

What Inhibits Social and Political Transformation in the Middle East? Social Change and the Global Middle East Series

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The organizers of this panel have accurately described a Middle Eastern region recently riven by a series of seismic events. These include the revolutionary risings against authoritarian regimes starting in 2011, massive, region-wide flows of refugees, civil wars cum proxy wars in several countries, and perhaps the world's worst humanitarian crisis in Yemen.

While these upheavals have changed much in the region, much remains the same. More than half of the nineteen countries of the Middle East suffer under one form or another of undemocratic authoritarian rule, and the rest have a range of modified authoritarian or partially democratic governments. In a region where most countries are either major producers of oil or gas, or produce smaller quantities, much of their surplus is either wasted on vanity projects or expensive advanced weapons systems,¹ or siphoned off into the overseas bank accounts of long-standing oligarchies with their roots in either kleptocratic monarchies or military or party dictatorships.

Although Turkey, and to a lesser extent Iran, are exceptions (in what follows I also do not consider Israel, which is in the Middle East, but not of it), in the five largest countries of the region, those with populations of 40 million or more, unemployment, especially among youth, is

¹ Saudi Arabia's total military expenditure from 2013-2020 was \$560 billion, and its arms budget in 2020 was sixth in the world, ahead of Germany and France. In spite of this stratospheric spending, it has repeatedly shown itself unable to defend its borders even against threats from enemies with extremely limited means.

rife,² there is relatively little high tech industry, education ranges from poor to appalling, literacy rates are low and economic growth is anemic. Thus, literacy ranges from a pitiful 50% in Iraq and 60% in the Sudan to 71% in Egypt, 73% in Morocco and 81% in Algeria, and economic growth in most of these countries has recently been lower than the rate of population growth.

The tenacity in clinging to power of the long-standing oligarchies of the Arab countries and the regimes they have shaped and control is a notable feature of their politics. The situation of political, social, cultural and economic stagnation that these regimes have presided over for many decades provoked the abortive revolutions of 2011 in several countries, and in others the massive unrest of 2019-20 in others that was cut short by the Covid-19 pandemic. Remarkably, in spite of the evident unpopularity of these regimes, with the sole exception of Tunisia (where a new dictatorship may be in the process of formation) and the Sudan (where the military still has the lion's share of power in an uneasy coalition with civilians), they are all still in power. Other exceptions are Libya, Syria, Iraq and Yemen -- all shattered states of one sort or another -- that are or recently were the scenes of ongoing civil wars or sectarian or ethnic conflict, fueled by massive foreign intervention, both military and covert.

In this short essay I examine briefly some of the internal, regional and international factors that have inhibited the social and political transformation of most Arab countries, resulting in this long-standing situation of stagnation and consequent ongoing unrest, punctuated by bouts of revolutionary upheaval.

The internal factors naturally differ from country to country, but one factor that most of them share is a powerful repressive apparatus, anchored in a robust military and a ferocious

² Estimated unemployment rates are 10% or higher in four of the five countries, surely an underestimate, and are much higher among youth.

secret police apparatus. One of the few arenas in which there is nearly seamless cooperation among Arab League countries, in spite of frequent political differences among them, is internal security. This cooperation is often supported by collaboration with and assistance from other security services, notably those of the US, France, the UK and Israel. Ostensibly directed against transnational terrorist networks, some of this external aid furthers domestic repression in several Arab countries.

Since the middle of the last century, regional wars, especially major wars between Arab states and Israel and between Iran and Iraq, have contributed to the growth of a potent military-industrial-security complex, even when these wars ended three or four decades ago. Once established, these massive accretions of budgetary power and material and class interests, enjoying a monopoly over the exercise of force (and often controlling large portions of the economy, as in Egypt), are virtually impossible to reduce in size, as Americans discovered after the end of the Cold War. There is always another enemy over the horizon, or within, to justify maintaining and expanding the power of the military and security services, which in the Arab world exist mainly serve to provide regime security. The existence of a potent security-military sector is a powerful factor militating against social, economic and political transformation.

Another internal factor is the reliance of repressive regimes on the demonstration effect of chaos in neighboring countries where contestation with the regime has produced civil war or prolonged unrest. Fear of going the way of these scenes of disorder, destruction and massive refugee displacement, suitably reinforced by subtle regime messaging, helps to keep the middle classes and many others aligned with dictatorships that offer “security” even as they deny political, human and other rights, pillage the country’s resources, and fail to produce vigorous economic growth or sustainable development.

Another factor involves the shared interests in preservation of “stability” of the elites that dominate many repressive regimes, and of the ruling families of several Gulf oligarchies. Both sides of this partnership lack popular legitimacy, are viscerally opposed to democracy, and are fierce partisans of the stagnant Arab status quo from which they profit handsomely. These combined interests played a crucial role in suppressing or derailing the anti-regime Arab upheavals of the past decade, with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi playing roles analogous to those played by St. Petersburg and Vienna in putting down the great revolutionary upheavals that shook Europe in 1848.

A final factor inhibiting political, social and economic transformation in the Arab world and propping up its undemocratic regimes has been massive external support from the US and leading European countries. They protect these regimes because their economies benefit enormously from sales of arms and civil airliners, oil and gas profits, investments in pricey real estate in New York, London and Paris, and in myriad other ways from the profligacy of Gulf and other Arab autocrats. Continuation of this flow of money which fattens bottom lines throughout the capitalist economy is dependent on the maintenance in power of weak, undemocratic regimes deficient in popular legitimacy, which cannot defend themselves against external enemies and their own peoples without outside help. Were the capital generated solely by the nearly \$2.5 trillion annual GDP of Saudi Arabia and the UAE alone spent productively within their borders and in the Arab region, rather than being wasted, for example, by one Saudi royal on a painting, a yacht and a French chateau that cost a quarter billion dollars each, the Arab world would face an entirely different social and economic future than it does today, and would have more hope for a gradual transition to a more democratic path.