply do not.

To support these emerging sectors, we can work on a number of areas to help further exploit these changes within the context of an integrated economic development model.

The first is easing and supporting the ability of companies to operate across the region. Given their nature, technology companies are uniquely able to scale in ways that traditional businesses find more difficult and cumbersome.

By breaking down these barriers, emerging technology companies are aggregating their constituent markets into a larger, singular economic bloc. By encouraging technology and technology-enabled companies to focus on being regional rather than local, we enable ourselves to adopt a new economic development paradigm that, rather than focusing on individual single countries, is driven by efficient resource allocation across the whole region and its many countries. If we further facilitate companies' ability to operate inter-regionally, emerging startups in these industries can access lucrative commercial markets in the developed Gulf countries and marry that to relatively low-cost talent based in the Levant and Egypt, allowing for a more efficient use of resources that can benefit the region as a whole.

Second, the key to enabling the FinTech sector is for stakeholders—including governments, regulators, and existing financial institutions—to see the emergence of new players as a positive development rather than a threat. Governments and regulators should work with FinTech companies to ease regulatory restrictions and provide them with a space to thrive. Alternative lending platforms, in particular, can help spur economic development by channeling capital to credit-worthy SMEs looking to grow their businesses, but, up until this point, they have been shut out of the financial system.

Third, we should encourage young entertainment content creators to develop their businesses rather than have them take on undue regulation in the form of licenses and production permits.

***The region is rich in capital, but too little of that flows toward meaningful economic development and support for nascent entrepreneurial and creative industries.***

Fourth, corporate engagement with new innovative segments of the economy is key to building a new economic growth model. We need to encourage corporations to engage with emerging companies in their sectors and look to integrate them into their businesses either through acquisition or partnership—not out of a sense of altruism but rather as a way for these corporations to help drive growth and insulate themselves from disruption. A path to greater productivity and economic growth can be achieved by synthesizing the innovative drive of young entrepreneurs and the resources and reach of larger corporations.

Finally, it is critical that we provide more capital in forms and structures that are conducive to the development of these industries, whether that be venture capital in equity for firms, or debt capital for SMEs, or grant-financing for creative talent. The region is rich in capital, but too little of that flows toward meaningful economic development and support for nascent entrepreneurial and creative industries.

# GOVERNANCE AND THE FUTURE OF THE ARAB WORLD

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Intissar Fakir and Sarah Yerkes

## INTRODUCTION

Arab regimes have established a set formula for managing state-citizen relations: government services in exchange for public consent. This prevalent social contract dictated that rulers would provide citizens with public sector jobs and free or subsidized goods and services (such as health, education, energy, and food) in exchange for loyalty and minimal political rights and civil liberties.<sup>47</sup> Over the past seven years, changes to the government-citizen relationship in the Arab world have reshaped citizens' perceptions of what they owe their government and what they can expect from it. In this context, the balance of different components of this relationship—such as service provision, anticorruption efforts, representation, rule of law, security, and stability—are changing.

As some states failed to make good on their end of the bargain or the public became dissatisfied with the terms of agreement, many citizens broke their silence. The need to forge a new state-citizen relationship was one of the implicit drivers of the 2011 Arab protests and the ensuing unrest. One of the core components of a viable social contract—effective governance—is still in decline across most of the region. High unemployment rates in non-oil



producing countries (especially among the youth), sluggish region-wide economic growth, and pessimism about the future add further dissatisfaction. Across the region, citizens—regardless of ethnicity, faith, wealth, education or status—continue to demand basic elements of governance that states are often unable or unwilling to provide: basic freedoms, such as of expression and assembly, access to decisionmaking, effective service provision, and efforts to combat corruption. Addressing these three primary components of effective governance can alleviate some of the tension currently brewing in the region today and can help bring stability in the long term.

## **REPRESENTATION, PARTICIPATION, AND FREEDOM: A SEARCH FOR ALTERNATIVES**

Across the region, civil liberties—namely freedoms of expression, assembly, association, and the press—are diminished. According to Freedom House, all but five Arab states (or 71 percent) are “not free,” and no Arab state is considered “free” in the press and internet freedom ratings.<sup>48</sup> Freedom House rates Morocco, Jordan, Lebanon, and Kuwait as “partly free,” demonstrating these governments’ ability to control their liberalization processes. However, overall, discouraged activists in the region have come to see 2011 as an ephemeral moment. And the trauma it caused in places like Syria, Yemen, and Libya, as well as the harsh responses to public protest by governments in Egypt and Bahrain, prevents citizens from seeking more political inclusion from their governments.

Citizens increasingly perceive traditional participatory mechanisms, such as voting and running for office, as lacking credibility, which further weakens the citizen-state relationship. According to the Arab Barometer, Arab citizens have extremely low levels of trust in public institutions.<sup>49</sup> In Morocco, for example, only 0.3 percent of survey respondents said they had “a great deal” of trust in political parties. In Algeria, only 9 percent of people said they have a “great deal” of trust in the government. Faith in the judiciary is somewhat higher in certain countries: 37 percent of Egyptians and 30 percent of Jordanians expressed a “great deal” of trust in their judicial institutions. Given this lack of trust, it is not surprising that, in most Arab states, citizens join nongovernmental organizations and groups at a higher rate than they join political parties. In Algeria, 9 percent of Arab Barometer respondents were members of an organization, while only 2.4 percent were members of a political party. In Egypt, 6.4 percent were members of an organization, while only 0.8 percent were members of a political party.

Yet, many people retain a sense of hope and feel that some options for engaging with their governments, however unconventional, remain at their disposal. Thus, people are looking for alternative ways to participate in their country’s decisionmaking processes and to assert and exercise their freedoms.

TABLE 3  
REPRESENTATION AND PARTICIPATION INDICATORS

Country	Voice and Accountability (2016) <sup>a</sup>	Freedom Rating (2017) <sup>b</sup>	Percentage of Youth (under 30) Who Say They "always" Vote in National Elections (2010–2014) <sup>c</sup>	Percentage of People Who Say They Have "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of Trust in Political Parties (2016–2017) <sup>d</sup>	Percentage of People Who Say They Are a Member of a Political Party (2016–2017)	Percentage of People Who Say They Are a Member of a Formal Organization or Group (2016–2017)
Algeria	-0.88	35	27	13	3.8	11.4
Bahrain	-1.45	12	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Egypt	-1.23	26	46	20	0.8	6.6
Iraq	-1.01	27	59	n/a	n/a	n/a
<i>Jordan</i>	-0.76	37	49	6	0.4	6.5
Kuwait	-0.69	36	33	n/a	n/a	n/a
<i>Lebanon</i>	-0.53	44	36	15	12.1	9.8
Libya	-1.89	13	45	n/a	n/a	n/a
Morocco	-0.1	41	14	9	3.3	22.5
<i>Oman</i>	0.19	25	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
<i>Palestine</i>	n/a	28	56	18	14.3	17.8
<i>Qatar</i>	0.75	26	47	n/a	n/a	n/a
Saudi Arabia	0.24	10	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Syria	-1.82	-1	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
<i>Tunisia</i>	-0.21	78	19	12	2.2	7.3
<i>UAE</i>	1.41	20	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Yemen	-1.82	14	49	n/a	n/a	n/a
<i>United States</i>	1.1	89	58	n/a	n/a	n/a
UK	1.24	95	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
France	1.08	90	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Germany	1.33	95	70	n/a	n/a	n/a

- a "World Governance Indicators," World Bank, <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/index.aspx#home>. Countries are measured on a scale of 2.5 (highest score) to -2.5 (lowest score). Voice and accountability captures perceptions of the extent to which a country's citizens are able to participate in selecting their government, as well as freedom of expression, freedom of association, and a free media.
- b "Freedom in the World 2017," Freedom House, accessed October 12, 2018, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/fiw-2017-table-country-scores>. Countries are ranked on a scale of 100 (most free) to 0 (least free). Of the 195 countries assessed, 87 (45 percent) were rated Free, 59 (30 percent) Partly Free, and 49 (25 percent) Not Free.
- c "World Values Survey Wave 6 2010–2014," World Values Survey Association, January 1, 2016, <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV6.jsp>.
- d "Arab Barometer Wave IV," Arab Barometer, conducted 2016–2017, <http://www.arabbarometer.org/waves/arab-barometer-wave-iv/>.

## Diminished Freedoms

Some governments have pursued a zero-tolerance policy for freedom of assembly. In Egypt, for instance, a hallmark of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's regime is its brutal methods of shutting down protests, which were established early on in response to the anti-coup sit-ins in Rabaa al-Adawiya Mosque in 2013 that resulted in 800–1,000 civilian deaths.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, since coming to power, the Sisi regime has reportedly imprisoned 60,000 Egyptians for various degrees of dissent, utilizing the most brutal forms of torture.<sup>51</sup> This marks a shift from even former president Hosni Mubarak's rule—to say nothing of the postrevolution era—where, although crackdowns and constraints existed, activists were still able to mobilize. Public activism against the military or against Mubarak himself certainly inspired repression, but activists were generally aware of the redlines. Today, the redlines have shifted and are, at times, difficult to identify. Anyone, at any time, can face the ire of the state—as evidenced by stories of forced disappearances, unlawful arrests, and killings, notably the brutal murder of Italian doctoral student Giulio Regeni at the hands of Egyptian security services in 2016.

In the majority of Arab states, the press is consistently under attack, if not fully coopted by the regime. Even in places where the press is partially free—such as Tunisia, Kuwait, and Lebanon—journalists face constraints including harassment, jailing, and legal limits on speech online, a phenomenon not unique to the Arab world. Within this restrictive environment, however, citizens have become adept at using alternative media and sources of information—such as communication apps and blogs—to access and spread information.

Although it is not a substitute for freedom of the press, social media has become an important advocacy tool. In Saudi Arabia, online activism flourished after 2011, culminating in various successful awareness-raising and advocacy campaigns. The women-led Twitter campaign #Women2Drive was responsible, in part, for Saudi Arabia's decision to lift the ban on women driving in June 2018.<sup>52</sup> Although the Saudi state ultimately used the issue of women's rights (including the right to drive) as a diversion from the growing authoritarianism under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and the country's troublesome foreign policy, the contribution women activists made using every tool at their disposal, including social media, to bring attention to this issue cannot be overlooked. While many Saudi activists face arrest and prosecution at home, others are able to continue their engagement even in exile—a common trend across the Arab world. But even continuing their work in exile is proving a challenge to activists. The reach of many governments has expanded, as illustrated by the disappearance and alleged murder of prominent Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi demonstrates.

## Politics and Political Participation

Public disdain for politicians and political parties and distrust in governments has driven low voter turnout in elections, particularly among youth.<sup>53</sup> Part of the lack of trust comes

from the disenfranchisement felt by many, especially youth and women, who make up small parts of political parties across the region. The feeling remains despite some changes in recent years, including a requirement in Tunisia's 2018 local elections for horizontal (not just vertical) gender parity within party lists.<sup>54</sup>

The lack of alternative political forces is adding to the fatigue and lack of trust in institutions. Citizens in the region struggle to find an alternative to the ruling elite that might help address the issues of ineffective governance and corruption. The ineffectiveness of political parties combined with the unpredictability of state pushback against public expression is gradually changing the nature of engagement. Citizens are increasingly turning toward informal mechanisms such as protests and boycotts, and focusing more on specific issues of governance, such as service provision, particularly at the local level. Furthermore, with democracy under threat across the globe, calls for broad democratic reform have been replaced by more basic demands.

Protests around specific issues of governance—for instance, in Morocco, Tunisia, and Jordan—have become more common. In 2016 and 2017, protests against economic marginalization, high unemployment, and austerity measures

***With democracy under threat across the globe, calls for broad democratic reform have been replaced by more basic demands.***

consumed southern Tunisia, which has seen numerous similar demonstrations over the past decade. In Kamour, protesters occupied an oil and gas facility, bringing production to a halt, and demanded that the state more equitably distribute the profits from oil and gas extraction in their region. The protesters' message—that the state cannot ignore the demands of one of the country's most marginalized regions and that the oil and gas companies must provide some benefit to the local population—resonated throughout the country, resulting in smaller protests far beyond Kamour. The protesters eventually secured many of their initial demands of the state and private sector, further enforcing the idea that protests are more effective than formal political participation.<sup>55</sup>

In Lebanon, a wave of protests over waste management was generated by fed-up residents of Beirut who took to social media under the slogan “You Stink!” The movement soon evolved into a political coalition called Beirut Madinati that took part in the parliamentary elections of May 2018. In Algeria, protests have long been a main motivator for state action. Though protests remain largely dominated by interest groups organizing around particular issues, broader movements have taken hold. Over the past few years, Algeria saw sustained protests about shale gas exploration, particularly fracking. Locals from the area of In Salah organized a strong movement that displayed the power of civic resistance for months until it eventually succumbed to the state's usual tactics of intimidation and cooptation.<sup>56</sup>

Likewise, in Morocco in 2016 and 2017, the frequency of protests spread from the Rif, a traditionally underserved region, to other areas, prompting the government to act with a

mixture of quick fix measures, promised long-term reforms, crackdowns including arrests and beatings, and intimidation. The Rif issues in Morocco provided a clear example of how poor economic conditions can intersect with poor governance and a lack of respect for basic rights and freedoms.<sup>57</sup> At the start of 2018, another protest movement, also a glaring illustration of poor governance, spread in Morocco's eastern region, where citizens demanded access to basic services and more development opportunities to bring the region in line with the rest of the country. All of these examples show how citizens are circumventing traditional processes. When elected officials—through the ballot box as well as traditional bureaucratic processes—fail to improve governance, citizens are resorting to protests and boycotts to pressure their governments into action—even if the solutions are only temporary.

## The Way Forward

While parliaments continue to lack real governing authority, in certain cases, local elected officials have more leeway to act. This is especially true in countries where governments are pursuing some degree of decentralizations. And while overall levels of trust and satisfaction with politicians and processes across the region is low, political actors, both parties and individuals, could improve their performance at the local level by making greater effort to improve service delivery. This would also allow political parties also can improve their grassroots outreach and focus on specific local governance issues.

Parties could also work with civil society actors—many of whom, despite pressure from the state, remain some of the few independent actors capable of stepping in where the state fails—to better reach the public. Rather than trying to supplant each other, political parties and civil society could work together to strengthen their reach and to improve governance at the local level.

States have the option to use consultative mechanisms such as national dialogues around important issues as well as local dialogues and town halls. Some Arab states, including Morocco and Tunisia, have undertaken national dialogue processes around issues like youth

***Civil society and political actors can work together to encourage citizens and ensure that the voices of the public are heard.***

engagement. In Tunisia, participatory governance is enshrined in the constitution and major legislation is regularly presented to citizens or groups across the country to solicit their input. These processes provide the opportunity for citizens to voice their view, concerns, or grievances and to feel a sense of ownership of the policymaking

process. However, public consultations can be counterproductive if policymakers overlook public feedback. Here, again, civil society and political actors can work together to encourage citizens and ensure that the voices of the public are heard. Civil society can also help manage public expectations regarding the outcomes of participatory mechanisms.

Citizens can do little to safely combat the high levels of repression in the region, so the international community has a crucial role to play in publicly and privately calling out Arab states for violations. The international community can also support local and international media and civil society that focuses on media, access to information and freedom of the press. Helping build the capacity of these groups and providing them with needed support can allow them to play their role, particularly in documenting abuses where possible.

## **GOVERNMENT EFFECTIVENESS**

In their efforts to address the challenges of service provision, governments often look for solutions that do not address the core issue of accountability.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE), among the richest countries in the region and its best performing government on service provision, began implementing a voluntary rating system to improve the public sector's performance in 2011.<sup>58</sup> Training was provided to each agency, which were rated on their ability to provide information, develop capacity, and deliver highly satisfactory services.<sup>59</sup> But for other governments, such as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, government effectiveness bears little relationship to resource levels. Despite their abundance of resources, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have failed to perform at the same level as the UAE and Qatar. Even countries with limited resources, like Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia, perform at a similar level to Saudi Arabia. But even in countries where governments have improved their effectiveness over the years, citizens are still frustrated with a perceived lack of progress.

### **The Challenges of Service Provision**

Over the past few decades, some governments in the region have made substantial advances in health and education, eradicating a number of communicable diseases, decreasing high infant and maternity mortality rates through awareness raising, providing greater access to medication and investing in building or improving the state of medical establishments, and enhancing access to primary education.<sup>60</sup> But despite these improvements, citizens remain frustrated at their insufficiency—particularly when juxtaposed with the perpetual rhetoric and seemingly never-ending reform processes.

Morocco and Jordan sought to improve the quality of basic services through a series of reforms in the early 2000s. However, singular stories of successful healthcare and education reform highlight the unevenness of development within countries that leads to regional marginalization and localized protests. In Morocco, each region's access to basic services—including healthcare, education, transportation, or even drinking water—can vary by significant margins. In Drâa-Tafilalet, historically one of Morocco's poorest regions, access to

TABLE 4  
WORLD BANK GOVERNMENT EFFECTIVENESS RATINGS

Country	Government Effectiveness Index (2016) <sup>a</sup>	Government Effectiveness Rank (2016) <sup>b</sup>	Government Effectiveness Index (2010)	Government Effectiveness Trajectory (2010-2016)
Algeria	-0.54	124	-0.48	▲
Bahrain	0.32	63	0.46	▼
Egypt	-0.66	139	-0.37	▼
Iraq	-1.26	176	-1.2	▼
<i>Jordan</i>	0.14	75	0.1	▲
Kuwait	-0.18	101	0.17	▼
<i>Lebanon</i>	-0.53	123	-0.28	▼
Libya	-1.89	191	-1.1	▼
Morocco	-0.1	92	-0.1	--
<i>Oman</i>	0.19	71	0.38	▼
<i>Palestine</i>	-0.62	136	-0.37	▼
<i>Qatar</i>	0.75	46	0.85	▼
Saudi Arabia	0.24	67	0	▲
Syria	-1.82	189	-0.61	▼
<i>Tunisia</i>	-0.21	105	0.22	▼
<i>UAE</i>	1.41	22	0.9	▲
Yemen	-1.82	190	-1.02	▼
<i>United States</i>	1.48	19	1.56	▼
UK	1.61	16	1.57	▲
France	1.41	20	1.43	▼
Germany	1.74	13	1.57	▲

- a All data in this table from "Global Effectiveness - Country Rankings," World Bank, [https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/wb\\_government\\_effectiveness/](https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/wb_government_effectiveness/). Countries are measured on a scale of 2.5 (most effective) to -2.5 (least effective). The average for 2016 was -0.02 points. The captures perceptions of the quality of public services, the quality of the civil service and the degree of its independence from political pressures, the quality of policy formulation and implementation, and the credibility of the government's commitment to such policies.
- b Countries are ranked from 1 to 193, with 1 as most effective and 193 as least effective.

healthcare lags behind other regions by as much as 30 percentage points.<sup>61</sup> Not surprisingly, Drâa-Tafilalet saw a series of protests in 2017, first around the lack of access to quality healthcare and then around inadequate access to drinking water.

The Egyptian and Lebanese governments are gradually lowering their citizens' expectations regarding service provision. In Egypt, some human development indicators worsened following the 2011 revolution, as the military regime stabilized the country but struggled with public service provision. An Egyptian youth stated: "Sisi's government has shifted citizens' expectations from questions of governance and service provision to those of security and stability. Egyptians no longer expect government jobs and the government is slowly cutting back on subsidies."<sup>62</sup> This gradual and deliberate effort reflects legitimate security challenges (instability in Syria and the rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State and affiliated groups in Lebanon, Sinai, and the Sahel) but also the government's propensity to use security as an tradeoff between stability and prosperity.

In Lebanon, a country that experienced a brutal civil war, citizens prioritize security and economic development over service provision, and are willing to accept a lower level of services in exchange for security.<sup>63</sup> Clientelism and prevailing corruption have prevented the government from improving its effectiveness. Lebanese citizens' perception of government effectiveness plummeted in 2006, as political infighting, the resulting government crisis, and government deadlock hampered service provision.<sup>64</sup> Since 2011, the influx of Syrian refugees exacerbated the burdens of an already struggling government and the unequal access to public services across Lebanon's subregions.

***The combination of ineffective governments and increasingly restless publics could result in more protests and lead some to more radical means of affecting change.***

The gap between what governments promise and what they deliver is large and growing. And, as each year passes, the patience of citizens across the region, who are waiting for tangible change in their daily lives, wanes. As a young Egyptian attested: "for many younger Egyptians the lack of electricity in urban areas is a redline, causing even the most apolitical Egyptians to become politicized." The combination of ineffective governments and increasingly restless publics could result in more protests and lead some to more radical means of affecting change. In Tunisia, some revolutionaries in the country's marginalized south and interior regions are reportedly joining the ranks of the Islamic State in Libya or Syria—not because of a shared religious ideology but out of hopelessness, frustration, and a feeling that the democratic government they fought for has done little to improve their lives.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, the nature of citizens' needs in some countries have changed notably as quality of life improves.



## How Governments Respond

Increasingly, many Arab governments are championing decentralization as the way to improve governance and foster development. In Morocco, in the early 2000s, King Mohammed VI put forth a blueprint for decentralization, and the 2011 constitutional revision created a strong basis for a decentralized Morocco. While the plans seem to be promising—and other countries, like Tunisia, are looking to emulate them—implementation remains an issue. The challenges facing decentralization include the lack of political will to truly devolve power to lower bodies or allocate necessary financial resources to peripheral regions, such as in Tunisia. Moreover, in many cases, the fundamental challenges that plague the central government are likely to be present at the local or regional levels as well, because the political culture, agendas, and priorities are not likely to be different.

Another long-lauded solution is e-government, or digitizing the bureaucratic process by providing electronic portals for citizens and public access to government information. Many governments are promoting e-government initiatives to streamline and clarify bureaucratic processes, cut back on corruption, and improve efficiency. For example, Bahrain's streamlined e-government portals offer simpler processes for requesting official documents. The government sought to improve the portal system by launching several campaigns to raise awareness and promote its use.<sup>66</sup> However, perceptions of Bahrain's government effectiveness have largely remained the same, potentially reflecting other factors like the severe crackdown on civil liberties and the government's harsh policies of discrimination.

These solutions remain stopgap measures as long as accountability is lacking. The Gulf countries are a prime example of how governments have effectively used their financial resources to avoid accountability, spending strategically to avoid public dissatisfaction and political stability. Following the 2011 regional upheavals, all Gulf countries sought to improve their government effectiveness, in order to stave off a Tunisian- or Egyptian-style revolution and to address the more challenging global economic environment. Compared to the UAE and Qatar, Saudi Arabia has struggled with reforms. In 2011, the Saudi government promised to spend \$80 billion to reform the public sector, and, more recently, it rolled out several major reform plans to convince its citizens to accept spending cuts. While none of these measures has yet demonstrated much change, neither has the situation led to major unrest. Conversely, Bahrain, without the abundant resources of Saudi Arabia or Qatar, continues to rely on repression to subdue its citizenry.

The uncertain outlook of global oil markets and rising budgetary pressures—due to high social spending and low economic growth rates—have led the Gulf states to formulate ambitious plans to transform their economies and social contracts. Bahrain's Vision 2030 (adopted in 2008), Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 (adopted in 2016), the UAE's Vision 2021 (adopted in 2010), Kuwait's Vision 2035 (adopted in 2017), Oman's Vision 2020 (adopted in 1995 and updated in 2016), and Qatar's Vision 2030 (adopted in 2008) all share a focus on improving government effectiveness and service provision. Yet, these countries struggle

with staggering social inequities and little to no public and political accountability or civil liberties. This breeds dissatisfaction of a different kind—one that prioritizes the citizen’s desire for greater civil freedoms and access to decisionmaking over the performance of governments.

## **The Way Forward**

Decentralization processes could facilitate better governance at the local level, provided adequate resources and political will. Building the capacity of local councils and providing competitive fund allocation programs that promote initiative and innovation among local actors would allow greater ownership of local development and could help address disenfranchisement among underserved populations.

Focusing on governance at the subregional, rural, and local levels and around specific issues, such as healthcare or education, is a potential starting place for actors looking to improve government effectiveness and address the lack of basic services. This can help raise political profiles and provide, or potentially restore, some trust in elected officials.

States could also consider efforts that reward good and effective performance at all bureaucratic levels—particularly at the local level, to encourage a higher performing public workforce and provide citizens with a sense of government responsiveness.

Other tools like the program being carried out in Tunisia, for instance a formal process of positive discrimination, could help generate goodwill among the population.<sup>67</sup> Such a process both attempts to address long-standing regional marginalization by prioritizing resources for traditionally underserved areas, and financially rewards regions for meeting certain political and socioeconomic criteria, creating a positive cycle of regional development.

Internationally or locally funded nongovernmental organizations should consider channeling aid through the local level, to circumvent inefficient national bureaucracies and ensure local control over local decisionmaking.

## **CONTROL OF CORRUPTION**

Across the Arab world, corruption—defined by the World Bank as “the abuse of public office for private gain”—cripples governments and angers citizens.<sup>68</sup> In Carnegie’s 2016 survey of Arab thought leaders on governance, nearly half of the 103 respondents listed corruption as one of the three most pressing regional issues.<sup>69</sup> Arab states exhibit varying levels of corruption, from small, petty corruption, such as bribing a traffic cop; to mid-level corruption, such as clientelism and nepotism in hiring practices; to large-scale, grand corruption, such as the illegal distribution of resources to a preferred ethnic or religious group or full kleptocracy.

TABLE 5  
**TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL CORRUPTION PERCEPTIONS RATINGS**

Country	Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index Score (2017) <sup>a</sup>	Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index Ranking (2017)
Algeria	33	112
Bahrain	36	103
Egypt	32	117
Iraq	18	169
Jordan	48	59
Kuwait	39	85
Lebanon	28	143
Libya	17	171
Morocco	40	81
Oman	44	68
Palestine	n/a	n/a
Qatar	63	29
Saudi Arabia	49	57
Syria	14	178
Tunisia	42	74
UAE	71	21
Yemen	16	175
United States	75	16
UK	82	8
France	70	23
Germany	81	12

a All data in this table from “Corruption Perceptions Index,” Transparency International, February 21, 2018, [https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption\\_perceptions\\_index\\_2017](https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2017). The index, which ranks 180 countries and territories by their perceived levels of public sector corruption, uses a scale of 0 to 100, where 0 is highly corrupt and 100 is very clean.

Furthermore, although actual levels of corruption may not be on the rise, public perception of corruption is. And while most people in the region—both within and outside government—agree on the importance of fighting corruption, efforts have largely failed.

Corruption has become a self-reinforcing system that is an “integral feature” of regional regimes, according to one Egyptian academic.<sup>70</sup> With the notable exception of Tunisia, Arab states possess a variety of autocratic features that are correlated with corruption. In authoritarian regimes, elites control all levers of power to some degree. Adequately addressing

corruption in the region requires not only legal reforms, such as passing freedom of information and asset declaration laws, or technological solutions, such as e-government initiatives, but also a fundamental change in the political culture within which corruption thrives. In many places, such as the Gulf countries, Morocco, and Lebanon, tackling corruption would be detrimental to the ruling elites, who benefit from the status quo. But failure to address this problem can lead to instability that could do even more harm to the regime and elite interests. The elite often control key media outlets, the private sector, or key industries, and, at times, even influential civil society organizations. Through these they can delay legislative decisions and judicial processes.

Many Arab states tend to have large and bloated public sectors, which is another driver of corruption.<sup>71</sup> In oil-rich states, the distribution of rents also breeds corruption.<sup>72</sup> As a Lebanese activist noted, the “lack of meritocratic recruitment in the public administration and the prevalence of clientelist, nepotistic and sectarian considerations often leads to the appointment of unqualified civil servants who either take part or contribute to cover corrupt practices.”<sup>73</sup> Clientelism across the region leads to a vicious cycle of poorly performing bureaucracies, which undermines trust in institutions, which in turn fuels further corruption.

***Fighting corruption requires a strong legal framework.***

## **Implications of Corruption**

Corruption is costly. In addition to stunting economic growth, in a corrupt country or industry, “firms have no incentive to improve product quality, and the productivity gains and innovation that would come from new firms is halted. In other words, [corruption] undermines the competitiveness of the economy, hampering investment and the creation of jobs.”<sup>74</sup> One study found that the low level of tax revenue in the Arab world is due, in part, to corruption as well.<sup>75</sup> This is particularly troubling given the inability of the region’s resource-rich states to rely on hydrocarbons, whose reserves are quickly diminishing and whose revenue has seen a significant decrease over the past few years. As one report notes, “for countries with large oil and gas reserves, such as Saudi Arabia, raising tax revenues is less urgent, though still necessary for longer-run fiscal sustainability,” especially given the significant increases in expenditures witnessed since the start of the Arab Spring.<sup>76</sup>

Corruption can also have a detrimental security impact. It provides opportunities for traffickers—of weapons, drugs, and humans—to bring illicit goods into the country. Lax border controls resulting from a system based on bribery can make money laundering easier and can allow the spread of terrorism.<sup>77</sup> As a Tunisian security analyst noted, border defenses are irrelevant if customs officials continue to be corrupt and allow illicit goods to cross.<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, citizens who develop mistrust and antagonism toward governments they perceive as corrupt may be more willing to join extremist groups, which can claim that they are fighting corrupt leaders, or rationalize other activity that is damaging to the state

and its interests.<sup>79</sup> Research has also found that Arab countries have highly opaque security sectors, as well as a lack of oversight and poor citizen engagement, leading to a greater risk of corruption inside these sectors.<sup>80</sup> A 2013 Transparency International report found that Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Yemen all had a “critical level of defence corruption risk.”<sup>81</sup>

Corruption can also reduce the quality of government institutions, particularly the bureaucracy. When bureaucrats become accustomed to engaging in corrupt practices, it becomes harder to implement public policies that are in the best interests of the state and citizenry. In the region’s resource-rich states, the decline of the rentier system has led to further corruption and subsequently more discrimination against guest workers, mercenaries, and other noncitizens who are competing for increasingly limited resources.

## The Way Forward

Fighting corruption requires a strong legal framework, including legislation on access to information and asset declaration, and a strong judiciary and specialized bodies to prosecute corruption-related crimes. Throughout the region, anticorruption laws on the books are often not enforced. Without accountability, citizen recourse, and the political will to enforce them, access to information laws and other legal transparency measures are meaningless.

One potentially powerful tool is an independent national anticorruption authority, such as in Tunisia, where the National Anti-Corruption Agency (INLUCC) is funded by the government but operates as an independent entity to investigate corruption.<sup>82</sup> But to succeed, these bodies must be free from political interference as well as adequately staffed and resourced to carry out what are often tremendous caseloads.

Another mechanism to fight corruption that has borne fruit in other regions is e-government processes and procedures. Digitizing bureaucratic processes such as customs operations, business registration, and procurements procedures can hamper opportunities for bribery, cronyism, and side deals by forcing all transactions through a humanless portal. While e-government procedures may not be appropriate for all circumstances, Arab governments that digitize and publicize their work will inspire greater trust and people will be more likely to conduct their transactions within the formal and appropriate channels.

Arab publics (as well as international organizations like Transparency International) should continue to pressure Arab leaders to stem corruption, even in small ways. Furthermore, drawing the connection between corruption and security as well as corruption and economic decline can incentivize action. Civil society and international actors should magnify media and diplomatic coverage of corruption cases, as regimes often care about their image at home and abroad, and promote positive examples of anticorruption efforts.

## CONCLUSION

Since the 2011 uprisings, the relationship between Arab leaders and citizens has been shifting. While the initial euphoria and hope of a democratic spring quickly faded, today—nearly eight years later—the anger and frustration that led to revolution, protest, and war persist. Across the region, citizens have grown impatient with governments they perceive as ineffective, corrupt, and unaccountable. This sustained anger and dissatisfaction is driving citizens to find and pursue new paths to reshape their relationship with the state. In the meantime, states are struggling to adapt and often coming up short, failing to deliver on promised reforms in the best case or resorting to repression and violence in the worst—both of which contribute to the growing gap between the citizen and the state.

Addressing these challenges will require more substantial action and a new social contract that “should move the region toward a more open political system, a more competitive economy where the state takes a more strategic and regulatory role aimed at ensuring broader access and a level playing field for a more dynamic private sector, and finally to a more inclusive economy and targeted redistribution system,” according to a 2016 Belfer Center report.<sup>83</sup>

In many cases, this sort of new social contract remains a remote possibility at best. At one end of the spectrum, states such as Egypt and Bahrain are actively and forcefully pushing back against the sort of political and economic reforms necessary to provide stability and effective service provision for their people. At the other end, Tunisia is slowly moving toward liberal democracy in the political sphere while also struggling to meet the socioeconomic demands of the public, also resulting in a massive trust gap between the people and their government.

Across the Arab world, governments must recognize that without addressing three issues—access to decisionmaking, effective service provision, and corruption—the state-society relationship will continue to deteriorate. There are no quick fixes to any of these challenges, but governments, civil society, and the international community can work together to develop gradual steps to improve governance, provide quality goods and services, and eradicate corruption across the region. Whatever the future holds for the region, these steps are sure to mitigate the worst outcomes.

*Sustained anger and dissatisfaction is driving citizens to find and pursue new paths to reshape their relationship with the state.*

## WHITHER EGYPT'S JUDICIAL INDEPENDENCE?

Commentary by Sahar Aziz

Egypt's judiciary is a state institution comprised of elites. Guarding their social status as highly paid civil servants, judges have little incentive to radically change the status quo. Thus, judicial independence is, by design, constrained by the state's political system. With presidential power currently at a zenith, legal mechanisms are weaponized to silence civil society, which has historically played the role of government watchdog. Coupled with the executive's misuse of courts to further its political agenda, promoting judicial independence in a manner that could threaten the executive's firm grip on power is likely a futile endeavor. But even an authoritarian state has an interest in a competent and efficient judiciary. As austerity measures intensify poverty and squeeze

***Even an authoritarian state has an interest in a competent and efficient judiciary.***

the vanishing middle class, Egypt's internal stability remains fragile. Attracting foreign investment and international aid is a top state priority. To do so, investors must be assured that Egypt's courts can protect their property through the

transparent and independent adjudication of laws. This provides an opportunity for domestic and foreign stakeholders to reform facets of the judiciary that, though facially mundane, are critical to the rule of law. Three specific reforms would bolster judicial independence over the long run.

First, a professional judicial training center should be established, where all new judges must complete at least one full year of training and an exit exam. Better qualified judges who take pride in the quality of their work are more likely to guard their professional reputations and preserve their independence.

Egyptian judges begin their career immediately after law school as a prosecutor in the prosecutor general's office. They are often selected to become a judge not solely on their grades or class ranking; nepotism also plays a role in selection.<sup>i</sup> Prior to becoming a judge, law graduates do not receive any special training in law school, where the quality of education has plummeted over the last two generations.

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i Nora Elbially, Miguel A. Garcia-Rubio, and Ahmed Zaki, "The 2007 Egyptian Judicial Reform and Its Efficiency Implications on First Instance Courts," Effectius, 2011, [http://effectius.com/yahoo\\_site\\_admin/assets/docs/The2007EgyptianJudicialReformanditsefficiencyimplications\\_EFFECTIUS\\_newsletter16.344135720.pdf](http://effectius.com/yahoo_site_admin/assets/docs/The2007EgyptianJudicialReformanditsefficiencyimplications_EFFECTIUS_newsletter16.344135720.pdf).

In 2008, a group of judges supported a bill establishing a judicial academy that would both train new judges and provide continuing professional education for sitting judges. The bill was not approved by parliament. Revisiting this proposal should be a priority for Egyptian officials, judges, foreign investors, and international organizations concerned with making the administration of justice more efficient and fair.

Second, a judicial clerkship program should be created, so judges can hire lawyers to assist in managing their overwhelming case dockets. Due in part to a shortage of judges and a litigious society, Egyptian judges carry significant caseloads. Yet, they have minimal, if any, administrative support to assist with legal research and case management. With more professional support, judges would have more capacity to give each case the time necessary to provide higher quality and more efficient adjudication.

Finally, Egypt's courtrooms need upgrading. With Egypt's courtroom infrastructure in shambles, Egyptian citizens perceive the judiciary as merely another inept state institution. Reformers, therefore, should push for upgrading courtrooms to make them places where the law is taken seriously—both by citizens and the foreign investors that the government seeks to attract. Perceptions matter in promoting the rule of law. If the state wants citizens to respect the law, venues where it is enforced should exude respectability and decorum.

## **A NEW ERA IN SAUDI ARABIA: LIMITING REFORMS AND SILENCING REFORMERS**

**Commentary by Hala Aldosari**

Saudi Arabia is witnessing a disturbing transformation in its political leadership. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's leadership acknowledges the historical economic, religious, and social challenges of the state while simultaneously curbing and antagonizing the civil society movement and reform leaders who were actively addressing those challenges. In addition, the engagement in regional conflicts threatens to deliver the same economic and political sustainability that it seeks to deliver.

On May 15, 2018, a wide-scale wave of arrests targeted prominent women activists, their lawyer, and several supporters. Surprisingly, the arrests started a few weeks ahead



of lifting the decades-old ban on women driving. It was also preceded by two waves of arrests, in which the state rounded up writers, Islamic reformist activists, high-profile businessmen, and statesmen, including members of the ruling family with significant political clout. The arrests also targeted women activists who had, since 2011, cultivated impressive public awareness and engagement on domestic and international levels.

Three of the detained women activists had introduced an advocacy model that galvanized a strong movement to promote reforms in women's rights beyond driving. Their arrest stands out for its unprecedentedly vindictive nature, which trespassed the prevalent cultural norm of respecting the reputation of individuals, particularly women. There is no question that this unique hostility is a testament to both the vulnerability of women activists in an absolute monarchy and also to their success in gaining support. Shortly after the arrests, pictures of the women and men arrested appeared on the front pages of the state-linked newspapers and social media accounts stamped in red as traitors. Simultaneously, a state-backed campaign accused the group of treason and branded them as foreign agents in a trial by the media. A series of op-ed articles, front-page analysis by legal experts, unnamed state sources, and members of the Shura Council, including a woman member, rallied the public against the activists under the nationalist slogan "the nation is a red line." The rhetoric changed from portraying them as agents of foreign embassies aiming to use international institutions against the state to labelling them as agents of Qatar, Turkey, and Iran, after the initial insinuations unnerved foreign diplomats in Saudi Arabia.

***Unchecked authoritarianism has rendered domestic activism a precarious endeavor that can be easily rebuffed by raising nationalist sentiments.***

The state did not provide evidence for the charges against the activists. But, within two weeks, the state declared that the activists had unanimously confessed to the initial charges. All of this was carried out in the absence of legal representation or basic transparency. It

was apparent that the persecution was intended to instill fear in the Saudi domestic audience in a provocative fashion reminiscent of the Saudi-led cyberwars against Qatar and other enemies. It is also notable that the state has expressed an increased interest in improving its international legitimacy, both to attract foreign investment and to secure political patronage for the new leadership. The arrests seem to be motivated by the state's desire to control the narrative on reform, not only among the domestic audience but also the increasingly significant international one. Therefore, the arrests offer an opportunity for the international community to significantly influence the authoritarian nature of Saudi Arabia by supporting those who were targeted.

The state's growing and unchecked authoritarianism has rendered domestic activism a precarious endeavor that can be easily rebuffed by raising nationalist sentiments. It took only one political decision to halt the growing momentum of feminism that had been patiently and carefully cultivated over years of collaboration and capacity building. The top-down approach to reform has limited capacity to meet public demands and decide on which reforms to pursue when the public is unable to prioritize claims, and scrutinize or inform policymaking. Most importantly, this drives activism outside the borders, where groups and individuals can organize, access information, and mobilize for a different model of governance.

## **FROM CIVIC ACTIVISM TO INSTITUTIONAL POLITICS: LESSONS FROM LEBANON**

**Commentary by Jean Kassir**

In the summer of 2015, as rotting garbage piled up in the streets of Beirut, networks of activists initiated a large scale anti-establishment protest movement. They demanded officials to find a sustainable solution for waste management and be held accountable. These protests expressed a growing nationwide anti-establishment sentiment and underlined the systemic corruption of the ruling elite. These anti-establishment networks had been building since 2011, mostly composed of civil society organizations, nongovernmental organizations, left-leaning political groups, and student collectives. The self-identified "civic movement" was the largest leaderless, nonpartisan, and nonsectarian political mobilization in post-war Lebanon.

Yet, despite its ability to mobilize, the movement failed to bring about significant policy changes and experienced a major setback in the long-awaited 2018 legislative elections when it ran as a coalition. The movement faced profound structural and strategic deficiencies that hindered its ability to play an impactful political role. While the leaderless and flexible structure, as well as its nonpartisan characteristics, led many Lebanese to take part in the demonstrations and feel ownership of the movement, the actors that initiated it fell short of building a solid popular base. Furthermore, the movement avoided traditionally divisive questions about Lebanese politics, such as issues of security and foreign policy, and instead focused on anticorruption in order to appeal to all. This strategy proved unsuccessful. Although it was motivated by a genuine willingness to

unite Lebanese voters, the movement exposed the extent of its own internal ideological divisions by skirting contentious political questions.

In the end, popular support for the protests remained fragile and the movement could hardly resist the establishment's counteroffensives. Without a preexisting grassroots base and an institutionalized political structure, the movement failed to capitalize on sympathy and enthusiasm. The lack of a clear and comprehensive platform seriously harmed the movement's credibility as a political alternative in the legislative

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elections and exposed its limited ability to build a popular base and transform the power structure. Additionally, most of the movement's leading figures were largely unknown outside Beirut activist circles and lacked political experience. Consequently, the movement struggled against Lebanese sectarian political parties

that rely on deeply rooted networks, control media outlets, and benefit from massive financial support. The parties tried to discredit the civic movement's leading figures by spreading rumors about their agenda, allegiances, and funding. These attacks, in addition to the state's brutal crackdown, eventually succeeded in diminishing the protest movement's popular support.

While organic anti-establishment mobilization managed to catalyze people's discontent and influence the public discourse, it had limited ability to grow a popular base and impact the power structure. Building grassroots and institutionalized political groups appears to be a better approach for efficiently seizing opportunities and transforming the political system.

## GOVERNANCE IN GAZA

### Commentary by Omar Shaban

The Hamas-Fatah divide and the Israeli-imposed blockade on Gaza, which began in 2007, have produced countless victims in Palestine. The political implications of the conflict between Hamas and Fatah and the Israeli blockade include the undermined legitimacy of the 2007 democratic elections; human rights violations, including restrictions on the right to free expression; and severe limits on the freedom of movement. In Gaza, these extreme circumstances have instilled a growing tendency toward radicalism, especially among the younger generation. An estimated 100 young Gazans reportedly joined the self-proclaimed Islamic State, in addition to thousands who stayed and carried out attacks in Gaza.

But the most important aspect of the blockade is the decreased quality of services provided to the public, namely health, education, electricity, and water. The quality and availability of these services has suffered dramatically. Since the blockade began, it has been unclear who is responsible for providing these services: the Israeli government, which controls the border with Gaza; Hamas, which has been ruling Gaza since 2007; or the Palestinian Authority (PA), which is the internationally recognized representative of the Palestinian people.

After the blockade began, the PA essentially ordered its public servants not to serve under Hamas. Hamas, in turn, filled these vacancies with tens of thousands of its own members—many of whom lacked qualifications. This shortage of qualified personnel severely impacted the availability and quality of services, particularly in the health and education sectors. Education sector personnel tend to be more conservative, so schools have become more religious, less diverse, and more politicized. In several incidents, schools even forced female students to wear special uniforms.

Gazans have also struggled with access to electricity and water.<sup>i</sup> The PA cut Gaza's electricity supply, which depends on three sources: the Gaza power plant, which is operated with fuel that comes from Israel and is paid for by the PA; Israeli supply, which is also paid for by the PA; and small quantities of electricity provided by Egypt and paid for by the Arab league.

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i Tamsin Avra, "Gaza Electricity Crisis Fact Sheet," Rebuilding Alliance, 2017, <http://www.rebuildingalliance.org/gaza-electricity-crisis-fact-sheet/>.

Residents of Gaza currently receive three to four hours of electricity a day,<sup>ii</sup> which severely impacts water pumping and water treatment plants. Decreased electricity also affects the capacity of Gaza's health facilities. Tens of thousands of cubic liters of sewage flood into the sea every day, and Gazan beaches are severely polluted. The harsh restrictions have also hampered private sector production—businessmen in all sectors struggle. Construction and manufacturing have been hit hardest, with many businesses unable to stay afloat. The decreased purchasing power of Gaza's population has compounded the challenges they face.

***The Israeli blockade and the political divide have weakened Gaza in staggering ways: the community is poorer, more dependent on food assistance, less productive, more radical, and less tolerant.***

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The Israeli blockade and the political divide have weakened Gaza in staggering ways: the community is poorer, more dependent on food assistance, less productive, more radical, and less tolerant. These ongoing conditions pose a threat not just to Gaza but to the stability of the entire region.

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ii "Gaza Plunges Into Darkness: Severe Deterioration in the Energy Situation," UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, May 25, 2017, <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/gaza-plunges-darkness-severe-deterioration-energy-situation>.

# ENGAGING SOCIETY TO REFORM ARAB EDUCATION: FROM SCHOOLING TO LEARNING

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## INTRODUCTION

Arab educational systems need to serve the needs of pluralistic societies and foster the development of active, responsible citizens who are empowered to deal with complexity and advance constructive change. Current systems focus on quantitative indices rather than quality and therefore fail to meet this goal. This is leading to increasingly strong criticism. The 2016 Arab Human Development Report stated simply and starkly: “Overall, the quality of education is poor.”<sup>84</sup>

Shelves of international reports connect shortcomings in the region’s school systems with unemployment and lack of preparation for looming economic challenges. But this understanding of the problem—focused on how schools need to prepare students for the economy—while accurate, is far too narrow. Reform should focus not only on schools but also on the way that societies engage education. It is not merely economic progress and the workplace that are at stake (though they are), but also political stability and social peace.

However, a broader understanding of the extent of the problem does not lead to despair. In fact, when taking a holistic approach to reform, there is much room for imaginative, constructive, and hopeful suggestions. Reform should not just involve

***Reform should focus not only on schools but also on the way that societies engage education.***

making a set of specific changes in existing school curricula to meet the needs of today's labor market. Instead, the focus must be on an effort to move society at all levels—political leadership, public officials, teachers, students, and parents

and communities—to develop visions for education in their own societies. Such visions need to be based less on what material should be taught in schools and more on how to foster a learning process that integrates what takes place in the classroom, outside of the classroom, in the workplace, in leisure, and long after graduation.

Failing to move from a narrow focus on schooling to a broader and society-wide process of learning will result in generations of *unproductive citizens*. And concentrating on the first part of that phrase (emphasizing the economic contribution of education) while forgetting the second part (stressing citizenship or the broad societal contributions of education) is both morally troubling and ultimately self-defeating.

Even when just considering the all-too-narrow goal of educating or instilling knowledge of specific material for participation in today's workforce, it is clear that systems, for the most part, perform inadequately. Youth unemployment and the resulting alienation remain major problems throughout the region. Pockets of excellence exist, but the quality of education varies so greatly that it reinforces rather than overcomes inequalities. Teachers receive little of the support and continuing training that they need. And the stress on the workforce and economic factors, while understandable, cannot obscure that the systems neglect all other aspects of growth related to engaged learning, individual empowerment, and especially social participation and active citizenship (including values connected to democracy and human rights).

With such profound challenges, technocratic solutions will fall far short. Educational experts can identify clear problems, drawing on international and regional knowledge. This helps with diagnosis but does not point to easy solutions. Often, there is a need to explore educational fields in areas where mechanical copying of curricula and material from other regions does not help. There may not be uniquely Iraqi physics or chemistry (though even in such subjects, simple reproduction of material developed for different societies serves education poorly), but there are Iraqi histories, societies, and cultures. Recommendations for reform must therefore combine general guidelines and proposals with suggestions for specific initiatives that might vary in their details even within the same region.

To be fair, Arab states have realized some real successes in building school systems that have encompassed much of their societies. But they have done so according to an implicit contract in which states provide services and citizens reciprocate with quiescence. That makes it possible to defend the existing school systems on several grounds, but generally only by citing indices of quantity rather than quality of learning. In most countries, educational systems have been expanded out from cities to serve villages, rural areas, and refugee camps; they have taught basic literacy to most of the population (raising youth literacy rates above 90 percent in most Arab states and largely closing a long-standing gender gap in that area).<sup>85</sup> Millions of students have graduated each year with a variety of skills that have allowed them to populate various bureaucratic structures, professions, and other activities. The gender gap is closing in areas beyond basic literacy as well. In most states, women outnumber men in pursuing university degrees.<sup>86</sup>

And many school systems continue to produce large numbers of graduates even while operating in extremely difficult fiscal and political environments—difficult in some countries not only because state resources are so limited but also because some existing regimes have failed to prioritize education or betray broader governance problems that afflict many sectors, including education. But the problem is not just fiscal or political. Even government officials in well-established and wealthier states who have invested heavily in education (with some allocating one-fifth of their overall budget) show frustration with the uneven results.<sup>87</sup>

Arab educational systems do not—and indeed are not designed to—foster democratic and engaged citizenship in all of its aspects. Rather than focus on learning more broadly, most of them center more narrowly on the acquisition of defined and approved bodies of knowledge. School systems are designed to use specific academic material, and as a result, teachers are encouraged to impart lower-level cognitive skills (recall and comprehension) at the expense of higher-level ones (application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and critical thinking). The systems therefore produce graduates with credentials but not the range of skills necessary to deal with the political, economic, and social challenges faced by Arab societies—or even to meet the needs of the workplace, which is the purported goal of many recent reform efforts.

Indeed, for all the extensive school infrastructure built in Arab countries, overall student learning is disappointing, both by national and international standards. (See the Haichour interview for quantitative measures of Arab educational systems.)

And even the positive accomplishments of the past are now threatened by a tumultuous and violent regional environment with large refugee populations, state decay in some places, and fiscal pressures in others. Regimes have come to regard burgeoning youth populations throughout the region as looming threats rather than agents of a better future. Even in those



societies that have escaped some of the political turmoil of recent years, senior officials in ministries of education feel that they are simply treading water at best; teachers are asked to educate students in a society that denies them adequate respect, status, and opportunities for professional improvement; and the many meaningful learning activities that take place outside of the formal system—widely recognized as a critical element of any educational system—are poorly tracked and difficult to mainstream in the Arab world.

To be sure, there are efforts at educational reform throughout the region, and positive experiences and imaginative experiments must receive attention. But many reformers complain that they are blocked by highly bureaucratized, rigid, and authoritarian organizational arrangements that mostly rely on large-scale, top-down approaches. Well-intentioned past efforts have often failed to attend to the complexities of implementation; neglected the concerns, voices, and priorities of the key stakeholders; lacked strategic vision; and been divorced from any well-articulated and substantiated pedagogical framework. Furthermore, many of these initiatives have been triggered and supported by international agencies and donor countries and are thus perceived as being driven by economic and political agendas rather than local visions.

Yet, despite these pressures, there are agents for positive change throughout existing systems: educators who care deeply about their work, officials who devise innovative solutions, and students who display imagination and have aspirations. That makes it possible to identify some promising experiments and to suggest avenues for mainstreaming them throughout the region and within education systems.

In this paper, we survey the field and the possibilities for reform, beginning with schools themselves, progressing to the official framework in which they operate, and concluding with an emphasis on the entire society.<sup>88</sup>

## **THE SCHOOL: ENGAGING TEACHERS AND STUDENTS**

Schools are at the center of debates about values, religion, identity, gender, and race—and states have therefore treated them as places where they must exercise their authority. They do so through closely controlling the content of curriculum. This creates two risks: that school systems will be overly centralized and therefore insulated from key stakeholders and mechanisms of accountability to society and that education will be built upon a mistaken understanding of how students learn.

In most Arab states, senior state officials and bodies determine an authoritative set of truths and a codified national and/or religious identity. The educational bureaucracy translates such authoritative determinations into the curriculum. Teachers transmit that to students, who are then examined on how well they have absorbed it. For instance, “national education” is a subject in Egypt, Jordan, and Palestine, and the texts rely on a single, official

version of history and politics.<sup>89</sup> It is not just the desire for stability and control that leads to centralization. Top-down approaches are also motivated by a desire to reform education to meet the needs of a globalized economy. And officials focus on educational content to ensure uniformity and control, so that even reform efforts are overly centralized.

The result has often left educators and learners feeling that their only choice is between becoming either blind imitators or fervent rejecters of “foreign” ideas. In both these cases, the educational system keeps graduating too many disengaged citizens, angry rebels open to destructive ideas, and potential emigrants longing to leave their society behind. Too many chase an idealized version of the “other” (associated with moral and technological superiority) rather than contribute to their own societies.

*The educational system keeps graduating too many disengaged citizens . . . and potential emigrants.*

Such approaches do not merely fail to realize their intended results in the short term; they prevent schools and teachers from helping students develop the skills that will enable them to learn outside of school and long after graduation. Current and future citizens must be able to negotiate differences and engage each other constructively. The current systems, based on the inculcation of officially endorsed knowledge, obstruct that goal.

Moreover, these approaches can lead to very mixed messages, as students are sometimes given a patriarchal vision of family life in one subject and an egalitarian one in another—and without the tools to probe the differences or negotiate their way in societies where many past sources of authority are crumbling. Further, curricula often sidestep significant issues, including communal tensions, religious disagreements, gender discrimination and disparities (particularly among poorer populations), and many other entrenched social problems that are deemed too sensitive for schools.

Two broad developments in the international understanding of education over the last three to four decades have helpful implications for educational reform in the Arab world, including for pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment.

First, experts have come to understand education differently—as something that emerges from, and takes place in, a social context rather than from a simple transfer of a body of knowledge to pupils. “Knowledge” is not simply a set of cold facts but something that members of a society develop collectively and argue about. Students should be seen as apprentices—being guided into becoming full and participating members of their communities—rather than receptacles. There is a change from an “acquisition of knowledge” understanding of education to a participation metaphor of learning—one that focuses on the interactive and social nature of sound education more than the simple transfer of information.

Second, the aims of education have moved beyond the emphasis on knowledge retention and recall to assisting students to think and read critically, express themselves clearly and persuasively, and solve complex problems in science, mathematics, and other areas.

These changes are not merely philosophical; there is now a better understanding of what underlies people's abilities to solve problems, how to enable students to use what they have learned in new settings, how cultural and social norms affect learning, how students' prior knowledge and abilities interact with learning, and how to use technology to guide and enhance learning.

In many countries, the new demands of workplaces and active participation in a democratic society have contributed to these developments. This is based on a new understanding of the workplace. Older approaches view it as a place where a labor force with specific credentials is required. That has led to a special focus on mathematics, technology, and science—welcome, to be sure, but unfortunately understood as technical subjects to be mastered rather than as ways of thinking to be cultivated.

Overall, the rapid growth of knowledge requires school graduates to be able to find and use information rather than simply recall it. That is, there is a need now for graduates to be autonomous learners throughout their lives. Thus, more appropriate educational systems are ones in which teachers guide students in addressing problems constructively as participants, citizens, and lifelong learners—in particular by equipping them to operate in societies characterized by differences over values.

There is another unrelated effect of the stress on technical subjects. It has distracted attention from—and even risked devaluing—the social sciences and humanities, which are precisely where the essential matters of identity, citizenship, and pluralism can be discussed directly. (See the Karami-Akkary interview for a description of the TAMAM project, a specific reform initiative, and the Al-Khadra interview on the need for humanities education more broadly.) With much less focus on such subjects in the curriculum, educators have fewer resources and are required (often by the testing system) to fall back on rote learning.

The two problems—understanding science and mathematics as a set of information to be transferred and the neglect of other subjects—often stem jointly from a good-faith attempt to be current but a misplaced emphasis on what current realities suggest should receive attention.

Past reform in the Arab world has focused on the content of the curriculum and that is indeed important, but it is not the only issue. It is *how* such subjects are taught (pedagogy) and *who* teaches (teachers) them that affect much of what is learned. Indeed, this is precisely what should unite all parts of the system across the range of academic subjects from literature to chemistry. Instead of attempting to deliver answers from the top, Arab education should allow teachers to guide students in learning how to address problems constructively

as participants, citizens, and lifelong learners. They must do so even, or in particular, in societies increasingly characterized by differences over some core values. (See the Karami-Akkary interview for an attempt to grapple with the need to develop citizenship skills.)

The best approach marries an array of necessarily related approaches in the educational experience, pursuing them simultaneously: learning to learn, learning for individual empowerment, learning to solve problems with others, and learning about values.

Assessment techniques now in place serve to monitor and control what takes place in schools, augmenting the tendencies of systems to be top-down structures aimed

at inculcating facts. The current approach misdirects teacher energies from cultivating learning to instilling specific material. Instead, testing should be reconceived to emphasize more than simple mastery of a subject material. Teachers should be trained as agents rather than intermediaries, or, even better, facilitators, in helping students learn and in identifying and overcoming challenges to the learning process. New appropriate teaching and testing approaches will have to renew the focus on quality. (See the Hashweh interview for a set of suggestions about reforms in pedagogy.)

***There is a need now for graduates to be autonomous learners throughout their lives.***

Furthermore, the approach to improving curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and teacher training must be holistic. Piecemeal efforts can lead to disappointing results. When strong teacher training programs are inserted into a system with a traditional *tawjibi* assessment (a secondary-school matriculation examination), based on a battery of subject-material tests, for instance, student success will still be based on memorization.

For students to develop the skills of constructive citizenship, a paradigm shift is needed, placing these skills firmly at the center of education and as key constituents of an Arab graduate profile. This profile sets the framework for learning outcomes that serve as parameters to guide pedagogical interventions, while allowing for adaptation and customization of interventions to the sociocultural context.

The following general guidelines should serve as a springboard for more holistic educational reform across the Arab region:

Each country should develop a teacher education strategy. This strategy should be facilitated by—but not be wholly a creature of—the Ministry of Education. It should involve official bodies, teachers, the broader society, and university-based faculties of education.

To develop lifelong learners, teachers need to employ a metacognitive approach: students should be helped to understand how they learn, to define their learning goals, and to monitor their progress.

The objectives of learning and the skills students acquire through the learning experience need to combine a set of necessarily related dimensions that should be pursued simultaneously: learning to think critically and solve problems; learning for individual empowerment; learning to be effective in the workplace; and learning about values and relating to others. Experimentation with creative pedagogies needs to be encouraged.

To improve quality-related outcomes, students need to acquire a deeper understanding of school subjects. The knowledge should be couched in important disciplinary ideas, and it should be gained in a manner that facilitates retrieval and application. This requires studying a smaller number of topics in-depth rather than a larger number of customary topics in a shallow manner. Improving quality also requires teachers to cultivate creativity and innovation.

Teachings need to address the preconceptions that students bring to classrooms and deal with the heterogeneity in students' prior knowledge and abilities. In some cases, learning needs to be customized to motivate students and foster participation.

The curriculum, especially in higher grades, should be less rigid. As students transition from pupils to citizens, they need to be given more freedom to explore their interests and develop practical skills. Rigid curricula, older pedagogies, and constant testing undermine such a transition.

Vocational education requires greater attention and integration within the curriculum. Schools should foster, not smother, practical skills. And this should start from the early ages.

Technology is often seen as a discrete subject or a set of techniques to teach; it is also sometimes seen as a panacea for handling educational problems. Instead, newer information and communications technologies should be seen as complementary to older ones and as an integral part of the educational process at all levels.

Curriculum reforms should trigger changes in evaluations and assessments. Testing should serve education, not the other way around.

## **THE STATE: REINVENTING THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION**

At the center of educational systems in the Arab world stand ministries of education, hierarchical and sprawling institutions called upon to perform enormous missions. They stand alone, accountable to the top leadership. They need to be integrated into the entire society.

Ministries provide a critical service—just as critical as health and housing services—to the entire population. Even as their officials strive to cope with enormous challenges, ministries are often seen as authoritarian and insular structures. Given this conception of their role—and the enormous extent of the services they are called upon to provide—they can hardly be

anything else. But the result can be stultifying, with key constituencies alienated and vested interests ensconced in official procedures and positions that block attempts at reform. (See the Egypt case study for an examination of controversies sparked by an ambitious reform-minded minister of education.)

Indeed, while the word “reform” is widely embraced, it can still sometimes seem threatening. Comprehensive reform of curriculum and pedagogy, for example, should not aim to undermine existing systems or structures but rather help students explore positive values, engage constructively with those who do not share them, and participate as active citizens in those structures that govern social and political life. As explored above, this must be done in a manner consistent with how students actually learn.

***Teachers...must be integrated as partners in reform efforts.***

Even if this goal is unobjectionable in principle, embracing it can set off contentious debates. First, some pious members of the public suspect that students are being encouraged to question religious faith, with education sometimes becoming a battlefield between religious and secular forces. It should not be. When education gets dragged into such conflicts, the debate is actually more political than educational. After all, historically, religious education has always incorporated critical thinking and sought to teach students not just to recite truths but also to apply the core values and practices into their own lives. Pedagogy involving the critical study of texts, for instance, has been a standard educational technique in the religious field for over a millennium.

Second, adversarial relationships have sometimes developed between reformers and teachers (especially teacher unions), where the former see the latter as an obstacle and the latter perceive calls for reform as criticism or even as dissent and insubordination. For instance, in Jordan, several ministers have clashed over the years with the Jordanian Teachers’ Association. In Egypt, the teachers union has treated current reform efforts with some suspicion and has tangled with the current reform-minded minister (see the Egypt case study). Reform should instead be understood and pursued as an opportunity to form an educational vision, raise the prestige of the teaching profession, marry pedagogical theory to the practical experience of classroom teachers, and design a full set of professional development opportunities. In that sense, teachers—and any body representing them—must be integrated as partners in reform efforts.

Managing these pressures and demands requires a transformational shift. Ministries should reinvent themselves by moving away from being service providers toward being vision/standards setters and process facilitators, while maintaining their role as regulators. Specific reform efforts in recent years are worthy of broader regional study. (See the Egypt case study for a description of a ministry-led effort in Egypt, the Alzaghbi interview for the Saudi experience with a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches, and the Craissati

interview for a description of a society-wide reform process in post-uprising Tunisia.) International networks are being constructed to support and link various initiatives (for example, the Life Skills and Citizenship Education Initiative, which involves international organizations and nongovernmental organizations but influences some Arab ministries).

Instead of simply imposing curricula, writing textbooks, and testing students, ministries can lead societal dialogues about what kind of graduates schools should produce: What is the profile (or set of profiles) that the educational system is designed to foster? (See the Craissati interview for some steps taken in this direction through society-wide dialogue in Tunisia.) Answers to this question—and not a collection of textbooks—are the heart of a true curriculum.

This approach will change the operating model: rather than having the ministry position itself as a fortress of expertise and management, it would serve as the leader of a socially engaged process. Freed from the current emphasis on monitoring fidelity to specific curricular material, ministries can instead focus on setting general policies and articulating a vision, setting general standards, and facilitating their monitoring and implementation. The point is not to undermine ministries of education but to anchor them more fully within the state and the society so that education becomes the concern of all and ministries are integrated rather than insulated.

Even as ministries shift from simply delivering material to broadly facilitating curricula design, they must set standards (and regulate these). But this should be done as part of a process of societal dialogue.

This will require two major restructuring efforts:

**A rethink and redesign of the ministries' role within the state.** Ministries that are leaders rather than bastions of authority and providers of services would function differently within the state apparatus. Specifically, they would:

Provide support to those responsible for implementing innovative interventions. Instead of merely holding schools and teachers accountable, ministries could identify their emerging professional development needs. Rather than being an “inspection” that emphasizes deficits, evaluation and assessment could become the engine for inquiry, problem solving, and sustainable growth and innovativeness.

Reposition research and evaluation so that it would no longer solely be a ministry function but instead entrusted to specialists in independent commissions (for example, as has been attempted in Saudi Arabia [see the Alzaghbi interview]). Such a process can lead to identifying a series of benchmarks and performance indicators. Qualitative and quantitative assessment of these is not merely a technical task for ministries. While ministries set the vision and standards in consultation with various stakeholders, independent bodies should conduct part of the qualitative and quantitative assessments and report to senior political



authorities and the general public about the state of education. This will allow authorities and the general public to hold ministries accountable to the standards they have set with society's input.

Build strong links with other state entities so ministries of education are not controlling the educational system in a silo. Ministries of youth have networks of organizations (such as youth clubs) outside of the formal educational system that can help inform policy; ministries of social affairs can link schools to other governmental and communal structures; ministries of labor and economy can link schools to employers; and ministries of higher education and state universities oversee much teacher education and are vital partners in any reform efforts.

**The building of mechanisms for broader partnerships and community engagement.**

Past reform efforts have generally been pushed hard from the top—the effect has been to centralize more in an effort to force educational reform. And top officials often turn over quickly, leading to ephemeral reform. For instance, Jordan has had a regular succession of ministers—some with very bold visions, who did not stay in the ministry long enough to pursue any long-term agenda.

Another option has been not to reform the state system but to build large private alternatives (most ambitiously in Qatar).

Both approaches have brought mixed results at best. Local innovation and broad social engagement need some national and state involvement to counteract the risk that education will deepen rather than ameliorate inequalities. Disparities are currently increasing in some societies to the extent that a bifurcation is at risk of emerging: elite (often private) education for the few and an underfunded state sector for less fortunate nonelites.

A hybrid approach—one that maintains the state role in education but builds mechanisms for broader societal partnerships and engagement at all levels—will be most effective.

Schools can build cooperative education and vocational training with local organizations and enterprises; they can involve parent bodies and community groups; and they can pursue active pedagogies that move some school activities directly into the community (linking school projects with community organizations, local businesses, or municipal governments) so that education becomes more visible outside as well as inside school walls. And schools can draw on expertise within their own communities—currently, students are rarely asked to find, assess, and learn from experts.

At the national level, the private sector and civil society should be brought into dialogues about educational needs and vision, focusing on the curriculum very broadly defined (to include not only the material students must master but also what kind of adult citizens the society wishes to foster).



## **EGYPT CASE STUDY: THE POLITICS OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN EGYPT**

Egypt's educational system has been built to serve the needs of a vast and growing population in a poor country. Like most other state services there, it is starved for resources and has developed in an environment in which quality must be sacrificed for quantity. But in recent years, a host of reform initiatives have come from the ministry that do not depend on generous funding. Tariq Shawqi, the current minister of education, had spoken forcefully and bluntly about the need for drastic changes.

One of his primary initial targets has been the system of examinations on which Egypt's educational system rests. Periodic testing culminates in the general secondary school exam (thanawiyya 'amma) that tests students on a battery of subjects. Their score determines not only whether they pass or fail, but also what subjects they may study in the state university system. The examination (and earlier tests, such as those at the end of sixth grade) have legions of critics who charge that they are based on rote memorization, place enormous and inappropriate pressure on young students, and encourage students entering university to study the subjects they score high on, rather than those that match their interests and broad abilities. The minister has suggested stepping away from a memorization-based examination, which he holds responsible for distorting pedagogy and rewarding the wrong skills.

The stress on examinations has generated confusion and corruption as well. Fake and even real exams are circulated in advance. Teachers hire themselves out to give private lessons, for a fee, where they coach students for the test. This shifts education outside of state-supported classrooms into a hazy and ill-regulated market where families feel compelled to spend money to guarantee their children's success.

Besides targeting the examination system, the minister has also focused policies on integrating more technology into teaching methods. Ironically, this need is felt even in the subject of computer technology, where students are currently taught how to use a computer using printed textbooks and are unable to implement the lessons learned on the actual devices themselves. The transition to online textbooks is also perceived as a necessity to encourage investment in private and public access to the internet in remote areas.

An end to corruption and better testing and modernized instruction would seem at first glance to be uncontroversial. But the minister has sparked a series of controversies. Some leaders of the teachers union have complained that the press for reform is based

on a lack of appreciation for those currently working and interpreted the minister as treating teachers disrespectfully as the problem. Parents have eyed the reform process anxiously, since there is such enormous pressure on students to perform; any shift in the system can cause confusion. Access to online resources is hardly universal in Egypt, and some worry that schools serving rural areas or poorer students will fall victim to a digital divide.

Some reforms cross some material interests; for example, textbook printing is a major industry. Those who look at the possibility of significant savings are balanced by those who fear pulling the rug out from under state-supported printers. Public criticism of the minister's plans have been voiced by teachers, parents, and politicians in the press and on social media and in parliament. The deputy chairman of the parliament's Committee for Education and Scientific Research, Hani Abaza, has stated that in the short run, schools cannot function without textbooks—illustrating that if the general idea of reform is popular, each particular initiative risks a counterreaction.

Perhaps the main lesson of the Egyptian experience is that reform efforts must be pursued politically and not simply viewed as technical improvements to be imposed. A number of stakeholders must be coaxed along. Teachers, publishers, parents, and students are all deeply invested in the educational system and watch any changes very closely.

## THE SOCIETY: REFORM THROUGH ENGAGEMENT

Perhaps the biggest unacknowledged challenge for educational reform is that schools are asked to do so much in a world in which much of the learning happens before, after, and outside of school—in the home and the broader society. Or rather, what takes place within the classroom is deeply influenced by the overall social context in which schools operate. Educational reform cannot simply be a task given to existing schools as if they are isolated places but must instead be based on rethinking the role of teachers and schools as part of a broader social fabric of education.

Acknowledging this reality will help societies redefine what they ask schools and teachers to do and assist them rather than asking them to do it alone. Arab schools cannot—and should not—be separated from family and community but instead should actively engage them so that the various influences on student learning (formal and informal) are complementary.

Actually, the challenges posed by the impact of social context are acknowledged by those who encounter them daily. They are widely known at the grassroots level; most people

directly engaged in teaching students struggle constantly with the realities imposed by various economic, social, and family problems. But the challenges are rarely acknowledged at a policy level because educational systems tend to guard their expertise and autonomy, effectively treating the classroom as an island where teachers do their educational work. And

***Educational reform...must be based on rethinking the role of teachers and schools as part of a broader social fabric of education.***

solely as places that should leave their children with the ability to earn high salaries, obtain useful technical skills, and find rewarding careers and when senior officials think only in terms of producing graduates with marketable resumes—most students, parents, and officials are inevitably disappointed.

When education is instead anchored in a vision to prepare youth to be engaged citizens and committed members to the betterment of their local society and the improvement of the global human condition—and when everyone from parents to senior officials shares this vision—they can support a set of reforms that will convert the educational apparatus from one that is asked to school children to one that turns them into learners.

And it will encourage a far more holistic sense of what schools should be focusing on. With an emphasis solely on science education, marketable skills, and testing, pedagogy and curriculum are distorted to serve utilitarian ends. Science is taught not as a process but instead as a set of truths or techniques to be mastered. Humanities and social sciences—where the most critical citizenship skills are directly addressed—can fall by the wayside.

The specific reforms that this shift from schooling to learning engenders will likely vary from society to society. But it is possible to advance some suggestions that should find traction throughout the region:

Encourage and enable teachers to interact with communities—to bring students out of the classroom into community institutions and bring community institutions into the classrooms.

Encourage officials to consult widely on reforms—to view societies as partners rather than obstacles to overcome in the pursuit of positive change.

Encourage a holistic view of the entire curriculum (social sciences and humanities, as well as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) by involving communities in setting general goals and standards about the kinds of graduates schools should produce rather than

societies—from parents to senior decision-makers—reinforce the boundary between school and life by implicitly placing the entire education burden on teachers and schools.

When societies take a utilitarian view of education—when parents look to schools

focusing on the cultivation of specific skills needed for today's workplace. (See the Al-Khadra interview for an argument for the necessity of social science and humanities education.)

Integrate newer technologies into the classroom and orient teachers toward blended education, treating such innovations not as alternatives or supplements but as bridges to connect classroom learning to the broader world. Newer technologies can support faster communication, offer new testing tools, reduce printing needs, enable self-assessment and more flexibility, and provide greater access to data and information. Technology use should complement not replace traditional classroom approaches that integrate social, emotional, and artistic components. Team building, working as a group, solving problems using collective intelligence, thinking outside of set processes and protocols, and many other social aspects of learning still must take place in the classroom. (See the Hourani interview for an exploration of the ways technology can be integrated.)

Address issues of equity and access—but only after surveying what the real problems are. The obstacles are often different from what is assumed. For instance, access to the internet through desktops and laptops varies considerably by region and income level, but access through cell phones has actually been very widespread for some time, even in some rural communities. Integration of technology must thus run simply to stay in place—and this requires not only staying abreast of the technologies themselves but also paying attention to (rather than assuming) what students actually do and do not have available. Access to high-quality education in remote and rural areas is more often impeded by a lack of strong teachers who are willing to live in such areas than by limited access to technology. Greater use of e-classrooms may be one way (though of course not the only way) to address this disparity.

## **BUILDING A NEW EDUCATION VISION**

Arab societies collectively are failing to prepare coming generations for the challenges they will face. This is clearly the case in the economic realm, where distress has been growing about youth unemployment, lags in productivity, and stagnation rather than social mobility for graduates. But this is only part of the problem. It is not simply that educational systems are not producing the expected number of skilled workers, but they are not producing good learners or good citizens.

To that end, educational systems need to be redesigned—or rather converted from schooling to learning systems. Instead of focusing on the inculcation of material and skills defined by today's workplace, learning systems need to base teaching approaches on how students actually learn and what skills are needed for lifelong learners in an evolving world. Ministries of education need to reinvent themselves—transforming from controlling, authoritative, and isolated structures to vision setters that are anchored in the broader society and integrated with other state bodies. And rather than operating as separate institutions,

*Rising generations can be transformed from a looming threat in the eyes of their rulers to agents of a better future.*

schools need to become part of a learning network with close links to local, national, and even international communities.

It is not fair to hold educational systems fully to blame for all social problems. But neither can the host of social and political

problems in the region be used as an excuse for failing to address the poor quality of education. Much progress can be made even in the context of fiscal constraints and weaknesses in governance. Indeed, educational systems might help in producing a generation that can better deal with those difficulties. Rising generations can be transformed from a looming threat in the eyes of their rulers to agents of a better future.

## **HOW DOES ARAB EDUCATION MEASURE UP?**

### **Interview With El Houcine Haichour**

**What are the best metrics to understand how Arab educational systems are performing? According to those metrics, how is the Arab world performing?**

The most reliable metrics to measure the performance of the education systems in the Arab region are the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). There are no measures without critics, so it makes sense to look across several measures. These international assessments have become the standards that allow us to measure learning outcomes across participating countries. The tests do not measure everything that an educational system is about, including the promotion of citizenship and the development of moral ethics, leadership, grit, responsibility, and so on; but for the areas that they assess, the international tests have proven to be very solid metrics. And participation in these assessments is itself an indication of how open the system's leaders are to accountability.

In the latest iteration of PIRLS, which measures the literacy skills of fourth graders, many of the top-performing countries—notably Finland, Ireland, Russia, and Singapore—have significant numbers of students scoring at the advanced level; while in some Arab

countries, an alarming number of students could not reach even the basic level.<sup>i</sup> The Arab region cannot win the future if a large proportion of the students cannot perform elementary tasks.

The level of performance of the students from the Arab region in the PISA and TIMSS—which test the knowledge and skills of fifteen-year-old students and the math and science achievements of fourth, eighth, and twelfth graders, respectively—is no different. Interestingly, girls outperform boys in some of these tests. Defying stereotypes, according to the 2016 PIRLS, Saudi Arabia had the highest gender gap in the world in favor of girls.

Test results aside, the decision by some countries in the region—such as the UAE, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Algeria, Tunisia, Lebanon, Bahrain, and Oman—to participate in the international tests is a laudable one. It takes a lot of political courage to display to the world the level of capabilities of a nation’s students.

### **Is the problem a lack of resources?**

States vary in their generosity with education, with some countries in the region spending close to 25 percent of their national budgets on education and some much less. The discrepancy between public investment in education and the learning outcomes achieved by the students is perplexing.

In absolute terms, some education budgets seem very large; but when we analyze these budgets by line items, we see that the lion’s share of the budget goes to paying salaries of the teachers and other personnel. Little in the budget is left for investing in professional development, equipping teachers and students with modern technologies, building science labs, or improving the physical environment of the schools. Ideally, more resources should be allocated to capital investment. But a smarter solution may be more efficient use of the existing resources, at least in the short term. And teachers have to be at the center of that.

### **Can you go a bit further in this diagnosis? What do you think are the underlying reasons for the poor performance?**

Two reasons stand out as having a negative impact on the performance of the educational system in the region. The first of these reasons relates to the status of the teaching profession itself; while the second relates to overall governance of the educational system.

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i TIMSS and PIRLS, “Exhibit 1.1: Distribution of Reading Achievement,” IEA and Boston College, 2016, [http://timssandpirls.bc.edu/pirls2016/international-results/wp-content/uploads/structure/PIRLS/1.-student-achievement/1\\_1\\_pirls-achievement-results.pdf](http://timssandpirls.bc.edu/pirls2016/international-results/wp-content/uploads/structure/PIRLS/1.-student-achievement/1_1_pirls-achievement-results.pdf).

In high-performing countries, teaching is a highly valued profession, where high school graduates compete to enter the faculties of education, undergo a long and challenging preparation in both subject matter and in pedagogy, and receive intensive professional development and support in and out of school throughout their careers. In many Arab countries, the teaching profession is not a highly valued profession: pay-wise, socially, or professionally. As a result, the profession does not attract the best talent that the system needs.

With respect to governance, accountability for performance is weak at all levels of the system in many Arab countries. The region needs to devise smarter ways of holding not just teachers but also school and system leaderships accountable for student performance. Signs of change have begun to emerge across the region, however. Some countries have set up independent evaluation entities, reporting directly to the head of state to improve the accountability of the system. Notable examples of such organizations include the Education Evaluation Commission in Saudi Arabia and the National Evaluation Agency in Morocco.

## **CONSTRUCTIVE CITIZENSHIP AND SCHOOL-BASED REFORM**

### **Interview With Rima Karami-Akkary**

**You have been involved in a research and development project called TAMAM (consisting of the initials for “school-based reform” in Arabic, *Al-Tatwir al-Mustanad ila al-Madrasa*). Can you tell us about it?**

Based on research conducted in the TAMAM project, many Arab educators at all levels of the system agree that the profile of a graduate should revolve around constructive citizenship—and that to achieve this profile, a student should become an agent of change; a continuous and reflective learner; an innovative and critical thinker; and a promoter of ethical social responsibility. Developing these competencies starts with designing, at the school level, holistic learning experiences that target the development of the child’s cognitive, emotional, social, and moral capacity. The competencies should enable him/her not only to assume membership in their communities but also to lead the transformation to a more tolerant, equitable, and just society.

The above cannot be achieved under the existing Arab educational systems. It requires a learning ecosystem that supports transforming schools into sociocultural learning communities, with responsive structural arrangements that enable leadership development and sustainable transformational learning among all its members. What should characterize these schools is strong partnerships with parents and, just as much, with members of their broader local communities, including nongovernmental organizations and institutions of higher education. These partnerships need to facilitate the exercise of concerted efforts that focus on designing strategies that target the emerging needs of students, support them on their learning journey, and enhance the needed learning of organizations at all levels. In this learning ecosystem, learning becomes pivotal not only as an outcome but also as a process that all of society engages in.

### **How do you pursue such reform?**

Triggering action toward this ideal starts at the school level (and not just through massive curriculum reform). It begins with building school capacity for sustainable improvement through capitalizing on the existing potential and drive of members of the school community. The TAMAM project strategy includes inviting the school to form leadership teams—one each for educators, community members (with strong parent representation), and students. The student leadership team is conceived as an experiential learning experience on citizenship, as well as a forum that ensures that the voice of these students is integral to school-based initiatives for improvement.

The first step is the careful selection of members for each team, which involves looking for potential as much as for demonstrated abilities and dedication to change and social responsibility. Team members work collaboratively under a shared platform for professionals and based on shared concerns and aspirations. The second step consists of initiating a process of improvement that is based on a thorough needs assessment and consensus of what constitutes a pressing priority to be addressed. The focus always remains on the ultimate goals of enhancing learning and achieving the desired graduate profile.

Once the goals for improvement are selected, team members receive ongoing and responsive on-the-job professional development on inquiry, critical reflection, and collaborative evidence-based decisionmaking. They also learn the pedagogic skills needed to implement their innovative intervention; how to plan, monitor, and evaluate improvement initiatives; and how to navigate the existing systemic obstacles to change while implementing these initiatives. In addition, they learn how to evaluate the impact of their initiatives through critically examining the quality of their design and their effectiveness in achieving their goals, as well as testing for impact.



With their acquired leadership skills, team members will engage in proposing and demanding structural changes that will help institutionalize what has proven to be effective in their initiatives. By the end of a cycle (bringing one improvement to completion), the school will have increased its capacity for sustainable improvement through dispersing leadership rather than focusing all authority at the top; empowering teachers to be agents of change; building a process for continuous self-examination and renewal; and cultivating a leadership team that has experienced success and acquired and demonstrated the skills needed to be role models of constructive citizenship. Students who contributed to the project as part of a leadership team will have gained experience in generating change, and those who were still in the observer seat will have the chance to experience membership in these learning communities. This experience allows students to become concerned and engaged citizens within their school community, with the capacity and promise to become transformative leaders in their societies.

## **PEDAGOGY FOR CITIZENSHIP**

### **Interview With Maher Hashweh**

#### **What does research on pedagogy tell us?**

Over the last several decades, a new vision of teaching and learning has arisen that emphasizes developing project- and problem-based learning tasks and other student-centered and active learning methods; designing relevant, real-world learning activities; and using a mix of whole class teaching, collaborative small group work, and individual work or one-on-one tutoring. Moreover, discussion, argumentation, and student questioning have become valuable teaching methods. Finally, there is a need to capitalize on students' interest in mobile technologies and make the most of social media.

#### **How do teachers use this new pedagogy?**

This change in teaching and learning has redefined teachers' roles and necessitates changes in teacher knowledge, skills, and beliefs. Teachers must develop strong subject-matter knowledge and a repertoire of new teaching methods—many of which require the design of complex learning environments and delegation of authority by the teacher to the students—such as monitoring and controlling their behavior in small groups without the presence of the teacher. Radical changes need to be made in

pre-service teacher education programs. Innovative teacher education programs require considerable capacity building of schools of education in Arab universities. This mainly involves faculty development, either through recruiting new well-qualified faculty members or facilitating the professional development of existing faculty, especially by exposing them to recent global trends in education, developing their research abilities, and encouraging them (with adequate salaries to avoid the need for moonlighting and providing resources for research) to publish in international, refereed, prestigious journals.

The teaching profession needs to become more attractive so that the more academically able students enroll in teacher education programs.

### **What can educational systems do to prepare teachers for these new roles?**

Meaningful professional development programs need to be designed—programs that are grounded on the modern conceptualization of learning and teaching. These programs should cater to the needs of teachers, emphasize disciplinary knowledge, support teachers who wish to try out new approaches, and encourage collaboration among teachers. Establishing professional development schools—which emphasize collaboration between university faculty and teachers in order to facilitate pre-service teacher education, in-service teacher professional development, and field-based research—is one way of ameliorating both in-service and pre-service teacher education.

The new teaching approaches require empowering teachers, and this means affording them more trust and freedom in their work. School principals need to become educational leaders in their schools to facilitate this change. Additionally, the role of school and subject-matter supervisors needs to change from that of inspector to that of a facilitator of teacher learning and growth.

### **Can you give some examples of model programs?**

I am not aware of model programs that implement all of the above. At the teacher preparation program that we have at Birzeit University, we try to build a research-based program that focuses on developing student-teachers' Pedagogical Content Knowledge—that is, the knowledge associated with teaching specific topics within their discipline. This is an amalgam of subject-matter knowledge and pedagogy, among other things, and it is a product of both theoretical research-based knowledge and the wisdom of practice. However, the program is weak.

An example of a model teacher professional development (in-service) program is the Democracy Education: A Case-Based Approach to Teaching and Learning Democracy

project, which I led a few years ago. In contrast to traditional programs that usually involve teachers attending a workshop for a few days and then “applying” what they have learned on their own, this was a three-year project. I worked with a small group of teachers (about twelve) over two years to understand the new trends in pedagogy and to design five cases that can be used at the middle or secondary school levels to learn about democracy. Teaching these cases to students involved employing a problem-solving approach, project-based learning, and collaborative small group work.

During the third year, most teachers taught these case-based units. We met on a weekly basis to plan for teaching the coming week and to reflect on the teaching of the past week. Finally, teachers wrote cases that documented their experience in using the new approach.

This model is expensive and time consuming, but it leads to a more permanent change in teaching practice. It also contributed to writing a book about the approach and the publication of three articles in peer-reviewed international journals. Not all professional development programs need to follow this example, but the model emphasizes the need for teachers to receive training that is subject-matter-based, allows them to receive support and feedback when trying to implement new ideas, and enables them to work collaboratively to research their practice.

## **REFORMING SAUDI EDUCATION**

### **Interview With Mohammed Alzaghbi**

#### **How is education reform pursued in Saudi Arabia?**

The Ministry of Education (MOE) in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has implemented innovative initiatives on both a small and a large scale. Whether reform initiatives are proposed centrally or at a local level, challenges are encountered—particularly related to defining innovation, identifying priorities, and assessing impact. When a reform is approved in the pilot phase, there are further challenges as it is scaled up to a roll-out phase.

#### **What kind of reform is possible from the top?**

Personal high-level support, along with being seen to meet the needs of the ministry’s overall strategy, can have an influence on the success and life-cycle of an initiative. This

can result in some initiatives being quite short-lived. Centralized interventions tend to receive ongoing support, as long as personal sponsors and supporters remain constant in their official positions on issues.

Having said this, the decision to continually finance approved and supported initiatives rests with government bodies outside of the MOE. These bodies usually prefer visible and concrete projects that are easy to monitor and ensure completion. Long-term and difficult-to-measure initiatives struggle to sustain their funding.

Given the centralized running of 30,000 schools in the KSA, it is hard to ensure and monitor the fidelity of implementation.

### **What about reform from below?**

Districts and schools vary in maintaining the rationale and essence of top-down interventions. This may lead to superficial implementation as well as duplication with other similar initiatives at the district level. Moreover, if the school has an ambitious, active principal, the school may become what some educational reformers call the “Christmas tree school”—where many incoherent and temporary initiatives are implemented in what could be described as a cosmetic approach. Such initiatives rarely meet the needs of the MOE strategy, and the amount of time allocated for their execution does not result in genuine implementation.

Strict centralization, combined with temporary and partial commitment, has perhaps led districts and schools to lose faith in genuine, committed, and supported reform. There has also been a boom in the opening of private schools due to their relative autonomy and some parents’ financial ability to enroll their children. Universities admit more students from private schools than public schools. Private schools maintain a focus on providing a safe environment and ensuring academic achievement. These visible measures have contributed to the popularity of private schools and have encouraged the MOE to adopt a charter school model that assumes a direct correlation between quality and autonomy, risking the abandonment of the public sector.

Currently, the country is moving toward a reform vision that attempts to marry top-down and bottom-up initiatives.

### **Part of the reforms involve moving assessment out of the ministry. Can you tell us about that experiment?**

The ministry is trying to put assessment in the hands of teachers to ensure that changes do happen at the classroom level. The aim is for teachers to do continuous formative

assessments that accord with students' various learning starting points. Recently, as part of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, the MOE initiated a competency-based education approach that relies on teachers' efforts to understand students' individual learning progression alongside typical collective assessments.

In conjunction with this move away from the MOE conducting summative assessments, an external body that reports to the king has been established to conduct overall evaluations of the educational system. Although in its early stages, the body is seen as providing a more credible independent evaluation, as well as enabling the MOE to focus on improving learning, teaching, and leadership.

**You are involved in a private company that is partnering with the educational sector. What is the idea behind it?**

For decades, the MOE has been responsible for providing all services linked to education—whether it be building schools, providing transportation, developing and implementing technology infrastructure, developing and revising textbooks, and so on. And all these services have been centrally and internally budgeted, managed, implemented, and monitored. With a large number of schools (approximately 30,000), you struggle to do all of this along with other duties like planning, policymaking, and quality control. Education is a consuming and challenging daily business that can bury you and perhaps inhibit you from reflecting on your progress or trying out new initiatives. To overcome this, some of these services—like construction, transportation, technology infrastructure and learning systems, and textbook development—have been transferred to newly established government-owned companies linked to one holding company chaired by the education minister. Key stakeholders are also represented on the company's board. The MOE sets the direction for all the companies, monitors quality, and approves deliverables. It is still a learning curve for all, but with less bureaucratic administration involved, service delivery appears to be faster. In terms of quality, more time is needed for the envisaged improvements to be judged and measured.

## **A TUNISIAN MODEL?**

### **Interview With Dina Craissati**

#### **Tunisia's revolution was seen as an uprising led by excluded youth. How has the post-revolutionary society handled education?**

The decades following Tunisia's independence in 1956 and the formulation of the education reform law of 1958 saw substantial investments and strides in the education sector, including the attainment of universal primary education, the development of a new modern curriculum focusing on citizenship, the reduction of inequities, and the promotion of human resources. However, the 2011 Tunisian Revolution highlighted major shortcomings, which are also characteristic of other Arab countries' educational systems: high school dropout rates, especially among the poor; deteriorating quality of education; weak competency acquisition, rising unemployment, and alarming radicalization among youth; feeble teacher training systems; and excessive centralization and ineffective governance.

At the onset of the 2011 revolution, the transitional government quickly prioritized the reform of the educational system and underlined the importance of two approaches: the reform process had to be participatory (to include all stakeholders) and it had to be strategic (to address the fundamental challenges related to equity, quality, and governance).

#### **Was the reform process implemented as envisaged?**

In March 2012, a large conference was held on the methodology of the education reform and was followed by consultations—from the central to local level—with teachers, counselors, school directors, inspectors, administrators, students and parents, unions, political parties, employers, and civil society organizations.<sup>ii</sup> Technical committees analyzed and summarized the content of these consultations, and the summary then became the subject of a broad national dialogue launched in January 2015 following the legislative and presidential elections, which marked the transition phase of the revolution. The dialogue lasted eight months and was led by the Ministry of Education, the Tunisian General Labor Union, and the Arab Institute for Human Rights (representing civil society). It also brought several concerned ministries together. The results were compiled in a national report, which, in turn, guided the development of an education white paper and the Strategic Plan for the Education Sector 2016–2020.

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ii Conférence nationale sur la 'Méthodologie pour la réforme du système éducatif,' Tunis, March 2012.

The education five-year plan constitutes a comprehensive reform package that aims, among other things, to universalize pre-primary education, improve teacher training and quality education, enhance vocational education to align with labor market needs, and strengthen governance and program implementation and evaluation. A technical commission was established within the Ministry of Education to lead major curriculum reform. Here, too, the process was exemplary because of two major aspects. First, it included the active contribution of teachers, inspectors, and other relevant stakeholders and experts, and it was accompanied by capacity development workshops on curriculum design and pedagogical approaches. Second, it ensured the mainstreaming of life skills and citizenship education into curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular learning channels, enabling linkages between the three. It also underlined the importance of life skills acquisition across the various learning cycles starting from the early ages up to post-basic education, encouraging the adoption of interdisciplinary approaches, the applicability of life skills to all fields of knowledge, and the alignment of assessment methods. Most important, it featured life skills acquisition as not only key for improving learning achievements but also for enhancing employability and promoting citizenship, human rights, empowerment, equity, and inclusion.

### **What can other societies learn from this experience?**

While the educational system and curriculum reforms are still in progress, key lessons can be drawn from the Tunisian experience. First, while education reform needs to be based on sound evidence, technical knowledge, expertise, and the attainment of results, the active participation of all relevant stakeholders in defining the essence and objectives of the reform is key to ensure buy-in and consensus; social, political, and financial support; and sustainability. Second, the involvement of teachers, specifically in the curriculum reform, is essential to enable them to implement the necessary changes that need to occur in the classroom and in the school. Third, interministerial collaboration in the education reform ensures that the education sector is in sync with and enhanced by the socioeconomic sectors, such as youth, labor, and social affairs. And finally, for education to fulfill its mission, it needs to be based on human rights and citizenship values just as much as the acquisition of knowledge and the preparation of students for work and life.

## **HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES IN JORDAN**

### **Interview With Wafa Al-Khadra**

#### **How are the humanities and social sciences treated in Jordan?**

They simply are not given the importance they deserve. The problem is, essentially, threefold. The first, and most salient, dimension of the problem has to do with the system's bias toward the sciences and prejudice against the humanities. By the time a student gets to secondary school, students with higher grades (especially in scientific subjects) are channeled to the "scientific" stream; others go to the "literary" (in other words, humanities) stream. Students, parents, and the broader society are told, in effect, that the literary stream is less important or prestigious.

Second, those students in the scientific stream are given fewer courses in humanities and social sciences, again delivering the message that they are less important and science is more serious.

Third, several subjects in the humanities and social sciences are totally absent from the school syllabus. Subjects like philosophy, world history, and literary criticism were dropped in the late 1970s due to internal politics within the Ministry of Education. Subjects like music and art are almost entirely absent now.

Officials have been reiterating the fallacious notion that the country's development depends on the scientific disciplines—that the needs of the labor market are better met by scientific subjects. They say, "What do we need history, philosophy, and Arabic literature for?"

#### **Is this distinction between humanities and the sciences accurate?**

No. It ignores what the humanities and social sciences can do for students that other subjects cannot do—at least to the same degree or in the same ways. Essential life skills—such as critical thinking, critical analysis, free association, and communication—are overlooked based on the perceived needs of the workplace.

But stating this even represents a misunderstanding of the workplace. Several studies show that many chief executive officers internationally, including of scientific companies, are graduates of the humanities, where they have focused on the arts of communication, human interaction, and social and life skills. Many of the so-called twenty-first century skills (for the labor market and otherwise) are best served by a humanities syllabus.



And a humanities syllabus endows students with many other attributes and skills, including open-mindedness, flexibility of thinking, broad-mindedness, and innovativeness. In addition, the humanities play an important role in enabling students to empathize with others and deal with them in humane ways.

For these reasons and others, there is a need to reverse this culture of prejudice against the humanities and social sciences at Jordanian schools and to give them the attention they deserve.

## **TECHNOLOGY AND EDUCATION REFORM**

### **Interview With Sami Hourani**

#### **How can newer information and communication technologies be harnessed by educational systems in the Arab world?**

When I talk about information and communication technologies (ICT) and their connection with the educational system, I refer to my experience with For9a (Forsa, *فصرف*), an online platform for educational resources. When drafting a youth strategy to support the project, I looked at the extent to which technology and the internet are infiltrating rural areas. I discovered that penetration is not an issue. During youth consultations, I asked the participants to raise their hands if they have a smartphone. And everyone put their hand up. Syria, Yemen, Egypt, and Morocco—hardly the wealthiest places in the region—are some of the countries with the highest number of visits to the website (For9a).

The internet is already present in the classroom. We used to think of this as a question of equity, and it is when you are talking about tablets, desktops, and laptops. But if you look at phones, things have changed even within the past few years. The internet can be a way of reaching outlying areas; it need not exclude them. About 70 to 80 percent of For9a visitors used to access the website from desktops and PCs. Now, it's the opposite; 70 to 80 percent are accessing it from smartphones, followed by desktops and PCs (20 percent) and tablets (10 percent). Especially for informal purposes, we need to invest in smartphones in order to reach the population.

Some educators were worried that any kind of emphasis on ICT would distract from the traditional classroom environment, and it is often seen as an alternative. But others

were much more enthusiastic about it, believing that these technologies could be integrated with, rather than replace, traditional education approaches.

**Are such technologies seen as providing an alternative to a traditional classroom environment? Or are they an appropriate part of such an environment?**

I am often shocked when youth between twelve and eighteen years old tell me that they are challenging their teachers in the classroom about using and integrating technologies. The youth say that they use Google often to research topics provided to them by their teachers. This is a new and emerging phenomenon.

So the technologies are there. They are in the classroom. This introduces as a new stress for teachers, and it can be frustrating for them. Some teachers may not want to go the extra mile to integrate technology, provide better access to information, and ease teacher-student relations.

**One of the reasons that teachers might be uncomfortable with the integration of technology is that students may get ahead of them and somewhat drive the situation. So, how do we equip teachers in this new environment?**

To solve the problem fully, my honest and realistic answer is to wait for a new generation of teachers to emerge and to start investing in them. So, instead of equipping the current 80,000 teachers in Jordan,<sup>iii</sup> you start with the newcomers. For example, for every new teacher you hired after 2015, you start integrating technology into their teaching methods.

At least in Jordan, the percentage of young teachers is quite high—at 40 percent.<sup>iv</sup> These teachers are probably going to be receptive to these new technologies and training.

But we have a broader issue we need to address. Right now, I believe we are lacking a vision for what we are expecting from and for students. This also affects the way we evaluate courses. We cannot have the question of technology divert us from the question of

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iii Wizarat al-Tarbiyya wa-l-Ta`lim, Al-Mamlaka al-Urduniyya Al-Hashimiyya, [The Ministry of Education of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan] "Taqrir al-Ihssa'i li-l-`Am al-Dirasi 2016/2017 [Statistical Report for the 2016/2017 Academic Year], [http://www.moe.gov.jo/sites/default/files/ltqryr\\_lh-syy2016-2017\\_1.pdf](http://www.moe.gov.jo/sites/default/files/ltqryr_lh-syy2016-2017_1.pdf).

iv Nadim Zaqqqa, *Economic Development and Export of Human Capital. A Contradiction? The Impact of Human Capital Migration on the Economy of Sending Countries; A Case Study of Jordan* (Kassel, Germany: Kassel University Press, 2006).

what the vision and purpose of education are. To simply include technology, or automate the teaching process, is not enough or beneficial. The whole evolution of the processes in terms of integrating technology is not just about making things happen online.

Technology is revolutionizing education when it comes to expected educational outcomes and evaluation. It is challenging the human brain to get to another level of problem solving, analysis, and art and social skills. Decisionmaking around educational outcomes and evaluation measures should take that into consideration.

I think reform must be about changing the curricula and also integrating technology in a way that leads to new education outcomes—that is crucial.

# REFUGEE CRISES IN THE ARAB WORLD

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## INTRODUCTION

Conflict has become a hallmark of the contemporary Middle East, forcing millions of individuals from their homes. Of the 60 million displaced people worldwide, close to 40 percent originate from the Arab region, mainly Syria and Palestine.<sup>90</sup> Globally, the scale of the crisis has highlighted the deficiencies of international covenants for addressing the political and humanitarian ramifications of mass population movements. Regionally, it has placed frontline countries under considerable duress as they struggle to care for vulnerable and destitute populations. For the refugees, the crisis has resulted in a systematic decline in their rights, the quality of their lives, and in the educational standards and the future prospects of their children.

Broadly speaking, the dramatic growth in refugee population in the Arab region has fanned preexisting existential fears in host countries. In Lebanon and Jordan, governments in these two frontline countries have been left grappling with a mass influx of Syrian refugees at a time of diminished resources and depleted capacities. In the absence of regional frameworks to address this crisis, and amid fears of prolonged displacement, most countries in the region have responded with a nonintegration paradigm that seeks to return refugees to their countries of origin. This has meant policies that limit the access refugees have to services and undercut the rights accorded to them internationally. Despite being at the forefront of the crisis, municipalities in Lebanon and Jordan have also lacked the necessary support

from central governments to meet the needs of Syrian refugees. The paucity of clear guidelines defining the scope of municipal authorities resulted in varied local responses shaped by municipal councils' political affiliations and the localities' sociopolitical specificities.

Meanwhile, because of security concerns, countries have sought to limit refugee flows. Previously open borders have been placed under strict control or closed altogether, severely restricting the cross-border flow of people and goods. The emergence of the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Iraq and Syria resulted in a collapse of border management between the two countries. However, these closures and restrictions have not prevented the informal flow of refugees but rather have fueled human smuggling networks across borders.<sup>91</sup>

To respond to this crisis, this chapter underlines three clusters of policy recommendations. While the analysis and these recommendations are focused on the Syrian context, which has generated the most refugees, the policy proposals have a broader applicability.

## **International and Regional Frameworks for Burden and Responsibility Sharing**

International instruments for managing the refugee crisis fall short of current challenges, including protecting vulnerable populations and managing the impact on frontline countries. A transformative vision is needed, backed by a sustained political and financial global

*A transformative vision is needed... to protect people from the vagaries of their own governments and to ensure dignified lives.*

commitment, to protect people from the vagaries of their own governments and to ensure dignified lives for those escaping the horrors of conflict. This requires international systems of solidarity and clear principles for burden sharing, far beyond what has been the case thus far. Such principles

would include commitments from governments to support refugees in keeping with their capacities. They would also include a clear regional framework of cooperation that allows refugees free movement and access to employment and services throughout the region. A precedent for such a framework already exists in the 1965 Casablanca Protocol, which was meant to address Palestinian refugee rights.

## **National Reallocation of Power and Resources**

National governments also have a role to play in dealing with the fallout from this crisis. Addressing the burdens placed on them while supporting the fundamental rights of vulnerable—often at risk—populations requires a transformative vision and willingness to undertake the necessary change. For countries hosting large numbers of refugees, this is a difficult but not insurmountable task. Rethinking governance structures to address long-standing bottlenecks, devolve decisionmaking to the local authorities, and better institutional coordination at all levels are central to this process.

## Safeguarding Refugee Rights

Finally, protecting the right of refugees to return to their homes should be a cornerstone of any discussion about a postconflict settlement. Empowering refugees with knowledge of their rights and with how to engage meaningfully in a postconflict Syria is central to a sustainable peace in Syria and the region. In the interim, the preservation of refugee status under specific conditions, as well as guarantees for the freedom of movement and labor rights, should also be a cornerstone for any durable solution.

## INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR BURDEN AND RESPONSIBILITY SHARING

Amid vicious and increasingly intractable conflicts, individuals and entire communities have fled their homes in Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. Most of those seeking refuge come from Syria. Around 5.6 million have been forced across the border into Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey while another 6.6 million have been displaced within Syria.<sup>92</sup> Many reside either in makeshift refugee camps or in other people's homes. Millions have risked their lives on treacherous journeys to Europe while hundreds of thousands have migrated to member countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), seeking education or employment.

They are not alone. In the last three decades, Iraqis have also witnessed massive displacement. Close to 4.4 million fled their homes in the first and second Gulf wars in 1990 and 2003 and close to 3.4 million individuals were forced to leave following the emergence of the Islamic State in 2014.<sup>93</sup> Today, almost 2 million remain displaced within the country, while tens of thousands more are in Syria and Jordan. In Yemen and Libya, a similar story has unfolded, although displacement has remained, for the most part, within national borders. Meanwhile, more than 2.4 million Sudanese have fled into neighboring countries, mainly Uganda.<sup>94</sup>

These mass population movements across national borders represent the fourth and most widespread wave of violent displacement that the region has faced since the end of World War I. These movements follow Armenians who escaped massacres in Turkey 1916–1918,<sup>95</sup> 1.2 million Palestinians forced out of their homes in 1948 and 1967.<sup>96</sup>

New global and regional instruments are needed to manage the fallout from this refugee crisis. The current system is unable to address the significant challenges posed by the sheer scale and expanse of conflict in the Middle East. The 1951 Refugee Convention and its related 1967 protocol, the main international instruments for safeguarding refugee rights and guaranteeing the principle of non-refoulement,<sup>97</sup> were designed to respond to challenges faced by post–World War II refugees in Europe and the USSR. Then, around 11 million non-Germans sought refuge in areas under Allied control, while another 13 million

Germans were expelled from the USSR, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. Responsibility for caring for refugees was implicitly assumed to be global, but no binding mechanisms were included.

Consequently, the absence of a global burden and responsibility sharing left frontline countries like Lebanon and Jordan with a disproportionate share of caring for the largest number of refugees. The nonbinding character of international instruments for refugee protection, and the lack of enforcement mechanisms to guarantee refugee rights, left vulnerable refugees in increasingly precarious conditions.

Regional instruments for addressing the crisis are also lacking. Only nine out of the twenty-two member states of the Arab League have signed the Refugee Convention and its related protocol, but none have actually ratified it (see the table in the appendix).<sup>98</sup> A positive step came in 1965 with the adoption of the Casablanca Protocol for the Treatment of Palestinians in Arab States by the Council of Foreign Ministers of Member States of the Arab League. This protocol advocates for the right to employment for Palestinian refugees in host countries, as well as the right to obtain travel documents and to travel between Arab states, in accordance with standard visa and entry requirements for other Arab nationals.<sup>99</sup> However, most of the rights accorded by this agreement have not been upheld by the different countries, particularly the rights to employment and freedom of movement.

***All Arab countries have adopted a nonintegrative policy approach that...denies [refugees] refugee status and basic rights.***

In this broader context, all Arab countries have adopted a nonintegrative policy approach that considers refugees as temporary, unwanted guests; it denies them refugee status and basic rights and considers them to be both a burden and potential

threat to the security and integrity of the nation. Diverse policies in different countries are for the most part driven by economic, political, security, demographic, and cultural considerations. While GCC member governments are concerned mainly with maintaining their current systems of governance and wealth distribution, countries of the Levant are worried primarily about the prospective challenge posed by incoming refugees to the political balance between different sectarian and ethnic communities as well as with the economic burden of caring for large numbers of newcomers to their countries at a time of depleted resources.

While GCC countries are listed among the top aid contributors to humanitarian operations dealing with the consequences of the Syrian conflict, they have been the most resistant to granting refugee status to individuals fleeing conflicts in the region. This position is consistent with the protectionist naturalization laws of these countries. In 2015, Saudi Arabia contributed \$88.8 million, Kuwait \$313.6 million, and the United Arab Emirates \$71.9 million to humanitarian operations related to the Syrian crisis, including care for refu-

gees.<sup>100</sup> And even though several GCC countries argue that they have hosted thousands of Syrian migrant workers and students since 2011, none have agreed to grant refugee status to Syrians escaping conflict.<sup>101</sup> Saudi Arabia, for example, indicated that it had authorized entry permits for 2.5 million Syrians since 2011, but scholars have noted these numbers are unsupported by official data, estimating that the actual number is closer to 420,000.<sup>102</sup>

In the Levant, Lebanon and Jordan, which share borders with Iraq, Palestine, and Syria, are hosting the highest number of refugees per capita worldwide.<sup>103</sup> Both countries have a long history of taking in refugees, including successive waves of Armenians, Palestinians, and Iraqis. In both countries, refugee camps for Palestinians are still in place more than seventy years after they were established as temporary shelters for fleeing populations. Yet neither country has signed the Refugee Convention or protocol.<sup>104</sup> While Armenians were eventually integrated into the countries they fled to, settling mainly in Lebanon and Syria, only Jordan granted Palestinians full citizenship rights. More than half of Jordanians today are of Palestinian origin.<sup>105</sup> Yet thousands, mainly from Gaza, have not been naturalized and continue to live in deplorable conditions, such as in the Jerash camp, which hosts 30,000 refugees,<sup>106</sup> while others have more recently had their nationality arbitrarily revoked by Jordanian authorities.<sup>107</sup> Lebanon has not integrated Palestinian refugees, and 174,000 currently live in the country's twelve refugee camps,<sup>108</sup> with restricted mobility and limited access to employment, education, and health services.<sup>109</sup> This situation is likely to worsen as international funding and aid through the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) is cut.<sup>110</sup> As for Palestinian refugees in Syria, they were forced out in the past two years, as the Yarmouk camp, their primary area of settlement, was besieged by Syrian government forces.<sup>111</sup>

Both countries are currently shouldering a disproportionate share of caring for the largest number of refugees. Lebanon's resident population expanded from 4.4 million to more than 5.9 million in the space of two years as a result of the refugee flow, placing a tremendous strain on government institutions, local communities, and national infrastructure such as water, electricity, schools, and health facilities.<sup>112</sup> In Jordan, a similar story unfolded as the country's population increased by nearly 87 percent from 2005 to 2015, the majority of whom are non-Jordanians, namely Iraqis and then Syrians fleeing conflicts in their countries.<sup>113</sup> The two countries hold the highest and second-highest number of refugees per capita worldwide; Lebanon hosts 164 refugees per 1,000 inhabitants whereas Jordan hosts 71 refugees per 1,000 inhabitants.<sup>114</sup>

This rapid increase in the population base also triggered a significant decline in access to services, aggravated preexisting socioeconomic and environmental pressures (such as scarce water resources), and led to increased urbanization. For example, today nearly half of non-Jordanians reside in Amman, significantly expanding pockets of urban poverty and further worsening the state of urban infrastructure and the ability of the government to provide requisite services.<sup>115</sup>



In response to the crisis, both frontline countries have also adopted similarly restrictive policies toward Syrian refugees, namely because of the significant financial burden of caring for millions of destitute individuals as well as serious concerns with the changing demographic balance. While East Bank Jordanians fear being outnumbered, the Lebanese are worried about the political ramifications if the country's sectarian demographic balance is disrupted.<sup>116</sup>

Both governments have imposed significant restrictions on obtaining and renewing residency permits. Yet, refugee access to basic services such as education, health, employment, and justice is often limited to those who are registered or have legal documents.<sup>117</sup> These restrictions render refugees highly dependent on international aid.

## Policy Recommendations

### Make the Global Compact a Binding Instrument

To address these shortcomings, members of the United Nations General Assembly should consider making the 2018 global compact for a Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) a binding instrument with credible enforcement and implementation mechanisms.<sup>118</sup> This global compact, issued in response to the current refugee crisis, attempts to mitigate its impact particularly for frontline countries through more equitable burden and responsibility sharing.<sup>119</sup>

Given the complexity of today's conflicts and the difficulties of arriving and implementing plausible political solutions, the CRRF presents an opportunity for countries in the region to push for long-term, multiyear support that goes beyond humanitarian relief to include economic and infrastructure investments.<sup>120</sup> Such multiyear commitments would take place through a ministerial-level Global Refugee Forum that would be held every four years. Lebanon's foreign ministry has already expressed its interest in this aspect of the global compact. Jordan has also demonstrated interest in developing international burden-sharing tools, such as the 2016 Jordan compact adopted in partnership with the EU that seeks to open up employment opportunities for Syrian refugees in exchange of easing exports to Europe and development projects.<sup>121</sup> Even though the Jordan compact did not meet its target of 200,000 work permits—only 37,000 Syrians had reportedly obtained these permits in 2017,<sup>122</sup> while only seven companies have been allowed to export so far<sup>123</sup>—it still represents how this might work. Improving on this model could be both easy and effective.

The CRRF could allow the Arab region to turn the refugee crisis into an opportunity. By seeking to provide solutions in support of host countries, enhancing the self-reliance of refugees, and promoting their safe and dignified return to their home countries while expanding access to resettlement in third countries, the CRRF's aims are compatible with the requests of host countries.<sup>124</sup> Burden-sharing mechanisms included in the compact could

potentially leave a positive impact on states themselves by enhancing their capacity in service provision, improving infrastructure, and boosting economic growth.

### Improve Subregional Cooperation

Intergovernmental responses at the subregional level are an essential tool that countries in the region should use to mitigate the crisis. To that end, the CRRF also supports the establishment of mechanisms at the regional and subregional levels for addressing the refugee challenge; one that would allow more proactive coordination between Jordan, Lebanon, and also Turkey on policy options. Such coordination could include joint needs assessments and collective lobbying for long-term international commitments to humanitarian funding and for sustainable solutions to the crisis.

Global examples suggest that regional protocols and conventions have been used successfully by African as well as Latin American countries to address similar challenges. The Kampala Convention that was adopted by the African Union in 2012 was a major milestone for the protection of refugees and internally displaced persons in Africa, defining the responsibility of states in their protection and strongly condemning arbitrary displacement.<sup>125</sup> Similarly, the Cartagena Declaration, adopted by a number of Latin American countries, reasserted the principle of the 1951 convention but adapted it to endemic regional challenges by extending the definition of refugees to include individuals fleeing gang-related violence.<sup>126</sup>

### Develop a Multistakeholder Platform

The scale of the refugee crisis and the depth of its impact in the short, medium, and long terms on peace and prosperity in the Middle East requires the involvement of all sectors of society in the development of integrated and multifaceted refugee response plans. This includes international organizations, civil society organizations, municipal councils, the media, and the private sector.

An integrated plan may also minimize the duplication of initiatives among various organizations. Such plans would consider the fallout of the crisis on different fronts, such as access to education for refugees and to employment opportunities, the capacity-building needs at the national or local level for government personnel dealing with refugees, and the negative public rhetoric around refugees that only serves to undermine social cohesion. For example, collaborative efforts between media outlets and research centers could counter misinformation campaigns over the actual number of refugees or their impact on the labor market or on service-oriented sectors.<sup>127</sup> Additionally, cooperation between international and local nongovernmental organizations (INGOs and NGOs) can help build the capacities of municipal personnel at the forefront of the crisis and, in the process, contribute to improved service delivery efforts. Private sector companies can also play a more proactive role in identifying employment opportunities best suited for refugees, reducing their dependence on government and NGO aid.<sup>128</sup>

## Promote Long-Term Engagement for Development and Labor Inclusion

The international community should commit support that goes beyond current humanitarian relief to include development aid for host countries to rehabilitate and expand infrastructure networks and boost their economies. This aid should be accompanied by significant commitments from host countries to empower refugees economically by giving them access to the labor market and improving their living conditions. In turn, this would enable refugees to contribute positively to local communities and the economy.

## NATIONAL REALLOCATION OF POWER AND RESOURCES

Municipalities' approaches to the refugee crisis have been molded by local politics as well as by the policies of central governments. The nonintegrative and security-driven approach toward refugees adopted by the central governments of Jordan and Lebanon left municipalities at the forefront of dealing with the refugee influx. However, it also opened the door, particularly in Lebanon, for local authorities to take on new roles, notably in security, and to use international donor support to build their own capacities and financial standing. This created considerable variations in locally generated measures to address refugee needs.

### *Incentives should be provided to municipalities hosting larger numbers of refugees.*

In both countries, local responses to the refugee influx were shaped by several factors.<sup>129</sup> The crisis aggravated long-term structural governance challenges, including a highly centralized decisionmaking

process as well as limited access to public funding for municipalities.<sup>130</sup> In Jordan, for example, even the most minor decisions and expenditures require a signature from the relevant ministries, and dismissing a municipal employee on a permanent contract requires the prime minister's approval. This is aggravated by the fact that the central government distributes funds to municipalities on the basis of their tax revenue (in Jordan) or registered population (in Lebanon) rather than on the size of the resident population or its development needs. This ultimately means that most funding goes to richer municipalities.<sup>131</sup> Meanwhile, the jurisdiction of municipalities, over development and security issues, are ambiguous at best, especially in Lebanon. For example, it was unclear to municipalities how far their responsibilities extended toward Syrian individuals who were violating the Directorate of General Security's residency conditions.<sup>132</sup>

These long-standing structural problems were further intensified in Lebanon by its recent political paralysis, epitomized by an inability to elect a president for more than two years (2014 to 2016). This meant that no clear, centrally led refugee policy was put in place, especially early in the crisis.<sup>133</sup> While many municipalities restricted the movement of refugees through evening curfews, others provided them with work opportunities. And as some municipalities expelled refugees sponsored by individuals who did not reside within their ad-

ministrative boundaries, others solicited international funding by adopting measures hospitable to refugees. Those that restricted the movement of refugees relied on circulars issued by the security cell established by the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities.<sup>134</sup> So while the municipality of Kfar-Rimman in southern Lebanon applied restrictive measures, such as denying refugees access to public places and demanding the departure of Syrian refugees whose sponsor was not from the township, other municipalities such as that of Zghorta took a more cautious approach by refusing to impose curfews or to collect residency fees not mandated by law from refugees.<sup>135</sup>

In contrast, Jordan's policies with regards to Syrian refugees were articulated in a government-led Jordan Refugee Response Plan and implemented by all relevant institutions. This meant that the response of Jordanian municipalities was somewhat more systematic.<sup>136</sup> For instance, a specific directorate was created under the Ministry of Interior—known as the Syrian Refugees Affairs Directorate—to coordinate refugee issues in the country.<sup>137</sup> Unlike Lebanon, the movement of Syrian refugees lacking valid identification documents is handled by the police rather than municipalities.<sup>138</sup>

Region-specific considerations as well as tribal or sectarian concerns, including the personality of the mayor, also played a role in defining local responses. For instance, the municipality of Mafraq has been more open toward refugees than other areas in Jordan, partially because of its stronger kinship ties with Syria's Daraa. In Lebanon, Sunni-dominated municipalities are the least strict compared to Shia- and Christian-dominated municipalities when it comes to implementing curfews, in part because a majority of Syrian refugees are Sunni.<sup>139</sup> This variation in municipal responses has meant that the impact of refugees at the municipal level has not been uniform. Refugees were more likely to settle in localities that were friendlier and more hospitable to them, especially when confronted with restrictive measures by the central government. As a result, these localities have faced more pressure on their infrastructure including waste disposal and water networks as well as social service delivery, while their financial resources remain limited compared to other less-welcoming municipalities.

The attitude of INGOs, shaped in part by central government frameworks for cooperation, also impacted municipal governance. While the crisis increased municipal access to financial resources and capacity-building opportunities from international nongovernmental organizations, the centralization of decisionmaking within specific ministries undermined their role in identifying policies based on local needs.<sup>140</sup>

Many municipalities are underresourced, have little control over their finances, and are unable to attract the skilled human capital needed to address the burgeoning pressure on their services. Meanwhile, the lead ministries chosen by the Lebanese and Jordanian governments as principal interlocutors with international organizations are often not the ones responsible for local governments. For instance, the lead ministries responding to the Syrian

refugee crisis in Lebanon and Jordan were the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation,<sup>141</sup> respectively, rather than the ministries that govern municipal affairs (the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities and the Ministry of Municipal Affairs, respectively).<sup>142</sup> Moreover, even though both the Jordanian and Lebanese crisis response plans recognize the importance of supporting municipalities in capacity-building and service provision, both plans lack a well-defined coordination mechanism between international nongovernmental organizations and municipalities not only for project implementation but also for response planning.<sup>143</sup>

As a result, municipalities have faced several issues in dealing with INGOs. In Lebanon, mayors felt that the short-term emergency approach of INGOs did not address the long-term needs of their localities.<sup>144</sup> They believed that an INGO program of action was more often than not shaped by donor priorities rather than local needs and believed them to be applying a one-model-fits-all approach to the refugee crisis, irrespective of local considerations. Some municipalities have grown increasingly skeptical of INGOs and believe them to be only interested in cooperating with local authorities for data collection rather than inclusive decisionmaking and planning.<sup>145</sup>

## **Policy Recommendations**

### **Integrate Action Plans**

At the national level, the government should promote an integrated approach to addressing the refugee crisis through a holistic action plan that outlines key challenges related to the crisis. Such a plan should involve all stakeholders engaged with addressing the ramifications of the refugee influx, including host communities and the refugees themselves. Through close collaboration with international organizations, the private sector, the press, academia, and civil society, such a plan can safeguard refugee rights, improve refugees' well-being and their positive impact on the economy, and promote social cohesion by countering negative, fake news with regard to their impact on host communities.

### **Involve Local Governments in Refugee Policymaking**

Ministries responsible for local governance should strive to build a platform for municipalities most affected by the refugee crisis; one that would allow such municipalities to discuss the challenges they face, learn from each other, pool financial and human resources, and present themselves as a unified front in national discussions or policymaking sessions related to refugee presence. Such a platform would also create a one-stop shop for other line ministries and for international organizations wishing to consult with local governments in the design of refugee-related policies. Such a platform could create an opportunity for municipalities to discuss their public investment priorities in ways that serve refugees and meet municipalities' development needs. It would also allow international organizations

to coordinate with municipalities throughout the different stages of the refugee response, that is, from planning through monitoring and evaluation to implementation. In time, this may rebuild trust between INGOs and municipalities and could facilitate municipalities' collaboration with INGOs.

### Provide Financial Incentives

Incentives should be provided to municipalities hosting larger numbers of refugees. In Lebanon, an example of such an incentive would be to allow municipalities that host refugees to keep a higher percentage of their collected taxes. Another option would be for central governments to transfer funds to municipalities based on their needs rather than their tax base.<sup>146</sup>

### Enable Regional Planning

In addition, municipalities should be provided with more authority not only for service provision but also for strategic planning. Improving their planning capabilities would allow burden sharing between municipalities that could then pool resources to better cope with the refugee crisis and ensure synergies among their respective policies. For that to happen, central governments should set up the institutional framework for regional planning and regional coordination between municipalities. With better planning and implementation capabilities, INGOs are more likely to work with local governments as actual partners.

### Enhance the Efficiency of Local Governance

Moreover, for local governance to be efficient, national governments and parliaments should simplify administrative procedures and introduce clear auditing measures to avoid corruption and increase transparency at the local level, especially during a crisis when there is a sudden increased demand on services.<sup>147</sup>

## **SAFEGUARDING REFUGEE RIGHTS: EXPLORING DURABLE SOLUTIONS**

The paucity of durable solutions to the refugee crisis requires a brave and innovative approach. Currently available durable solutions, which usually involve three main options—repatriation, resettlement, or local integration—do not present a sustainable solution to the displacement of millions of people from their homes. This was already the case for Palestinian refugees.

The option of mass voluntary repatriation to Syria is unlikely to happen in the near future, given the persistence of multiple security and political challenges. These include a conscription law that forces young adults until the age of forty-two to enroll in the army,<sup>148</sup> vetting procedures imposed by the regime,<sup>149</sup> as well as the extensive destruction of Syrian cities.<sup>150</sup>

For refugees in Lebanon, where almost 70 percent are originally from the Homs, Idlib, Rif Dimashq, and Aleppo Governorates, this poses significant challenges because these governorates were among the most heavily destroyed during the war.<sup>151</sup> In addition, the recently issued Law Number 10, which allows for the designation of property as a redevelopment zone, presents a real threat to refugees' private property.<sup>152</sup> And even though Assad has recently issued a presidential amnesty for military deserters and draft dodgers on the condition that they turn themselves over to the regime within four to six months and serve two years in the military, many Syrian refugees are wary that this amnesty, like the reconciliation deals, would be used to imprison them or even send them to their deaths. Other hurdles face refugees seeking to return to Iraq or Sudan, where the sectarian or ethnic aspects of the conflict and their displacement as well as weakened central authority pose specifically trying challenges to their return.

***A strictly humanitarian approach to the refugee crisis that ignores its political roots cannot address the structural challenges that prevent mass voluntary return.***

Since 2015, resettlement in European or other Western countries is also becoming increasingly difficult, if not outright impossible. Populist politicians and security incidents have contributed to the tightening of EU member states' migration policy.<sup>153</sup> European countries are eager to keep

Syrian refugees in neighboring countries, as demonstrated by the European Union–Turkey deal whereby Turkey agreed to take back asylum seekers deported from Greece in exchange for \$6 billion in aid.<sup>154</sup> Similarly, the contribution of Gulf countries to the refugee crisis remains limited to humanitarian aid, and despite some flexibility toward Syrian migrants, GCC states have given no real signs they would be willing to change their asylum policies.

The option of integration in host countries is also a nonstarter for refugees. In Lebanon, public officials have loudly rejected the mere mention of naturalizing refugees,<sup>155</sup> as they believe it would undermine the fragile sectarian demographic balance of the country. Lebanon's foreign minister Gebran Bassil recently admonished the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for its call that all parties respect the voluntariness of return, and accused it of being "an organization which acts against (Lebanon's) policy of preventing naturalization and returning the displaced to their homeland."<sup>156</sup> In a recent trip to Russia to discuss the return of refugees, Bassil also declared that "Lebanon refuses to tie the return of the refugees to the political solution [in Syria]."<sup>157</sup> Even Turkey, which welcomed the largest number of Syrian refugees and naturalized about 12,000 of them, has recently called for the rapid return of refugees due to economic pressure and cultural differences.<sup>158</sup>

Finally, strict border policies imposed by neighboring host countries restrict the ability of refugees to move back and forth to Syria and impede the smooth, safe, and progressive



return of refugees. As examples from other contexts indicate, repatriation often takes place progressively and is not immediately final. First, members of a household sometimes take multiple trips to the country of origin to ensure it is safe, and to secure the necessary arrangements for the family to return.<sup>159</sup> Second, families often get split between those who stay in a host country for any number of reasons including fear for safety, continued education, or employment and those who return home to try it out.<sup>160</sup> Movement back and forth allows families to ensure diverse income streams as some members of the family might try to work back home while others stay in exile to complete their education or a medical treatment. Currently, the UNHCR removes protection status from refugees the moment they cross the border to return to their countries of origin.<sup>161</sup>

As options for refugees become increasingly limited, and military actions take precedence over political solutions, international stakeholders involved in the Syrian conflict must seek a lasting political solution that would include the safe return of refugees to their homes with the requisite political and security guarantees. A strictly humanitarian approach to the refugee crisis that ignores its political roots cannot address the structural challenges that prevent mass voluntary return. As refugees feel increasingly trapped between host countries that want them out and a dangerous return home,<sup>162</sup> significant efforts must be made by the international community to lessen the deplorable conditions faced by refugees on either side of the border. Such a plan should seek to alleviate the burden on host countries and improve refugees' as well as their host communities' living conditions while guaranteeing refugees' rights to return voluntarily. Long-term aid for frontline countries should be increased and extended to economic and infrastructural aid. These measures aim to improve refugees' living conditions, as well as their positive economic contribution to host countries. In parallel, concrete steps should be taken on the political front to ensure the safety and security of returnees.

## **Policy Recommendations**

### Safeguard the Right to Return

Recent policies and measures by the Syrian regime regarding property rights and mobility within Syria are imposing a *de facto* reality that could prevent millions from returning home. While non-refoulement and the voluntariness of return should remain key instruments of the international legal framework for refugees, an equal emphasis should be made on the right to return. International stakeholders should increase their pressure on the Syrian government to revoke measures that prevent refugee return, particularly potential donors to Syria's reconstruction such as the EU. These measures include, as a priority, revoking or amending military conscription law, vetting procedures, and property laws to allow for the safe and sustainable return of refugees.



### Advocate for the Legal Empowerment of Refugees

As restrictive legal measures against refugees are being taken on both sides of the border, access to legal knowledge becomes a necessity for refugees. In that regard, international organizations can help establish a cadre of Syrian lawyers or paralegals who would become familiar with Syria's legal frameworks as well as the rights guaranteed through international conventions.<sup>163</sup> In view of new urban development laws, these professionals could inform refugees about their rights particularly over housing, land, and property; these rights are likely to be at the center of key disputes in a postconflict Syria. This would also enable refugees to make an informed decision regarding return to Syria, as legislation regarding vetting and property rights remain complex and obscure.

### Increase Cross-Border Mobility of Refugees

As the situation in Syria is likely to remain uncertain and unstable even after the end of hostilities, cross-border mobility will allow refugees to make an informed and aware decision about permanently returning to their areas of origin. Refugees should be allowed to move across the border within a specific time frame while preserving their refugee status. During that time frame, dependence on aid would decrease gradually as refugees restore their lives back to certain levels of normalcy. Mobility across borders also allows refugees to diversify their resources. This is especially important during prolonged conflict situations, when aid tends to drop with time and other, more recent conflicts take precedence.<sup>164</sup>

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The conflicts generating mass population movements from and within the Middle East have become global in nature, and their destabilizing effect can be felt far beyond its borders. Addressing their ramifications requires bold leadership and a sense of shared responsibility at the global, regional, and national levels. Without it, there can be no sustainable peace for the people of this region.

TABLE 6

State	Area	States Parties <sup>165</sup>	Date of Signing the 1951 Convention	Date of Signing the 1967 Protocol
Mauritania	North Africa	Yes	May 5, 1987 (a)	May 5, 1987 (a)
Morocco	North Africa	Yes	November 7, 1956 (d)	April 20, 1971 (a)
Algeria	North Africa	Yes	February 21, 1963 (d)	November 8, 1967 (a)
Tunisia	North Africa	Yes	October 24, 1957 (d)	October 16, 1968 (a)
Egypt	North Africa	Yes	May 22, 1981 (a)	May 22, 1981 (a)
Sudan	Africa	Yes	February 22, 1974 (a)	May 23, 1974 (a)
Djibouti	Africa	Yes	August 9, 1977 (d)	August 9, 1977 (d)
Somalia	Africa	Yes	October 10, 1978 (a)	October 10, 1978 (a)
Yemen	Gulf	Yes	January 18, 1980 (a)	January 18, 1980 (a)
Iraq	Levant	No		
Lebanon	Levant	No		
Jordan	Levant	No		
Syria	Levant	No		
Saudi Arabia	Gulf (GCC)	No		
United Arab Emirates	Gulf (GCC)	No		
Oman	Gulf (GCC)	No		
Qatar	Gulf (Former GCC)	No		
Kuwait	Gulf (GCC)	No		
Bahrain	Gulf (GCC)	No		
Libya	North Africa	No		
Comoros	Africa	No		

**Note:** Ratification (r), Accession (a), Succession (d).

## POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS IN HISTORICAL AGREEMENTS

Commentary by Dawn Chatty

Does the recent refugee crisis in the Arab world necessitate a new international and regional framework? Can the 1965 Casablanca Protocol be brought to life and applied to refugees other than Palestinians?

The new millennium has seen several million Arabs—mostly Iraqis and Syrians—displaced from their homes, seeking asylum near and far. In the first few years of this crisis, most of the displaced were provided with sanctuary in neighboring states as fellow Arabs, guest workers, or temporary guests. By 2015, the armed conflict in Syria between state and nonstate actors (like the so-called Islamic State, among other groups) and proxy combatants (such as Hezbollah, Iranian militias, and Russian airpower) saw displaced Syrians and others begin to walk north. They went to the Balkans and further on into Europe seeking safety, job opportunities, and, in some cases, reunification with other family members, particularly in Germany and Sweden.

***It is time to [revive the Casablanca Protocol] and extend the protocol to all refugees in the Arab region.***

The international framework for providing refuge to those fleeing persecution was created after World War II. It was set out in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and originally focused on Europeans displaced by that war. In 1967, the temporal and territorial restraints were lifted and providing refuge was globalized. As long as seeking asylum was an individual act, the system worked. However, in cases of mass influx, the system stalled. For example, the crisis of the Vietnamese boat people, which began in 1975 at the close of the Vietnam War, took fifteen years to resolve. Only in 1989 was a Comprehensive Plan of Action implemented, which saw over 1 million Vietnamese refugees distributed for resettlement throughout the Global North.

The current crisis in the Arab world needs a new Comprehensive Plan of Action to resettle the refugees who see no hope of returning and wish to be resettled. In the case of the Vietnamese, one man, Sérgio Vieira de Mello, at the United Nations Refugee Agency worked behind the scenes for over a decade to make this a reality. Is there such a person at work behind the scenes hoping to implement a similar Comprehensive Plan of Action for displaced Syrians in the 2020s?

The international framework for providing refuge to those fleeing persecution was created after World War II. It was set out in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and originally focused on Europeans displaced by that war. In 1967, the temporal and territorial

While waiting for some new international framework to emerge, there are regional examples of efforts that were both timely and successful. In the wake of the Nakba (Catastrophe) in 1948, which saw nearly 1 million Palestinians displaced, dispossessed, and made stateless, neighboring states provided them with asylum and varying degrees of rights. Syria and Egypt, for example, passed domestic legislation early in the 1950s providing Palestinians rights similar to their own nationals.

Perhaps it is time to dust off another asylum mechanism that once applied to all Palestinians, the Casablanca Protocol. In September 1965, the League of Arab States passed the Protocol for the Treatment of Palestinians in Arab States. This protocol was accepted without reservation by Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Syria, and Yemen. It was later approved by most Arab states except for Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia. The Casablanca Protocol called on its member states to take the necessary measures to provide Palestinians in their country with what might be regarded as temporary protection. This included the right of employment on a par with its citizens; the right to leave and return to the state they are currently in; the right to travel in the region for permitted periods and purposes; the right to valid travel documents; and the right to receive the same treatment as all other League of Arab State citizens with regards to visas and residency applications.

Reviving the Casablanca Protocol would mean providing all displaced peoples within the Arab region the right to seek employment and the right to travel within it. It is time to do this and extend the protocol to all refugees in the Arab region.

## **THE REPATRIATION OF SYRIAN REFUGEES**

### **Commentary by Ibrahim Awad**

Support from Russia and Iran in the last three years has allowed the regime of President Bashar al-Assad to regain control over all Syrian territory, with the exception of Idlib and the surrounding areas in the northwest of the country. The priority seems now to be the repatriation of Syrian refugees from the countries where they sought protection.<sup>i</sup> Russia seems particularly keen on putting repatriation into practice. In July 2018, the spokesman for the Russian Ministry of Defense announced that, following

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i In this commentary, the terms “repatriation” and “return” are used interchangeably.

the Russian-U.S. summit in Helsinki in June, the ministry had sent a proposal to the U.S. government about the joint organization by the two countries of the return operation.<sup>ii</sup> The proposal suggests that the two countries set up a joint committee about financing refugee return. According to the spokesman, it also provides for establishing two monitoring committees in Jordan and Lebanon for the return of Syrian refugees from those countries. In addition to Russia and the United States, the governments of Jordan and Lebanon would be members of the two respective committees.

Other Russian initiatives go further. A Russia-Turkey-Iran summit with return at the top of its concerns was held on September 7 in Tehran. Another summit bringing together Russia, Turkey, Germany, and France in Istanbul was scheduled but the four countries finally met at the level of bureaucrats. Germany and France are the leading member states of the European Union (EU), which is expected to significantly contribute to funding the reconstruction of Syria.

***If refugees return, external parties will likely do their utmost to prevent a recurrence of violence that would trigger new refugee flows.***

Three factors may explain the priority given to return, which is assumed to be voluntary, as international refugee law provides. First, return would mean that regional and international systems recognize that the regime exercises effective control over the territory, which should reinforce its legitimacy. Second is the in-

sistence on return by some countries of refuge, exemplified by Lebanon, whose authorities do not want to subject return to prior political settlement. The third factor is that, if refugees return, external parties will likely do their utmost to prevent a recurrence of violence that would trigger new refugee flows. This is in the interests of both the regime in Syria and bordering countries.

Turkey, in addition to Lebanon, is the only country actively calling for repatriation. Jordan recently announced that it would neither encourage nor discourage refugees to return. In Egypt, no calls for repatriation have been heard, which is probably due to both the small number of Syrian refugees it hosts relative to its large population and the absorption of these refugees in its relatively large economy. And it is noteworthy that in EU member states, where alarm and a sense of crisis and panic has been nurtured by

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ii Arshad Mohammed and Phil Stewart, "Exclusive: Despite Tensions, Russia Seeks U.S. Help to Rebuild Syria," Reuters, August 3, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-russia-syria-exclusive/exclusive-despite-tensions-russia-seeks-u-s-help-to-rebuild-syria-idUSKBN1KO2JP>.

populists and the Far Right since the arrival of refugees in 2015 and 2016, return does not presently figure with any sense of urgency in the public debate. This should mean that refugees have been economically and socially absorbed in host countries, which is precisely what most experts in refugee movements, economies, and labor markets said back then.

The relationship between repatriation and the political settlement of the Syrian conflict is the more substantive issue. A settlement is difficult because there is a clear victor on the ground—the regime—that does not feel compelled to bargain with the vanquished. But in reality the bargain will rather be, directly or indirectly, with parties to the regional system and especially with the great powers, which are attached to the preservation of this system lest they incur the consequences of its collapse. The avenue to bargaining will be reconstruction, which is necessary for both repatriation to be significant and for the regime since, without it, it would only rule over rubble. Thus, there is a larger relationship between repatriation, political settlement, and reconstruction.

The hope is that with the participation by representatives of the Syrian people, this bargaining will realize several objectives. These include respect for the Syrian people and for their right to govern themselves, and ensuring the safety and security of returning refugees. This is the core of the political question. It is not easy but it cannot be ignored. It is in the interest of all parties to reach a sustainable settlement.

Modes of financing reconstruction, its models, plans, stages, tying it to the progressive return of refugees and internally displaced persons, and the implementation of this return are all questions where the technical and political are mixed. They are complex but not impossible to manage.

A political settlement is necessary for Syria's reconstruction and for the repatriation of Syrian refugees.

## LESSONS FROM LEBANESE MUNICIPAL RESPONSES TO THE SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS

Commentary by Joanna Nassar

With the eruption of the Syrian crisis in March 2011, Lebanon has witnessed an influx of refugees through its northern and eastern borders, spreading across the country. A majority of the refugees, who number 976,002 per the United Nations as of July 2018, have either stayed in informal tented settlements or rented shelters in villages that were already considered to be among the most vulnerable in the country with existing weak infrastructure and limited access to basic services.<sup>i</sup>

***Municipalities should be encouraged...to play a leading role in transforming local conflicts between different groups in their communities.***

Municipalities in Lebanon, as officially elected bodies, were put at the forefront of the crisis to deal with the arrival of Syrians. These villages were faced with the lack of a solid national response strategy and received limited instructions or guidance from their central government on how to handle this large influx (before

the Ministry of Social Affairs took a more proactive role in coordinating with the UN and international organizations). Therefore, different municipalities had to come up with different models and even procedures to manage the crisis.

With limited capacities and financial resources, municipalities stepped up to the challenge while serving a higher number of inhabitants, which had doubled in many villages; managed the delivery of basic services (including water, sewage, electricity, garbage collection, and so on); mediated and made unilateral decisions to resolve economic constraints (like closing illegal Syrian shops); responded to new social and cultural problems that arose; and assisted Syrian refugees with humanitarian needs (including registration, housing, and other services). Some municipalities had to take unilateral arbitrary steps, like imposing curfews (in almost all governorates),<sup>ii</sup> impos-

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i "Syria Regional Refugee Response," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), last updated July 31, 2018, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/71>.

ii "Defining Community Vulnerabilities in Lebanon," REACH Initiative, 2015, p. 9 and 88, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/44875>.

ing fees on Syrian families,<sup>iii</sup> and other security-related measures. In some cases, the character of the mayor did play an important part in the management of the crisis: a charismatic mayor who had personal connections and power was able to better control the situation.

Based on the above, some key recommendations are worth developing:

- organizations responding to the Syrian crisis need to improve coordination with municipalities;
- the central government needs to give municipalities clear guidance married with strong technical and financial support to manage different aspects of the crisis (social, economic, political, aid management, and security) for a comprehensive and targeted response;
- municipalities should be technically empowered (including building up the skills of municipal police and supporting social stability); and
- municipalities should be encouraged with the support of Ministry of Social Affairs' Social Development Centers to play a leading role in transforming local conflicts between different groups in their communities.

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iii Bill Frelick, "'Our Homes Are Not for Strangers': Mass Evictions of Syrian Refugees by Lebanese Municipalities," Human Rights Watch, April 20, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/04/20/our-homes-are-not-strangers/mass-evictions-syrian-refugees-lebanese-municipalities>; and Elham Barjas, "Restricting Refugees: Measuring Municipal Power in Lebanon," Legal Agenda, September 30, 2016, <http://legal-agenda.com/en/article.php?id=3174>.





# FUELING MIDDLE EAST CONFLICTS—OR DOUSING THE FLAMES

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Perry Cammack and Michele Dunne

## INTRODUCTION

More than any other region in the world, the Middle East is defined not by commercial ties, diplomatic interaction, or regional organizations, but by hard power and military might. This has been the case for the region's modern history and will remain so for the foreseeable future. But not since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire a century ago has the Middle East been so convulsed by regional turbulence and internal conflict.

Amid this crumbling regional order, the ongoing civil wars, especially in Syria and Yemen but also in Libya and Iraq, have become apparently intractable. Regional power struggles, such as the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, are widely understood to be complicating factors. But while such rivalries are indeed consequential, broader dynamics have also made these conflicts particularly long and ugly.

Four factors in particular have served to escalate and perpetuate conflicts. First, the regional balance of power has been highly uncertain following the 2011 uprisings as well as the aftermath of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. Second, local disputes have become the stage on which ever-present regional rivalries are playing out in larger, more lethal conflicts. Third,

arms imports to the region have skyrocketed—sales for which the United States and its European allies actively compete. And fourth, the Middle East suffers from a notable dearth of norms of warfare and dispute resolution mechanisms in comparison with other regions of the world. The result is a complicated hornet’s nest of military interventions across the region.

Overcoming these factors is a daunting task for regional and international policymakers. Even in optimistic scenarios, progress toward deescalation and stability is likely to be incremental, slow, and uneven. Nonetheless, there are concrete steps that regional and international actors can explore to mitigate the dangers of these conflict escalators.

Beyond these broad factors, the particularities of each conflict as well as the interests of the intervening parties must be considered, and they are treated at the end of this chapter in a series of question-and-answer commentaries with experts from the countries under discussion.

## **CONFLICT ESCALATOR 1: SHIFTING REGIONAL POWER DYNAMICS**

Among the casualties of the turbulence following the 2011 Arab Spring was the status quo regional power distribution. Countries formerly seen as regional authoritarian anchors, such as Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali’s Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak’s Egypt, Bashar al-Assad’s Syria, and Muammar Qaddafi’s Libya proved to be brittle shells that succumbed to domestic turmoil or conflict. Scarred by its Middle East forays since the September 11 terrorist attacks, Washington has been unable—or unwilling—to sustain the prevailing regional order. The successive U.S. presidential administrations of Barack Obama and Donald Trump have played a less vigorous role than their predecessors in attempting to mediate conflicts; they have also pursued policies toward Iran and Israel, respectively, that Arab states have found alarming in various ways.

Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah have long proclaimed an “axis of resistance” in opposition to the U.S.-led regional security order and have been united in their animus against Israel. Iran had little direct involvement with the initial turbulence in Syria and Yemen, but it certainly sought to take advantage of the institutional fractures and sectarian cleavages that followed. Alarmed at these developments, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates have found their threat perceptions steadily converging in recent years.

But it has been the actions of two global powers—the United States and Russia—that have solidified these nascent alignments into something resembling regional blocs. Russia’s September 2015 military intervention on behalf of the Assad government brought it into a military partnership with Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah.<sup>166</sup> The Obama administration had sought to straddle this regional division—continuing security cooperation with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates while leading negotiations on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) for Iran’s nuclear program. But the

administration's inability to translate the JCPOA into a new *modus vivendi* with Iran on its regional activities coupled with the more hawkish Trump administration—including its May 2018 exit from the JCPOA—have further solidified the anti-Iran bloc.

Each of these blocs has its own contradictions. Syria is the fulcrum of Russian-Iranian cooperation. Yet Russia has sought to work through the nominally nonsectarian Syrian military, while Iran employs sectarian militias that undermine the state's coherence. Moscow's muted reaction to Israel's wide-ranging May 2018 airstrikes against Iranian assets inside Syria—compared to its vociferous protests to the United States' far more limited airstrikes against suspected chemical weapons facilities a month earlier—suggests it is not troubled to see Iranian military capacity in Syria reduced.

*The Middle East suffers from a lack of both regional dispute resolution mechanisms and diplomatic protocols that might reduce the scope for regional conflict.*

Meanwhile, the U.S.-led bloc is an inchoate alignment of shared antipathy toward Iran rather than a proper military alliance. Absent a Palestinian state, Israel will continue to lack even basic diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia or the UAE.

There is also cross-fertilization between the blocs. Despite its partnership with Iran in Syria, Russia has maintained serviceable relations with most regional states, including U.S. security partners.<sup>167</sup> Turkey remains a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member and a member of the U.S.-led coalition to combat the self-proclaimed Islamic State. But relations between Washington and Ankara have become severely strained, in part because of continued U.S. support for Syrian Kurdish rebels. Turkey has also participated with Russia and Iran in the Astana process, which has supported a series of ceasefire agreements between pro-Assad Syrian forces and rebel groups while allowing Russia to expand its political influence inside Syria. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have pursued counterproductive ideological and power struggles with Turkey and Qatar, further pushing these former partners to flirt with Iran.

Against this complicated backdrop, four competitive dyads—Saudi Arabia–Iran, Israel–Iran, U.S.–Iran, and U.S.–Russia—seem especially critical to shaping a new regional security balance. The likelihood of resolving any of these is low. Some of these struggles are viewed in near-existential terms, while leaders in others appear to derive significant political benefits from the rivalries.

While reconciliation among the most contentious of these axes may not be possible for the foreseeable future, there is an urgent need to explore whether these inevitable competitions for influence can be made less lethal. This would spare states such as Syria and Yemen their wholesale destruction, and allow Middle Eastern governments the opportunity to focus on providing for the social and economic well-being of their citizens.

Scholars of international security policy warn of security dilemmas, in which steps taken by one state to increase its security result in countermeasures from an adversary who in turn feels less secure, thus risking a chain reaction leading to conflict.<sup>168</sup> This dynamic well describes today's Middle East. To observers in Israel or Saudi Arabia, it is self-evident that Iran is playing a highly destructive role in places such as Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. Israeli security officials point to the importance of creating credible military deterrence given decades of Iranian hostility.<sup>169</sup> From an Iranian perspective, however, such actions are justified as a defensive response to Israeli threats of military strikes and the U.S. military installations in close proximity to Iran's borders.<sup>170</sup>

The Trump administration has recently announced efforts to create a Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA) with the Gulf Cooperation Council states, Egypt, and Jordan.<sup>171</sup> Although the prospects for success seem low given inter-Arab divisions and the track record of previ-

***If routine diplomatic engagement with partners is important, diplomatic exchanges with adversaries can be even more so.***

ous initiatives, such an alliance could certainly produce tangible security benefits for its members in coordinating counterterrorism efforts and countering Iranian influence. But in so doing it would likely harden divisions in the Middle East.

In comparison with almost every other geographical region, the Middle East suffers from a lack of both regional dispute resolution mechanisms and diplomatic protocols that might reduce the scope for regional conflict. While the Cold War was defined by the antagonism between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, both sides increasingly felt the need for inclusive institutions and mechanisms to reduce tensions. Every U.S. president during the Cold War, from Dwight D. Eisenhower to George H. W. Bush, met with his Soviet counterpart. During the tensest moments, high-level U.S.-Soviet channels of communications were especially important. Over time, a number of confidence-building institutions and transparency-enhancing measures were created, including the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), successive arms control agreements, and later the Treaty on Open Skies, which allows for unarmed surveillance flights over signatory countries to promote military and nuclear weapons openness.

In the Middle East, however, the absence of any similar mechanisms or organizations, particularly amid proliferating military conflicts, feeds security dilemmas across multiple vectors, so that steps justified by one state as necessary to its security—military intervention, arms procurement, alliance formation, and so on—are perceived by its rivals as threatening.

During the Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts of the 1990s, there were attempts to build mechanisms for regional communication and cooperation. Participants at the 1991 Madrid Conference set up five multilateral working groups to address regional challenges, each involving Israel and a range of Arab states. The centerpiece was the Arms Control and

Regional Security (ACRS) working group, which marked the first bid to create a formal multilateral framework for regional security issues. Six ACRS plenary sessions, co-hosted by the United States and Russia, were held and a series of regional confidence-building measures were outlined before the working group slowly broke down by 1995 under the weight of regional animosities and implementation challenges. While all of the working groups have long been defunct, one tangible result survives: the Middle East Desalination Research Center in Oman, created in 1995. The center conducts transboundary water research and development projects, and its membership includes Israel, Jordan, Oman, Palestine, and Qatar as well as several Western nations.

## Policy Recommendations

The Middle East is likely to remain unstable so long as internal conflicts continue to rage. Creating trust between Israel or Saudi Arabia and Iran seems impossible at present. But a more feasible objective might be for regional and international actors to support the creation of tangible measures to better manage these animosities, so as to reduce the likelihood of further escalation toward regional conflict, which would benefit no one. Even establishing mechanisms for information exchange can reduce the likelihood of miscalculation and perhaps provide off-ramps to deescalate crises when they occur. Measures to explore might include:

**Bilateral measures:** Diplomatic outreach is sometimes caricatured in the public perception as a sign of weakness. But if routine diplomatic engagement with partners is important, diplomatic exchanges with adversaries can be even more so. The prevalent bias against engagement among rivals in the Middle East is terribly counterproductive; reversing it may be an important ingredient in creating a less turbulent regional environment. Policymakers could explore many possibilities—restoring diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran; allowing Arab diplomats from countries not recognizing Israel to quietly meet with their Israeli counterparts in neutral countries; and reestablishing diplomatic channels, created during the Obama administration, between the United States and Iran. While such openings would not likely lead to quick breakthroughs, they might reduce the scope for further escalation at moments of crisis.

**Multilateral measures:** Even as the Trump administration pursues the MESA initiative, the United States and other regional and international actors should consider a parallel effort to expand the mechanisms and forums for dialogue on pressing regional issues. Eventually, a Middle East organization might be created to play the role that the OSCE played in Europe during the Cold War, increasing transparency on nonproliferation and military issues. However, the ACRS track record highlights the impediments to success. A less ambitious multilateral measure might follow the model set by the Middle East Desalination Research Center, focusing on pressing nonsecurity challenges such as climate change, pandemic preparedness, or seismology. Given that national-level responses to such problems

are far more effective with increased international coordination, governments might have incentives to create venues for professionals—such as epidemiologists, seismologists, or first responders—to exchange information, experiences, or best practices.

**Supporting neutral states:** Certain governments—notably Kuwait, Oman, Tunisia, the Palestinian Authority, and more recently Iraq—have sought to chart independent courses amid the regional turbulence of recent years. But the pressure to take sides is mounting as conflicts have internationalized and regional blocs have hardened. Saudi Arabia has put significant pressure on smaller Arab states to support its policies on Yemen and Qatar, while Iran has pressured Iraq to support its policies on Syria. Yet neutrality serves a potentially important role in the region, both as a hedge against geostrategic pressure and as a possible vector for future mediation. International and regional actors would be wise to support the independence of such states.

**Track 2:** Track 2 diplomacy (which involves backchannel engagement between private citizens acting in unofficial capacities) has a long history in the Middle East. While the results can be uneven, diplomatic breakthroughs—such as the 1995 Oslo Accords between the Israelis and Palestinians and the 2015 JCPOA between Iran and the P5+1 (China, France, Russia, the UK, and the United States, plus Germany)—are often built on extensive experiences of informal contacts and unofficial negotiations. Particularly at a moment when the prospects for formal diplomacy seem limited, international actors should support track 2 efforts across all lines of Middle East conflict to allow influential participants to explore alternative futures. Given the rising levels of sectarianism and radicalization, more religious leaders and younger participants should also be included.

## CONFLICT ESCALATOR 2: SPREADING EXTERNAL INTERVENTIONS

Three of the region's four ongoing civil wars—Libya, Syria, and Yemen—have local origins dating to 2011, while the Iraqi civil war is inextricably bound to the U.S.-led invasion in 2003. But while the particulars of each conflict are unique, certain ingredients are common across all four: collapsing socioeconomic orders, corrupt rentierism, and predatory authoritarianism (please see separate chapters of this report on the political economy and governance of Arab states). Over time, each conflict metastasized, becoming both regionalized and internationalized.

Regardless of whether U.S. disengagement from the Middle East in recent years marks a blunder, a rectification, or a financial necessity, regional and global powers have sought to fill the ensuing power vacuums. Across the region, states are intervening in neighbors' affairs at an unprecedented rate—politically, economically, and militarily. Partners and rivals of the United States alike have asserted greater roles.

The Libya, Syria, and Yemen conflicts continue because local leaders as well as their regional and international partners believe that they can achieve their strategic objectives through zero-sum military victories. The fifteen-year U.S. struggle in Iraq, however, suggests they might be mistaken. In the spring of 2003, the United States removed Saddam Hussein from power in just three weeks. But the resounding U.S. military victory soon gave way to a nearly decade-long military occupation and a popular shift among U.S. voters against such interventions, marking the gradual end of Pax Americana in the Middle East. Although the United States remains the unquestioned preeminent military power in the region, Washington has struggled to advance—and sometimes even to define—its interests in recent years and has been frustrated in its attempts to leverage its military strength into durable political and diplomatic achievements in the Middle East.

***Washington has struggled to advance—and sometimes even to define—its interests in recent years and has been frustrated in its attempts to leverage its military strength into durable political and diplomatic achievements in the Middle East.***

The early evidence suggests that those countries currently intervening in regional conflicts, particularly when pursuing broad political goals rather than limited defensive ends, may experience similar results. Iran has protected, and even advanced, its security interests in Syria through a brutal military intervention, in conjunction with Russia, that helped secure the Assad government's grip on power at a terrifying human cost. Iran has also maintained its land bridge to Hezbollah and pushed its zone of influence to Israel's doorstep in the Golan. But Syria may now be fractured beyond repair. There is also increased dissent inside Iran, whose public does not appear to view its experience more favorably than did the U.S. public a decade ago. A consistent theme of the sustained public unrest that has gripped Iran since December 2017 is rising displeasure at the perhaps \$20 billion spent supporting Assad both militarily and economically.<sup>172</sup> That total does not include lesser expenditures on the Houthis in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and various terrorist groups in Iraq, Palestine, Syria, and elsewhere. Meanwhile, rampant inflation and high unemployment have caused significant economic dislocation at home.

In Yemen, meanwhile, the Saudi-led military coalition has achieved slow tactical gains against Houthi rebels since 2015. But decisive victory remains elusive. Several cities, including Aden, Mocha, Mukalla, and Taiz, have been nominally restored to governmental authority, but pro-government forces have subsequently struggled to exert control. The result is a slow-motion fragmentation of Yemen that has coincided with a catastrophic decline in humanitarian conditions. Almost four years into the campaign, it is difficult to see an end in sight. Saudi Arabia's defense budget, like Iran's, is not public, but its expenditures



in Yemen have been estimated at \$3 billion to \$5 billion per month.<sup>173</sup> To the extent that either Iran or Saudi Arabia is achieving its respective objectives in Syria and Yemen, these are Pyrrhic victories indeed.

This is not to say that there are easy answers to whether external interventions in local conflicts can be justified or successful. The 2003 U.S. intervention in Iraq is widely seen as having created enormous local and regional problems in the Middle East as well as domestic political trouble in the United States. But the 1991 U.S.-led intervention to repel the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait is generally regarded as both justified and successful, in part because it had limited military objectives.

***Militaries in authoritarian societies, in which governments are not directly accountable to citizens, face fewer constraints on the conduct of war than do militaries in democratic societies.***

By contrast, the juries are still out on the NATO intervention in Libya and the anti-Islamic State intervention in Syria and Iraq, partly because the ultimate effects are unknown. Did the Libya intervention violate its humanitarian mandate, destabilize the country, and pave the way for jihadism? Or did it spare Libyans a vast civilian slaughter akin to what has hap-

pened in Syria? Regarding Syria, did the United States wisely stay out of a domestic dispute and confine its objectives to defeating an international terrorist organization? Or did it undermine international norms by ignoring massive brutality and pave the way for enhanced Iranian and Russian influence in the region? Even now, is the U.S. decision to retain a military presence in eastern Syria indefinitely necessary to prevent a dangerous power vacuum, or does it start down a slippery slope toward an open-ended intervention lacking achievable objectives?

Every war must end. But when civil conflicts end with political settlements rather than outright victories, belligerents are likely to question whether such agreements will be honored unless they are combined with some kind of international enforcement mechanisms.<sup>174</sup> Thus, even if political settlements for Middle Eastern conflicts are found, it is unlikely they will hold without some form of peacekeeping.

This raises the prospect that settlements to existing conflicts might contain the flashpoints for new conflicts and new belligerents. This is particularly the case in Syria, where new spin-off conflicts can be imagined from a number of directions, given contrary ongoing military interventions by Iran, Israel, Russia, Turkey, the United States, and Hezbollah.

## Policy Recommendations

Militaries in authoritarian societies, in which governments are not directly accountable to citizens, face fewer constraints on the conduct of war than do militaries in democratic societies. Thus, in the long run, reducing the level of international interventions may require Arab citizens playing a greater role in the governance of their societies. The United States and Europe, burned by previous experiences and their domestic political consequences, have become more cautious, while Russia may have renewed confidence in interventionism. In any case, there are steps that may limit the scope of further regionalization of Middle Eastern conflicts over time.

**More limited interventions:** If regional and international leaders feel they must continue to intervene in the Middle East, they might consider that it is in their own interest to do so in a more limited fashion. From the United States in Iraq, to Russia and Iran in Syria, to Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Yemen, military interventions in the Middle East tend to begin as short-term operations with limited military objectives and evolve into open-ended commitments with broad political aims. Leaders contemplating interventions might seek to emulate the characteristics of the 1991 intervention against Iraq: it was based on a generally accepted international principle (prohibiting the use of force against the territorial integrity of a sovereign state<sup>175</sup>); it had a limited, specific aim (repelling the Iraqi invaders and restoring the internationally recognized Kuwaiti government); it enjoyed significant (though not complete) support inside and outside the Arab region; it did not create a power vacuum; and it ended upon achieving its specific goals.

**Planning for peace enforcement:** Extensive academic literature makes clear that without peace enforcement and the disarmament of nonstate actors, the recidivism rate of negotiated settlements to civil wars is high. Given the immense complications of peacekeeping in potentially unstable postconflict environments (presumably including the remnants of nonstate militias and terrorist groups), significant attention must be paid to how any prospective political settlement will be enforced and what, if any, mechanisms for the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of fighting groups will be implemented. In all of these cases, smaller follow-on conflicts among local parties are to be expected and mechanisms for peaceful dispute resolution (through political competition, mediation, and so on) should be baked into national-level dispute settlements.

## CONFLICT ESCALATOR 3: SKYROCKETING ARMS SALES

Beyond direct military involvement, outside actors also intervene indirectly through arms sales and security assistance, which can seem an appealing way to influence the contours of a conflict without deploying troops or undertaking military action. Moreover, for leading exporters, including the United States and its European allies as well as Russia and China,

arms sales can generate significant economic benefits, and they have become a diplomatic priority as well as a factor in the political fortune of leaders in exporting countries.

The Middle East is the most militarized region in the world. Although numbering less than 6 percent of the world's population and contributing less than 5 percent of its GDP, it accounted for nearly one-third of the world's arms imports between 2013 and 2017—more than doubling its share compared to the previous five-year period.<sup>176</sup>

***The United States and its European allies should reconsider the circumstances in which they provide weapons to Middle Eastern states.***

Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates were three of the four top arms importers in the world (with Algeria and Iraq also in the top ten) between 2013 and 2017. All three have intervened militarily

in neighboring countries (Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Yemen, Egypt in Libya) since 2013. Turkey and Israel (also a significant exporter) were in the world's top twenty arms importers, while Iran imported much fewer arms (primarily from Russia and China) due to international sanctions.<sup>177</sup>

Meanwhile, the United States was the world's largest arms exporter between 2013 and 2017, comprising some 34 percent of the global total, followed by Russia, France, Germany, China, and the United Kingdom. The United States and the UK were the major suppliers to Saudi Arabia, while the United States and France have supplied Egypt as well as the UAE. Germany has diminished its sales to Arab states, although it remains a major supplier to Israel.<sup>178</sup>

The April 2018 U.S. presidential memorandum to streamline procedures for conventional arms transfers issued by Donald Trump is unabashed regarding the economic advantages of arms exports; its first paragraph hails “a dynamic defense industrial base, which currently employs more than 1.7 million people.”<sup>179</sup> French President Emmanuel Macron also has pushed aggressively for arms sales to the Middle East, despite growing criticism of potential abuses related to the technology provided.<sup>180</sup>

In addition to the economic benefits, advocates of arms exports in democratic countries argue that arms sales and security assistance programs can help to professionalize developing militaries, and in this way can produce a moderating influence on recipient nations.<sup>181</sup> U.S. officials also tout the need to improve allied states' capabilities to enhance the possibility of joint operations with U.S. forces.

But is there evidence that the increased provision of arms has helped to stabilize the Middle East, or even to provide victory for key allies? Unfortunately, the brutality of contemporary Middle Eastern wars suggests that this flood of weapons has poured fuel on the fire and made conflicts lengthier as well as deadlier.

First, arms sales to belligerents in a conflict are seldom a decisive factor, but rather invite a counterreaction by opposing states, thereby feeding civil wars rather than extinguishing them. U.S. and European supply to the Saudi-Emirati intervention in Yemen has coincided with Iran's increased support for its Houthi partners.<sup>182</sup> The provision of weapons by the United States and several Gulf states to Syrian rebels initially helped to tip the balance against the Syrian army. But this same support also encouraged Iran to escalate its support, and once it became clear that the Obama administration would not take direct military action against the Syrian armed forces, Russia seized an opening to intervene and defeat those same rebels, thereby decisively changing the contours of the conflict.

Even worse, arms provided to militaries in fragile or highly corrupt states can slip into the hands of terrorists, militias, and other nonstate actors. Although the Houthi rebels have reportedly received Iranian-supplied ballistic missiles, many of their ballistic missile stocks are composed of Russian and North Korean weapons originally provided to the Yemeni army and seized during Houthi advances in 2013 and 2014.<sup>183</sup> A comprehensive survey by Conflict Armament Research of 40,000 combat items recovered from Islamic State fighters in Syria and Iraq suggests that more than 50 percent of their weapons were originally produced by Russia and China (many of them for the Syrian and Iraqi armies), and 30 percent originated from Warsaw Pact–era Eastern Europe. Three percent of weapons and 13 percent of ammunition were NATO caliber, presumably seized from the Iraqi armed forces during the Islamic State's advances in 2014.<sup>184</sup>

In one case, an advanced anti-tank guided weapon was reportedly manufactured in Europe, sold to the United States, supplied to a party in Syria, and transferred to the Islamic State in Iraq, where it was recovered—all within two months of leaving the factory.<sup>185</sup> Unfortunately, the advanced weapons systems being sold to authoritarian Arab governments today may be used by insurgent fighters in future wars.

What of the argument that security assistance and arms sales can moderate the behavior of recipient countries?<sup>186</sup> Here too, experience suggests otherwise. Take the examples of U.S. security assistance to Egypt and U.S. arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

The United States has provided \$1.3 billion in security assistance to Egypt annually since the 1978 Camp David Accords, totaling more than \$46 billion.<sup>187</sup> While the hope had been that the assistance would help modernize, professionalize, and depoliticize Egypt's military, in fact the opposite has happened. In 2013, then defense minister (now President) Abdel Fattah el-Sisi upended a brief democratic opening, and since then the military domination of politics and the economy has escalated sharply. Gross human rights abuses have also risen, fueling an insurgency in Sinai and radicalization among youth in prisons. The United States has struggled to use its assistance as leverage; the Obama and Trump administrations each suspended portions of assistance or equipment deliveries due to alarming rights viola-

tions and lack of cooperation in other forms, but then gave up and resumed aid without getting anything in return. Any potential political leverage was thus forfeited.

A review of 2017 U.S. arms sales found at least \$659 million in sales to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates for laser-guided bombs and other munitions, as well as firearms, to be used in combat operations in Yemen.<sup>188</sup> But there is little evidence that the U.S.

*The United States and its European allies should reconsider the circumstances in which they provide weapons to Middle Eastern states.*

support for the Saudi-Emirati campaign has either accelerated a coalition victory (thereby shortening the conflict) or significantly reduced casualties in Yemen. U.S.-made weapons systems have targeted school buses, funerals, and hospitals.<sup>189</sup>

Four years into the war, the situation has been called the worst humanitarian crisis in the world, with millions of Yemenis at risk of starvation or suffering from related diseases. Germany and Spain have cut off weapons sales to the intervening parties, and pressure has grown in the United Kingdom and United States to consider doing likewise, particularly after an August 2018 United Nations report found that practices by both sides in the conflict amounted to war crimes.<sup>190</sup>

Interoperability has also proved to be something of a mirage. The United States and its allies have cooperated in some cases with Arab militaries on common goals: the 1991 Gulf War to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait, the 2011 intervention in Libya, and the more recent war against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. But increasingly, Arab militaries are using weapons, technology, and training obtained from the West to conduct interventions not necessarily to the West's liking—such as the Gulf force that crushed a peaceful Bahraini uprising in 2011, the ongoing Saudi-Emirati campaign in Yemen, and the ongoing Egyptian-Emirati intervention on behalf of General Khalifa Haftar in Libya.

## Policy Recommendations

**Establish new arms sales parameters:** The United States and its European allies should reconsider the circumstances in which they provide weapons to Middle Eastern states—as well as their unseemly rivalry in doing so. Such weapons inflame conflicts and lead to direct threats to their collective security through migration and terrorism. To reduce the likelihood of weapons slipping into the hands of nonstate actors, they should severely restrict the sale of advanced weapons systems to fragile states at risk for future internal conflicts. They should also reduce sales to states at risk of committing grave human rights abuses against their own citizens.

**Diplomacy to broaden arms sale norms:** Western states should seek to reach agreement among themselves on principles, and then can use those principles to discourage other arms exporters such as Russia and China. Such policies would have a limited impact on states not

undertaking interventions such as Morocco, Tunisia, and Jordan, though certain advanced systems might be impacted. However, such policies would restrict the sale of weapons to countries such as Iraq and Libya (for fear of slippage), Egypt (for its gross human rights abuses), and Saudi Arabia and the UAE (for their continued conflict in Yemen).

## **CONFLICT ESCALATOR 4: LACKING REGIONAL NORMS FOR CONFLICT**

The modern history of the Middle East is replete with conflict, particularly the numerous Arab-Israeli wars, often of short duration and in recent decades involving nonstate actors such as Hamas and Hezbollah. However, before 2011, military interventions by one Arab state into another were relatively uncommon. Notable exceptions included Egypt's 1963–1967 intervention in Yemen, Syria's 1976–2005 occupation of Lebanon, and Iraq's 1990–1991 occupation of Kuwait. The devastating Iran-Iraq war of 1980–1988 was a conventional conflict between two states rather than an intervention by a stronger state into a weaker one. By contrast, in the last six years alone, Arab states and Iran have intervened militarily in four Arab countries (Syria, Yemen, Libya—as well as a brief intervention to crush an uprising in Bahrain) as well as politically in others (notably supporting the 2013 military coup in Egypt).

The blurring of lines between civilians and combatants, as well as a lack of international consensus about how these conflicts might be ended, has created an environment where massive violations of international humanitarian law have become commonplace, particularly in Syria and Yemen, but also in Iraq and Libya. These abuses include, but are not limited to, indiscriminate bombing of urban civilian populations, ethnic cleansing and civilian displacement on a grand scale, widespread sexual violence, use of chemical weapons, denial of humanitarian access and use of starvation as a weapon, and the bombing of hospitals and schools.

Norms of conflict and mechanisms for defusing conflict have never been robust in the Middle East compared to other regions. Organizations such as the League of Arab States (established in 1945 primarily in reaction to European colonialism and the founding of Israel) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC, established in 1981 after the Iranian revolution and subsequent onset of the Iran-Iraq war) have not been as vigorous or inclusive as bodies in other regions such as the African Union, Organization of American States, or Association of Southeast Asian Nations. While the Arab League and GCC have within their charters commitments to and mechanisms for the peaceful settlement of disputes between members, they lack credible mechanisms to impose consequences, such as sanctions, for noncompliance short of expelling members. They also have been heavily dominated by one or two regional powers—often Egypt or Saudi Arabia, more recently UAE—which have abused and been ready to jettison the organizations to pursue parochial agendas, such as the ongoing Saudi-Emirati diplomatic dispute with Qatar that began in 2017.

Establishing new norms of conflict and reinforcing norms that exist on paper are likely to be a lengthy, perhaps generational process, but need to be part of the international agenda for the Middle East. All Middle East countries are signatories to the Geneva Conventions, and as such political and military leaders have a legal and moral obligation to uphold these standards in the conduct of war.

## **Policy Recommendations**

History suggests that norms are established after conflicts, not during them. The Geneva Protocol of 1925 was a reaction to the widespread use of chemical weapons in World War I. The more expansive Geneva Conventions, which form the basis of modern international humanitarian law, were negotiated after the horrors of World War II. Thus, the eventual end of the current conflicts in the Middle East will offer an opportunity to strengthen norms. However, there are proactive steps that can be taken now:

**Recommit to international norms of conflict:** Organizations such as the United Nations, Arab League, and Organization of Islamic Cooperation should be encouraged to rearticulate their commitment to international humanitarian law. Regional political leaders should be pressed to say publicly what peace—or at least an end to violence—might look like in specific conflicts. Outside donors should consider expanded support for track 2 dialogue on norms of war, including among religious leaders and educators, for use with publics in Arab countries.

**Lead by example:** The United States and European nations as well as Israel should acknowledge the ill effects of the steps they have taken in the name of combating terrorism, including enhanced interrogation techniques and outright torture as well as military tactics such as signature drone strikes (which target people based on their behavioral patterns) and targeted assassinations (long a feature of Israel's counterterrorism approach). Going forward, the United States, Israel, as well as NATO members should consider more stringent rules of engagement.

**Train in international humanitarian law:** Training in international humanitarian law should be a fundamental part of curricula for officer corps and professional soldiers alike. Providers of security assistance and sellers of weapons should more stringently make access to advanced armed systems contingent upon such training.

**Pursue accountability:** There will inevitably be temptations to do whatever is most expedient to end fighting, including guarantees to avoid accountability for the parties to the conflicts. But international actors and organizations should keep in view the goals of establishing accountability and improved norms to mitigate future conflicts and atrocities. In Syria and Yemen, in particular, this means supporting efforts to collect and safeguard evidence against perpetrators of war crimes. Governments, both in the region and beyond, should



refrain from normalizing relations with the Assad government, which has been particularly egregious in perpetrating war crimes.

## CONCLUSION

While the Middle East has been recognized as an outlier among world regions in terms of the frequency and intensity of conflicts for some time, it is time to recognize that it is also an outlier in terms of the dearth of regional communication channels, dispute resolution mechanisms, and norms for warfare as well as a surplus of arms imports. There are opportunities for regional states as well as international actors to open up channels to resolve current conflicts and, in so doing, perhaps prevent future conflicts.

Internal unrest, regional power struggles, and quarrels between neighboring states are likely to endure in this region, which is struggling to find a new equilibrium as its decades-old economic models and social contracts lose salience. But nothing dictates that these problems translate into large-scale armed conflicts that bring about horrific human suffering and the destruction of state institutions, as well as spillover into neighboring regions.

A previous chapter of this report discusses the challenge of refugees and displaced persons. Here it is sufficient to repeat that sustained international humanitarian assistance for refugees and other persons displaced in Middle East conflicts will be necessary for the foreseeable future, and will be challenging to sustain over time as new regional and international challenges emerge. Ultimately the wealth of the Middle East region resides not in hydrocarbons or advanced weapons systems, but in its youthful and dynamic population.



## **SYRIA: MARKING A PYRRHIC VICTORY**

### **Interview With Kheder Khaddour**

#### **What is the nature and extent of control you expect the Assad regime to exert once most or all of the fighting ceases?**

Through a mixture of military and security methods, the Assad regime will most likely remain in control of the majority of Syria's territory and strategic areas such as border crossings and major highways. Yet much of this control will be over lands that have been largely, or in some cases completely, depopulated. Rather than negotiate with residents in these areas, the regime has instead chosen to displace them, seize the lands, and leave it up to international powers to negotiate for their rights.

Eventually, the regime aims to reconnect all the territory under its control with Damascus, making the capital the only hub through which regional and international powers can deal with the government on a national level over issues such as reconstruction and return of the refugees. In short, the nature of the Assad regime's control will be characterized by efforts to dominate key resources through the central hub of Damascus.

#### **Are new governance structures needed to stabilize the country? And is there a way to institute them?**

The regime has created a dilemma for itself. In order to survive, it created a mass of informal networks and structures outside Syrian state institutions throughout the years of war. These informal structures have expanded everywhere and at all levels, while the formal structure has been weakened. Now the regime must find a way to formalize these informal networks if it hopes to win political recognition as the country's legitimate government that it has been striving to attain. Consequently, future governance structures will necessarily include people who were involved in the war either economically or militarily. These will likely include prominent figures from various militias, who are now becoming involved in local elections, as well as the businessmen who helped finance armed groups, some of whom are now serving in the Syrian parliament. This process will continue as local armed groups and nongovernmental organizations are gradually incorporated into the framework of the state.

As a consequence of the war, Syria will not see a new centralized government structure able to stabilize the country, but instead existing structures will be used to stabilize the remaining forces—the regime, the Syrian Democratic Forces, and the armed opposition groups—rather than Syria as a whole.

**Given the ongoing role of regional and international actors inside Syria, what can be done to avoid persistent or new armed conflicts emerging?**

Turkey and the United States are present mostly in the border regions of the north and east, while the Iranians and Russians are more involved in Syria's south and its key urban hubs. To avoid any persistent conflicts, political channels should be maintained on common ground between all powers present in Syria, particularly in the northern and eastern border regions.

**Given the likely continuation in power of Assad for now, what can be done to guarantee the safety and property rights of those refugees and IDPs who seek to return to their homes?**

With support from the Russians, the Assad regime is trying to gain political legitimacy and to make Damascus the central Syrian hub for dealing with the refugee issue, partly through dealing with neighboring countries.

The issues of displaced people and refugees must be put on the agenda of the political process in Geneva and must be made part of any international resolution for Syria. Such international attention will be one of the best methods for ensuring property rights.

## **YEMEN: EMPOWERING LOCAL CIVIL GOVERNMENTS**

### **Interview With Amat Al Alim Alsoswa**

**How can a negotiated political settlement to the conflict in Yemen be achieved?**

The United Nations Security Council must support a framework that enhances confidence between local and regional parties to the conflict and encourages them to return to the negotiating table. The UN prioritizes a deal between the Houthis and the Yemeni government (President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi's administration), but the Houthis will look for assurances from the Arab coalition (mainly consisting of Saudi Arabia and the UAE)—assurances Hadi can't deliver—before they deescalate. In return, the Houthis must distance themselves from Iran and end attacks on Saudi Arabia. This kind of progress is unlikely unless tensions between the regional powers ease, so the UN Security Council should also encourage any rapprochement between the regional powers, which can create a more appropriate atmosphere for negotiations.

The war economy must also be undermined. The coalition governments need to punish commanders profiteering from the conflict and shut down illicit trade, some of which stems from neighboring states, and the Security Council needs to sanction major war profiteers on all sides. These and other measures need to be tied to the broader peace process, in which warring parties must be incentivized to cooperate with the UN envoy in serious negotiations.

**Can traditional dispute resolution mechanisms in Yemen be reactivated if the external intervening parties allow it? Or have power relationships among Yemeni factions been fundamentally altered due to the war?**

The war has undermined the very existence of the state, traditional institutions, and political parties in Yemen, and there are no national leaders with the influence to make major decisions that can stop the war, begin a national reconciliation process, and ensure justice (or even reparations or another form of compensation) for victims of war crimes. The people with immediate power will be the de facto authorities and armed militia leaders who continue to benefit from war and corruption. Therefore, discussions on the future of Yemen should take place with the participation of representatives from all regions of Yemen and representatives of the constituents of Yemeni society, integrating the needs and opinions of local communities in particular.

Right now there's no sense that external parties want Yemeni reconciliation. There's not only the intervention of pro-Saudi and UAE elements but also the undeclared presence of Iran, Qatar, and Turkey. All these actors must be both pressured and incentivized to facilitate a permanent ceasefire on the ground.

**Given the political fragmentation of recent years, would new governance structures be needed in a postconflict scenario?**

The best solution for Yemen is to reach a flexible central system of government and a system of regions based on our historical and social constituencies, but not merely on a tribal basis. One path toward accomplishing this is to empower local civil governments that adopt equal citizenship and promote the rule of law, and empower them to direct their communities' reconstruction. These local bodies would be elected prior to any national-level elections, and this approach would remove decisionmaking power for basic governance and development from the political elite, placing it in the hands of local leaders more responsive to their communities' needs and demands.

## **What are the prospects for defeating al-Qaeda and other extremist groups operating in Yemen?**

Counterterrorism must be looked at locally and internationally. Locally, a representative government that delivers basic services, stabilizes livelihoods across regions, and disempowers corrupt leaders using sectarianism as a tool for their own ends will all help diminish al-Qaeda. So here, prospects for a long-term “defeat” are poor.

But we also need a serious reconfiguration of international counterterrorism policy. Emphasis should be placed on drying up the sources of terrorist thought and adopting realistic policies to contain terrorist elements and reduce their risk by adapting economic and educational plans that help to eliminate the underdevelopment, poverty, and unemployment in Arab and Islamic countries.

## **LIBYA: RECONCILING GRIEVANCE AND GREED** **Interview With Tarek Megerisi**

### **How can a negotiated settlement to the conflict in Libya be achieved?**

There are two drivers of conflict that need to be reconciled for a negotiated settlement to the conflict: grievance and greed. Satisfying the aggrieved will require a mixture of transitional justice and constitutional-level guarantees to assuage insecurities for the future. Predatory actors will be significantly harder to satiate, and will require a mixture of carrot-and-stick-based coercive measures to ensure they don't spoil any process. Overall, it's arguable whether the greed driver of conflict can be neutralized without reforming Libya's governance system and, most crucially, the centralized mechanism for distributing state largesse.

### **Who are the main foreign actors, and how do they affect the conflict?**

Despite the international community uniformly claiming to only act through the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), in reality many states act unilaterally to attempt to secure their interests. The coalition backing Khalifa Haftar, comprised of the UAE, Egypt, France, and to some extent Russia, complicates and disrupts the political process and has created fresh grievances among many constituencies. The other major

actor is Italy, which prioritizes securing installations belonging to the Italian oil firm Eni, protecting oil extracted from under the Mediterranean, and blocking migrants crossing from Libya to Italy. The Italian-French competition to take the leading role has undermined the efficacy of European actors. Although Qatar has previously been a dominant actor, its involvement dissipated alongside the marginalization of their interlocutors within the Libyan dynamic and the ascension of Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani to emir. Following the collapse of Fajr Libya and the National Salvation Government of Khalifa Ghweil, many in Libya's Islamist milieu fled to Turkey to escape an increasingly insecure environment. Although Libyan communities within Turkey continue to send armaments and resources to their allies in Misrata or Tripoli, the Turkish government appears to remain largely indifferent to Libya's internal conflict.

### **Is it possible to disentangle the role of these outside actors?**

European actors share medium- and long-term interests with Libya. If Europe could agree on a path toward stability and work toward coherent policies, then it could become a unified actor with enough gravity to bend the regional actors toward a common path. Regional actors will be significantly more difficult to untangle given the ideological lens through which they view the conflict. It would behoove UNSMIL to include a strand of work that seeks to reconcile regional actors with their own action plan and dampen the worst negativities of the regional approach. Algeria previously advanced a big-tent approach whereby all Libyan security and political actors would meet to devise a road map. Reviving this could be a diplomatic way of disentangling international involvement.

### **Given the political fragmentation in recent years, what new governance structures are needed?**

Libya's postrevolutionary conflict, political malaise, and fragmentation are largely a product of its Jamahiriya governance system, which incentivizes zero-sum competition between Libyans. Key to this is the centralization of the state's administration, decision-making systems, and finances. As such, decentralization is at the heart of any structural fix to the country. Political issues (such as service delivery and development projects) should be devolved and a division of the country's oil revenues should be guaranteed. If expenditure and decisionmaking are decentralized, then resolving Libya's many militias into a national security apparatus would also become considerably easier.

## **IRAQ: SEARCHING FOR COMPETENT GOVERNANCE**

### **Interview With Maysoon Al-Damluji**

#### **What can be done to prevent the resurgence of the Islamic State inside Iraq?**

Various political, economic, and social measures will need to be implemented in order to prevent the resurgence of the Islamic State inside Iraq. First, the population that previously provided shelter to the Islamic State will have to feel it's a part of the political process. This population has felt threatened and disenfranchised since 2003. It suffered from de-Baathification, abrupt detentions, false imprisonments, and exclusion from the armed forces.

The economy also plays a part in bringing normality to the region. Reconstruction of cities must be accomplished by the hands of their own youth. Agricultural land and rural areas have to be developed in order to increase employment and productivity.

Intellectual, cultural, and physical challenges should also be addressed. Libraries, sports grounds, museums, and so on should be made vital elements of communities, with larger support for civil societies and media.

Finally, and probably most importantly, police and other security institutions must appear to work for the communities, not against them.

#### **What can be done to insulate Iraq from the impacts of the regional competition between the United States and Iran?**

Iraq's long border with Iran makes it difficult to insulate, adding deep historic and religious elements that tie the two people. Iran has had a massive influence on politics in Iraq since the U.S. invasion in 2003, under the pretext of spreading religion and resisting invasion.

At the same time, a new Iraqi nationalism is also on the rise, especially after the defeat of the Islamic State. Iranian-backed politicians are being held responsible for the sectarian conflicts and corruption that have consumed Iraq's income since 2003.

Iraq today is in need of a competent government that can deliver services, build a sound economy, and limit the influence of militias. Iraq could even take advantage of the regional competition to negotiate the flow of water into rivers from Turkey and Iran.

### **Is a more equitable political compact possible in Iraq?**

A review of the Iraqi constitution is urgently needed in order to clarify the relationship between the federal government and the provinces, to look into ownership of natural resources, and to create a fair system for distribution of wealth. After fifteen years, it is time to put an end to de-Baathification and to refer all personal injustices to courts of law.

The electoral system has to be more inclusive by creating clear constituencies where a constituent can relate to his or her representative.

Also, the judiciary has to be fortified and empowered to gain more of the public's trust, and able to hold officials responsible for any misconduct.

### **Iraq's relations with its Arab neighbors have improved in recent years. What can be done to nurture this process?**

Iraq can play a pivotal role in creating stability and balance in the region. Prosperity would not be confined to Iraq but would spill over to neighboring countries, enabling deeper economic, cultural, and social ties with the Arab world.

Yet neighboring states might find it beneficial to invest in Iraq's stability and prosperity, and find a way to coexist with Iraq's Shia majority.

Exchange of visits, effective embassies, and small investments might be a good start.

## **RUSSIA IN SYRIA: PREVENTING REGIME CHANGE, BUYING INTERNATIONAL INFLUENCE**

### **Interview With Marianna Belenkaya**

#### **What are Russia's primary interests in Syria?**

According to the official version, Russia's intervention is a fight against international terrorism in a remote territory. Syria has always been diplomatically close to Russia: it is the only country where Moscow had a military-technical base on the Mediterranean, although before the beginning of the Syrian conflict it was difficult to consider it a real military base. Russia also had economic plans in Syria. However, the psychological trauma on the Russian leadership from the development of the Libyan conflict and the murder of Libya's former leader Muammar Gaddafi became the catalyst for Russia's actions. A few months after the beginning of the military campaign in 2015, it became obvious that Russia had regained its influence in the Middle East, which it had previously lost after the collapse of the USSR. Russia's military operation in Syria coincided with an international campaign to isolate Russia because of the events in Ukraine. But thanks to the Syrian campaign, Moscow's influence on international politics only increased. Now, for Russia, the stabilization of the situation in Syria is a matter of maintaining Russian positions in the Middle East and the international arena as a whole.

#### **What would a preferred end state for Syria look like from the perspective of the Russian government, and how can it be achieved?**

Russia is interested in stabilizing the situation in Syria and preserving the integrity of this country. It is important for Russia to demonstrate not only its success in putting an end to terrorism in Syria but also its positive role in the political settlement in that country. It is important that the future authorities of Syria remain loyal to Russia, and that the country continue to be in the orbit of Russian interests, becoming an outpost of Russia's policy in the Middle East. In addition, Russian politicians realize that considering a more active role the United States starts playing in Syria and the Turkish interests there, returning Syrian national integrity is not an easy task, especially in light of the need for the country's reconstruction. No country can accomplish the latter task by itself. And Russia has some reasons to fear that it may end up in an unfavorable situation.



### **What can Russia do to reduce the likelihood of a conflict between Israel and Iran in southwest Syria?**

Russia has already done everything that was in its power on this issue. It was Moscow that got the pro-Iranian forces to refrain from officially participating in the military operation in the southwest of Syria and move to other areas. Unofficially, some Hezbollah and other pro-Iranian forces remain in the area, and the Israelis know about it. But while the status quo is being respected, the Israelis are turning a blind eye to this. Further developments depend not only on Moscow but also on the attitude of the international community toward Tehran. The greater the pressure on Tehran, the more actively it will resist. Moscow will try to restrain Israel and Iran, since an open conflict between them is not in its interests while the situation in Syria has not yet stabilized. But not everything depends on Moscow.

### **Is an accommodation between Washington and Moscow possible in Syria? (If no, why not? If yes, what might it look like?)**

Now that Washington has stepped up its policy in Syria and intends to stay in that country for a long time, the prospects for agreements between Washington and Moscow do not look simple. However, military contacts and political dialogue between the two countries will continue. But Russia can't resist the United States if it decides to stay in Syria, and in this circumstance a search for the political solution in Syria will be more difficult and drag out the conflict. In any case, both sides will be forced to contact each other and negotiate on issues of coexistence in Syria.

## **THE UNITED STATES IN SYRIA: DEFEATING THE ISLAMIC STATE, BLOCKING CHEMICAL WEAPONS**

### **Interview With James Carafano**

#### **What are the United States' primary interests in Syria?**

The United States has several strategic interests in Syria, but only two currently rise to the level of vital interests that would merit the use of U.S. military force: defeating the Islamic State and deterring/punishing the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime. In addition to those two, the United States also has an interest in containing Iranian influence, protecting allies from threats emanating from Syria, addressing the humanitarian situation inside Syria, and preventing more refugees from flowing out of Syria. However, the problem lies in balancing U.S. interests without incurring unnecessary monetary and military costs. Therefore, the United States should be primarily concerned with counterterrorism operations in Syria and deterring/punishing the use of chemical weapons. It should continue eliminating any remaining Islamic State presence and prevent it and similar terrorist groups from rising again. The second-order goals can be accomplished by working through allies and friendly Syrian factions, without the direct use of U.S. military force, at least for the time being.

#### **How should the Trump administration seek to secure these interests?**

The U.S. military policy in Syria should focus on counterterrorism first. U.S. troops should not remain in Syria longer than is necessary to accomplish their strategic goals there, and working with allies in the region should be prioritized. To prevent Iran from filling the vacuum left by the Islamic State, the United States should not withdraw its limited military presence in eastern Syria until allies and local partners have been trained, equipped, and deployed to prevent a resurgence of the Islamic State. The United States should continue working with allies on not only counterterrorism but also mitigating the spillover effects from the Syrian civil war.

The United States should strongly support Israel's right to self-defense in pushing back on Iranian advances in Syria. It also should assist Jordan in defending itself against the Islamic State, Iran, Iranian-trained militias, and the Assad regime.

#### **Is an accommodation between Washington and Moscow possible in Syria? (If no, why not? If yes, what might such an accommodation look like?)**

The United States and Russia have competing interests in Syria. Russia has long been friends with the Assad regime and has backed Syria against Israel and the United States.

Additionally, Russia has aligned itself with Iran and has supported Iranian meddling in Syria. Both of these realities are in direct opposition to U.S. interests.

Russia has furthermore proven itself to be an untrustworthy diplomatic partner for the United States in Syria. It has negotiated the creation of four deescalation zones that enabled it to temporarily reduce the fighting on some fronts while it crushed other fronts, one by one. Idlib is the last remaining deescalation zone. Putin's interventions in Ukraine and Georgia also demonstrate that Russia has no problem in violating its international legal commitments and undermining other nations' borders or governments.

**Shifting briefly to Yemen, to what extent should the Trump administration support the Saudi-led intervention there?**

Saudi Arabia is an important U.S. ally in the Middle East. The Houthis, who overthrew the internationally recognized government of Yemen, increasingly have become an Iranian proxy force and have launched Iranian-supplied missiles at civilian targets in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Yemen. They have also attacked international shipping, U.S. Navy vessels, and Royal Saudi Navy vessels in the Red Sea. The United States has a vital interest in safeguarding the free flow of oil and other shipping through the Red Sea, and lower priority interests in helping Saudi Arabia push back the Houthis, countering Iranian influence in the peninsula, restoring the legitimate government in Yemen, and brokering a political settlement in Yemen that ends the fighting, eases humanitarian suffering, and frees up the Yemeni government and the Saudi-led coalition to focus more on defeating al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Yemen.

## **IRAN IN SYRIA: SECURING REGIONAL DETERRENCE**

### **Interview With Hassan Ahmadian**

#### **What are Iran's primary interests in Syria?**

Iran is primarily concerned with preserving Syria's prominent role in the Axis of Resistance and its overarching goal of securing its regional deterrence. Accordingly, the collapse of Damascus was intolerable because it would have negatively affected Iran and its allies in the region. This includes securing supply routes to Lebanon; enhancing the deterrence capabilities and operational experience of the Axis of Resistance against Israel and the United States, especially with Trump's renewed hostility; and balancing Turkey in northern Syria. In addition, preserving Syria's significant position within the Axis of Resistance serves to showcase Iran's effectiveness in supporting allies and in its leadership role in the axis.

#### **What is Iran's preferred outcome in Syria, and how is it seeking to achieve such an outcome?**

While initially opposing a military solution in Syria, Iran and its allies gradually moved to using military means to pave the way for a negotiated political settlement after the military balance on the ground shifted drastically against the Syrian regime. This transition was evidenced clearly in the Iran-Russia partnership, which aimed at stopping the opposition's advances in Syria and provided a lifeline to the Syrian government. The premise of this strategy was that with the reversal of its advances, the opposition in Syria would be incentivized for a political settlement. While Iran still insists on this general political blueprint, Tehran's preferred outcome is one in which the Syrian regime and state would survive and the opposition would be tamed and ideally integrated. It also wants takfirists and their backers completely excluded. Deterring the United States along the eastern Euphrates is also important for Iran. To achieve this, Iran banks on its own allies on the ground and on its counterparts in the Astana process, which has proved successful in mitigating negative effects from the civil war.

#### **How can an Iranian-Israeli conflict in Syria be avoided?**

First, to avoid a conflict it is very important to avoid misperceptions on Iran's policy and priorities in Syria, which include prioritizing the balancing of Turkey and pushing back against the United States in northern Syria. A conflict with Israel is not a priority. Iran will also stay in Syria until its strategic concerns with keeping Syria in the Axis of Resistance

are met. That includes a Syria free of foreign troops, especially with regards to U.S. and Turkish forces. Second, there is the possibility of unintended conflict. Iran cannot turn a blind eye and refuse to respond to Israeli assaults on itself and its allies without putting its reputation in jeopardy. Therefore, it is possible that Iran's secondary priorities could, at any time, cause unintended conflicts that go beyond Syria. International partners, especially Russia, can be intermediators of crucial effect to contain such a knock-on effect and conflagration that could quickly envelop the larger region.

**Turning to Yemen, what is the best way to produce a negotiated peace settlement in that country?**

Iran's main driver for the limited support to Ansar Allah (the formal name of the Houthi movement) is to help keep Yemen independent of Saudi domination, which is in and of itself a strategic gain over Riyadh. Boggling down Saudi Arabia in Yemen is part of a strategy of exhausting Riyadh's anti-Iran campaign in the region. Based on this clear and precise goal, Iran brought up an initiative for a political settlement in Yemen stressing an end to the Saudi war in the first clause, which in effect would mean a Saudi defeat, demonstrating that any scenario (either peace or war) is a defeat for the Saudis. As such, despite its close ties with Ansar Allah, Tehran was not welcomed as a mediator by Saudi Arabia. Theoretically, a peace in Yemen is only achievable when realities on the ground, namely the political primacy of Ansar Allah, are acknowledged, but it does not appear that Saudi Arabia is ready to recognize Ansar Allah and negotiate.

## **THE UAE IN YEMEN: SUPPORTING THE LEGITIMATE GOVERNMENT**

### **Interview With Mohammed Baharoon**

#### **How successful has the military intervention in Yemen been in pursuing the primary objectives of the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia?**

The efforts in Yemen are both military and diplomatic. The diplomatic effort by the Saudis and Emiratis to establish a unified global position on Yemen, represented by UN Security Council Resolution 2216, is based on two important principles: supporting the legitimate government of Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi and preventing a religious takeover of Yemen akin to the Islamic State's occupation of Mosul and Raqqa. Meanwhile, the military campaign has stopped the advances of the Houthis into Aden and Marib and helped push them back in many areas, including the west coast where most smuggling was happening through ports like Mokha and Midi. This does not mean the military mission has been a complete success, but it is an important aspect nonetheless.

#### **What would, in your view, an acceptable end state for Yemen look like?**

Resolution 2216 articulates a base line for all parties involved, both domestic and foreign. Once the legitimate government has been restored in Sanaa, then the peace process can be resumed that decides the final status of Yemen. Ultimately, it is up to Yemenis to decide on the form of governance that provides justice and realizes their aspirations. Yemen may not go back to be the central state it used to be, and its diversity may be managed by a more decentralized state.

#### **Is a negotiated solution in Yemen possible now? If so, how might it be achieved?**

Experience has shown that unless the Houthis feel pressure, they will not be interested in a negotiated solution. Thus, the ongoing coalition military operation is designed to create leverage for such a political process. Despite a great deal of international support, the UN special envoy to Yemen, Martin Griffiths, has not yet succeeded in getting negotiations restarted. However, there still is the prospect that tribal dialogue with the Houthis could lead to a breakthrough.

#### **What role do you expect Yemen's political and social forces to play in resolving the conflict?**

Discussions are ongoing among various political forces. But Yemeni politics are changing. The General People's Congress splintered into three factions after the assassination

of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, while Islah is also strained by internal divisions. Meanwhile, new political forces have emerged, such as the secessionist Southern Transitional Council. A major challenge is that the Houthis, officially known as Ansar Allah, is not a political party and does not want to be seen as such. It insists that it is a movement possibly to avoid being measured by the size of its constituency. This distinction will complicate things.

The traditional tribal forces have been absent from the process but can be vital for track 2 discussions. An example is the temporary truce Saudi Arabia achieved with the Houthis on December 15, 2015. There is little evidence that civil society organizations can be helpful in a political dialogue even though they will be vital for postconflict discussions.

# NOTES

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