A DECADE OF ARAB UPHEAVAL 2011-2021

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Arab World has undergone a transformational decade of political upheaval and contentious politics that had varying trajectories in different states. This paper takes a holistic approach to evaluating the last ten years' regional implications with regards to internal governance, structural issues, international relations, and human security.

The period from 2011-2021 cannot be viewed as a unitary, linear historical period with a clear progression. It is perhaps more useful to think of four distinct sub-periods of political development: the initial spark of the revolutionary momentum of popular mobilization (2011-2013), the virulent regime pushback (2013-2016), the attempts at establishing a new "normal" (2016-2019), and the continuation of popular mobilization (2019-present), albeit with lagging results.

Arab State behavior has vacillated greatly over the past ten years. The only constant is conceding as little as possible, but tactics have greatly varied, from widespread co-optation to massive coercion and everything in between. Prediction in this landscape would not be prudent.

Preceding the Arab uprisings and revolutions of 2011 and persistent throughout the last decade are several structural macroeconomic and socioeconomic challenges. Notable among these are three specific challenges: education, unemployment/underemployment, and women's participation.

Arab states as presently constituted—with partially liberalized economies that depend on taxation, but with illiberal governance and politics—cannot generate enough jobs either through public sector employment or through facilitating private sector growth. This challenge has been ubiquitous throughout the Arab World. As long as Arab states cling onto some tenets of their eroding social contracts, their structural problems are unlikely to be tackled systematically and equitably.

Neighborhood effects in the Arab World have not been conducive to democratic transition, and in fact have enabled war crimes and state collapse. The last ten years witnessed regional state intervention and military adventurism on an unprecedented level, along with a rising prominence of non-state military actors.

Taken as a collective, regional and global interventions in crisis countries have exacerbated sectarian strife and worsened human security. No places in which state actors have interfered is posed for stability, let alone prosperity and development. In this regard, state actors have been more damaging than non-state actors.

International actors (diplomatic or NGOs) who seek to engage in the region should be cautioned to the following: recognize the limits of the sovereigntist/statist paradigm and maintain self-reflexivity; recognize the implications of "neutrality," which often privileges the powerful and privileged in the regional order; be cautious of adopting legal and theoretical frameworks that assume a supportive infrastructure; foster relationships with independent (non-state) entities in Arab countries; and finally, encourage states with commitments to universal values (human rights, good governance, and the rule of law) to be more forceful in counterbalancing those that do not.

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[1] The views expressed in this paper are those of the author.

A DECADE OF ARAB UPHEAVAL IN GOVERNANCE AND POLITICS

2021 marked ten years since the advent of the Arab Uprisings and the tumultuous, history-making revolutionary processes they unleashed. Though frequently described in terms of democratization and democratic transitions, this period is perhaps more helpfully thought of in terms of the "revival of Arab politics" (Brown 2016), in which the Arab World exited a long period of economic and political stagnation and inertia and entered a truly revolutionary dynamic. As generations of political scientists have warned, the movement towards democracy cannot and should not be taken for granted (e.g., Carothers 2002). Rather, what can be safely assumed is that the authoritarian bargain of providing jobs and prosperity in return for citizens' submission has been permanently ruptured. For a multitude of reasons, the Arab State can no longer survive on "no taxation, no representation," and the citizenry will not accept taxation without representation. Top-down, partial economic liberalization without subsequent political and legal reform and liberalization has also failed spectacularly. These are some of the structural foundations which ushered in the "Arab Spring" (Malik and Awadallah 2013).

At the same time, the period from 2011-2021 cannot be viewed as a unitary, linear historical period with a clear progression. Instead, what is proposed in this paper is the segmentation of the last decade into four sections. The first of these is the period of popular mobilization and hyperactive citizenship that brought down some (and shook most) political regimes, popularly known as the "Arab Spring," from 2011-2013. Second is the virulent regime pushback and bloody counter-revolutionary backlash from 2013-2016. Third is the period of regime reconsolidation and reestablishment of fault lines, alliances, and poles—a desperate attempt at establishing a "new normal" along neo-fascist lines—roughly from 2016-2019. Finally, the fourth and current period is one in which protracted governance crises rekindle popular mobilization and hyper-citizenship from 2019-2021, shaking regimes in the region once more and reaffirming the centrality of grievances that led many to take the streets in the first place. This latest period came against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, which itself shocked global systems in an unprecedented manner.

The "Spring" (2011-2013)

The initial protests and uprisings that broke out in 2011 throughout the Arab World were a moment of long-awaited reckoning for societies and political regimes alike. Few commentators predicted that the partial liberalization model adopted by Arab authoritarian incumbents would survive, but none predicted it would crumble so quickly after its initial introduction in the early 2000s. 2011-2013 is the period when Arab societies gained the initiative in renegotiating the governance bargains under which they had been ruled for decades.

What is noteworthy here is not the mere scale and scope of popular protests and uprisings, and the viral way they spread across the Arab World, leveraging social media to mobilize the citizenry in a regional context—borrowing tactics from the Iranian Green Movement (2009) and influencing the Turkish Gezi Park Protests (2013). This has received ample media coverage, scholarly attention, and policy deliberation. What has received less attention is the sheer alarm that hit regimes which had, up until 2011, stalled any prospects of meaningful reform and dismissed calls for increasing political representation. This alarm led to desperate attempts to stem the revolutionary tide engulfing the region, and most regimes adopted a conciliatory tone and firefighting policies during the period 2011-2013.

Just a few days before he escaped his enflamed country, longtime Tunisian dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali delivered his famous "Al-An Fahimtukum" ("I now understand you") speech, offering protesters concessions deemed too little, too late. After his escape, Arab regimes rushed to offer their own conciliations: Jordan slashed energy prices and reinstated food subsidies,[2] Saudi Arabia promised

billions in aid programs,[3] Egypt underwent multiple cabinet reshufflings and launched a constitutional reform process, in addition to price cuts and salary increases, before Mubarak was forced to step down,[4] and the King of Morocco started a constitutional reform process that promised political liberalization.[5] This is not to suggest the absence of repression across Arab countries helped manage the political unrest. Rather, the Arab rentier state was attempting its last stand and regimes across the region were alarmed and frightened, as the Tunisian, Egyptian, Libyan, and Yemeni dictators fell one after the other.

During this time, human rights, democratic governance, and liberalization of the public sphere were primary demands of protest movements. Theories were concocted about the "rising cost of repression" (Lynch 2013), both physical and reputational, that compelled Arab dictators not to repress with as much force as perhaps they would have liked. Some of those who unleashed their full repressive force (e.g., Muammar Al-Ghaddafi) were met with international scorn and multi-national coalitions to defend their populations. Others (Bahrain's Hamad Al-Khalifa and Syria's Bashar Al-Assad) were more tactical in their repressive efforts during the "Spring." Despite his boisterous rhetoric of facing "the conspiracy aimed at Syria," Al-Assad even released political prisoners in May of 2011 and declared an amnesty in June of 2011 in order to manage the Syrian revolution in its early days.[6] The Arab regime was teetering, grasping at the available tools at its disposal to survive the Spring.[7]

The Virulent Pushback (2013-2016)

By mid-2013, themes of democracy and human rights were overshadowed by the political and ideological polarization that had reached an apex in the region. Islamist parties and factions had expressed a desire not only to lead but to dominate the political scene in Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, and elsewhere, and their commitments to human rights and democracy were notoriously fickle. Their experiences in leading both governments and oppositions were facing severe challenges (economic, security, and other forms), fostered both at home by members of the ancien régime and abroad by the various states supporting the counter-revolutionary momentum.

From the summer of 2013 until about late 2016, the Arab order attempted to reestablish or "reassemble" itself.[8] Perhaps the most significant development in this regard was the military coup in Egypt, which was supported by a plethora of local political actors and movements, as well as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and other Arab states/regimes. The political developments in Egypt, Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere took a bloody turn, as state actors realized that the cost of repression was indeed lower than they had anticipated.

The region witnessed one state (or state-aspiring entity) after another committing one massacre after another: the Rabaah massacre in Egypt committed by the Egyptian Army, the Ghouta chemical massacre and many others in Syria committed by the Assad regime, multiple massacres committed by the Houthi insurgency in Yemen and the Saudi-led coalition fighting it, and finally multiple massacres perpetrated by the newly emergent Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS, or Daesh). The genocidal pushback was an attempt by the Arab State system to scare the Arab citizenry into submission by unequivocally adopting the "War on Terror" paradigm to justify human rights violations. It largely succeeded due to the failure of the international community to condemn (let alone stop) the bloodshed, perhaps due to the latter's own complicity in the war crimes and overall nihilism of the "War on Terror."

This period also oversaw the blurring of state lines and a free-for-all in terms of regional and international intervention. Saudi troops crossed into Bahrain to prop up the Al Khalifah dynasty. Lebanese, Iraqi, Iranian, Afghan, and later Russian forces descended upon Syria in aid of the Assad regime. Moroccans, Tunisians, Algerians, Jordanians, and others flocked to join ISIS. Libya became a theatre for Egyptian, Saudi, Emirati, Russian, and Turkish intervention. Finally, Yemen witnessed the intervention of a coalition including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Sudan, Morocco,

and others. Political conflict in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, and to a certain extent Bahrain no longer conformed to national frames, grievances, or issues, and could no longer be solved with national processes.[9] States that did not collapse into failure warned of the fate of those that did. Arab regimes regained the initiative in dictating societal outcomes to their citizenry.[10]

Establishing a New "Normal" (2016-2019)

Sensing the upper hand, Arab state actors and regimes tried to establish a new "normal" or semblance of political order. The pillars of this new order were hyper-securitization, a new regional rivalry, and bold policy initiatives that were transformational in scope. This period can easily be described as the rise of Arab neo-fascism. In the backdrop of all this was the election to the US presidency of Donald Trump, who made no pretense of supporting human rights or democratization processes. Also in the background was the heightened regional role of Russia, starting with its military involvement in propping up the Syrian regime at the end of 2015.

The most notable developments of this period came in the form of attempts at reasserting control. In Egypt, Abdelfattah Sisi (Trump's favorite dictator) consolidated his dictatorship and extended his constitutional mandate until 2030. In Saudi Arabia, Mohammed Bin Salman rose to the rank of Crown Prince and consolidated his grip over the country by enacting an ambitious purge in 2017. In Syria, the Assad regime regained Aleppo after a savage bombardment campaign in 2016, followed by Ghouta and Daraa in 2018, which were recaptured in a similar fashion. In Iraq and Syria, ISIS was driven out of Mosul and Raqqa by Iraqi government forces and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) respectively. However, this came at a massive human cost, with both cities shelled indiscriminately, leading to massive dislocation and civilian casualties. In Iraq specifically, the recapture of Mosul by the Iraqi National Army and allied Popular Mobilization Forces (Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi) came with a distinct sectarian undertone. In Yemen, Ali Abdallah Saleh was killed by the Houthi insurgency after he attempted to switch sides, and the country drew to a vicious military, political, and humanitarian stalemate that saw no side emerging as a clear victor despite committing massive war crimes. In Morocco, Mohammed VI dismissed Party of Justice and Development (PJD) leader Abdelilah Benkirane as the appointed Prime Minister after a deliberately manipulated, stalled cabinet formation period, and the Moroccan state launched a harassment and repression campaign against Rif activists and independent journalists.

The underlying message of all these developments was that the Arab State was back, in full force, without any of its redistributive or rentier structures, but proposing infrastructure and other projects that were meant to display the grandeur of the state (hence the aptness of the neo-fascist designation). In addition to the internal dynamics of each state, a new regional rivalry blossomed as Saudi Arabia and the UAE led a vindictive campaign against Qatar, severing all diplomatic ties in mid-2017 and enacting a political, economic, and cultural boycott campaign while pressuring other countries to do so as well. This was also done under the auspices of "fighting terror," since Qatar supported the Muslim Brotherhood and harbored some of its exiled figures. The proactively anti-Arab Spring axis of Saudi Arabia and the UAE was thus flexing its muscles, punishing not only restless societies but states that were not part of the axis.

Rekindled "Hope" (2019-2021)

Despite the voracity of the counter-revolutionary axis and the sheer level of destruction that hit revolutionary countries such as Libya, Syria, and Yemen, what had commenced in 2011 did not stop. The Arab public sphere remained an arena of contention between Arab citizens on the one hand and Arab states and regimes on the other, where issues of freedoms and governance were raised and contested.

The period 2019-2021 witnessed the eruption of several protest movements sprinkled across the Arab World, some of which achieved remarkable accomplishments. This period can aptly be described as the "Second Wave" of Arab uprisings.[11]

Perhaps the most notable uprising of the second wave took place in Sudan. There, protests that started at the end of 2018 led to the deposition of Omar Hassan Al-Bashir. The Sudanese president had been one of the most notorious and vicious rulers of the Arab World, ruling Sudan since coming to power in 1989 through a military coup. Al-Bashir was accused of committing war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide.[12] As in Egypt in 2011, popular protests in Sudan compelled the military to depose the president and install a transitional ruling council. As was very recently evident, the military has continued to play a dominant role in governing Sudan—which does not bode well for the country's democratic future. Nevertheless, the people of Sudan won a crucial battle in 2019 by unseating their genocidal dictator of thirty years.

Another notable uprising was that of Algeria. Starting in February 2019 and under the name of "Hirak" (Arabic for "movement"), the Algerian protest movement erupted as a response to Abdelaziz Bouteflika's announcement of a renewed candidacy for the Algerian presidency, seeking a fifth consecutive term of governance. Having ruled since 1999, Bouteflika had already been in power for about twenty years at the time. The movement succeeded in not only blocking Bouteflika's bid for a fifth term, but also in compelling him to resign shortly thereafter. Bouteflika's departure plunged Algeria into a crisis of leadership, with the Algerian military also signaling an unwillingness to compromise its dominant position within the system. Though changes have been much more cosmetic than in the case of Sudan, Algeria was also one of the success stories of the 2019 protest wave.

Other notable protest movements that erupted in 2019 were in Iraq and Lebanon. Triggered by sordid living conditions, these protest movements called for accountability and ends to the corruption of the ruling class and the sectarian confessional system of government. In Iraq, the protest movement was met with widespread state violence and public demonization by the beneficiaries of the sectarian polarization of Iraqi society. In Lebanon, the protests were met with similar public demonization but also a more targeted violence from sectarian militias. And while both movements were halted by the COVID-19 pandemic, Lebanon's was also challenged by the economic collapse and depreciation of the local currency that began at the end of 2019. Both protest movements achieved little in terms of tangible benefits, though not before leaving their mark on public discourse and media coverage.

This second wave of Arab revolutionary uprisings signaled that the violence and turmoil had not in fact dissuaded Arab citizens from demanding more of their governments. It showed that what started in 2011 continued to have long-term effects in public deliberation and the discourse of governance. Finally, it demonstrated that historical transformations do not conclude in years (or even perhaps decades), and that the Arab World is very much still in flux—an open arena of political contestation and development.

PERSISTENT MACRO- AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

Preceding the Arab uprisings and revolutions of 2011 and persistent throughout the last decade are several macroeconomic and socioeconomic challenges that have been identified as long-term obstacles to prosperity. Notable among these are three specific challenges: education, unemployment and underemployment, and women's participation.

Education

Long a topic of regional analysis and discussion, education in the Arab World has been identified as one of the main challenges for the region. The most recent data on literacy confirm that Arab countries (both those that have gone through recent tumult and those that have not) still have important gaps to fill in terms of literacy rates.[13] Sudan, Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia all have sizeable proportions of illiterate citizens, according to relatively recent data. Yet as John Waterbury has recently argued (Waterbury 2020), the Arab World's education deficiencies have not been quantitative in nature. Provocatively, Waterbury argues that Arab institutions of higher learning have by and large done their job in producing graduates that have the skills to perform in public sector jobs. In terms of purely quantitative metrics, the Arab World does not perform particularly poorly in terms of educational outputs.

Where the performance is lacking is in qualitative terms. The number of graduates has been sufficient, but there are challenges in how well their skills and training match the job market. Arab education systems have failed to produce graduates with the skill sets to compete in the twenty-first century's global economy. This has captured the attention of analysts and policymakers alike, with many arguing that graduates of Arab institutions of higher learning lack the necessary problem-solving abilities, applied and field experience, and soft skills conducive to administration and crisis management.[14] Though these shortcomings of the education system have made their way into the policy and public discourse, it is unclear whether there have been any policy remedies—regardless of the national context.

Employment, Unemployment, and Underemployment

Another challenge related to the quality of educational outputs is employment, unemployment, and underemployment. Often said to be part of the root cause of the Arab uprisings and revolutions of 2011, unemployment and youth unemployment specifically have garnered much scholarly and policy attention.[15]

There are two main drivers of unemployment in the Arab World. The first is the previously discussed mismatch between the products of the education system and the demands of the labor marketplace. The policy solutions for this problem have been identified and tackled—in other words, policy makers know what needs to be done in terms of training, education, and the required changes, even if they do not necessarily have the resources to enact these.

The second and more notable driver, which is more structural and has less of an obvious policy solution, has to do with the nature of Arab economies. It has previously been identified that the Arab rentier state can no longer sustain itself. One of the many legacies of this rentier state was rent provision through public sector (government) jobs. Since Arab states began privatizing their assets at the beginning of the twenty-first century, exiting vital sectors such as energy generation and provision, telecommunications, and water management, far fewer jobs are available at their disposal to calm restless populations. And though Arab states launched their partial economic liberalization in the beginning of the twenty-first century, seldom have any made the transformation into economies that are productive and private sector driven. There has been an impressive amount of research conducted on Arab private sectors[16] and levels of trust in them.[17] For a multitude of reasons, notably a lack of political transparency and accountability in terms of governance, private sectors have not been able to fill the gap left by public sector employment.

As such, Arab states as presently constituted—with partially liberalized economies that depend on taxation, paired with illiberal governance and politics—cannot generate enough jobs either through public sector employment or through facilitating private sector growth. This challenge has been ubiquitous throughout the Arab World in resource rich and resource poor countries, whether their regimes have survived the tumult of the last ten years or not.

Women's Participation

Another long-term challenge for the Arab World is women's participation in the labor force. Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and its adverse impact on all marginalized segments within society, the Arab World housed countries with some of the lowest female labor participation rates in the world.[18] Despite being neither the poorest nor the least-educated region in the world, various economic and political structures as well as cultural norms and attitudes deter or prevent women from accessing the labor force.

This issue has captured the attention of both policymakers and scholars in the MENA region. Jordan, for example, identified this problem as a major one to be tackled in its National Employment Strategy of 2011,[19] and the World Bank has recently highlighted it as a problem in Lebanon and Iraq as well (Lugo, Muller, and Wai-Poi 2020). The Arab Barometer has recently included a battery of questions on obstacles to women's participation in the labor force across seven countries in the region. The results indicate that access to transportation and childcare weighed heavily on women's participation in the labor force, much more so than presumed societal and cultural norms about gender roles.[20]

Research findings suggest that policy remedies are readily available for increasing female participation in the labor force: improving access to education, transportation, and social provisions (such as childcare). In practice, these research insights have proven difficult to translate into policy remedies. The case of Jordan shows that access to education is not an impediment to women's participation in the labor force, and in fact their low participation partially derives from women's high level of enrollment in post-secondary education and "over-qualification" for the labor market. Also in Jordan, researchers found that women often preferred public sector employment due to the social protections and benefits it provided. Jordanian women self-select out of private sector employment, and private sector employers are wary of employing women due to their unwillingness to bear the burden of pregnancy and childcare.[21]

The problem is thus structural in the sense that if public sector employment (the Arab state's favorite form of rent) is a viable alternative, employees will hold out in the hopes of landing a government job. As long as Arab states cling to some tenets of their eroding social contracts, the problem is unlikely to be tackled systematically and equitably.

REGIONAL DYNAMICS, SECURITY, AND INTERNATIONAL INTERVENTION(S)

What has garnered most of the research and policy attention throughout the last ten years has been regional security and military interventions in failed/failing states. The democratization literature has emphasized that democratic transitions often require a favorable international environment, enhancing what political scientists call "neighborhood effects" (Huntington 1993). Not only have the neighborhood effects in the Arab World not been conducive to democratic transition, but they have enabled war crimes and state collapse. The last ten years witnessed regional state intervention and military adventurism on an unprecedented level, along with a rising prominence of non-state military actors.

Regional Players

The most important regional player that has emerged in the last ten years has been the Islamic Republic of Iran. Iran had already made significant investments in Hezbollah and other political factions in Iran, but its military intervention to prevent the fall of the Assad regime in Syria (directly and through proxy militias) and its dominant ground position in the war against ISIS solidified its place as a dominant regional power. Iran has the upper military hand in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, and supports the Ansar Allah (Houthi) faction in the Yemen war.[22] Despite reservations from its proxies,[23] it had a direct role in escalating the military conflict in Syria and inviting Russian intervention in 2015. It has enflamed sectarian tensions throughout the region, while positioning itself as a supporter either of state "sovereignty" or of the "legitimacy" of non-state actors such as Ansar Allah.

Another regional player which has also been much more forceful about military interventions in the last ten years is Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia's military interventions were inaugurated in Bahrain to prop up the Al Khalifa dynasty, but its most notorious military intervention has been in the Yemen war, fighting against the Ansar Allah (the Houthis). It has also been involved in Libya's civil war, supporting the Libyan National Army and its commander Khalifa Haftar. Saudi military adventurism has been mainly aimed at reversing the course of 2011. Though brazen, it has had the least ambitious social engineering agenda of all the regional military interventions. It can thus be safely characterized as "conservative" in aim and scope.

The United Arab Emirates is another regional power that has emerged with an ambitious military intervention agenda, one far exceeding its size. The UAE has coordinated closely with Saudi Arabia in Yemen and Libya, arguably leading the Yemeni military intervention. The UAE has also actively interfered in the Horn of Africa: in Ethiopia to support Abi Ahmed's forces against the Tigray rebellion, and in Somalia to counter Qatari influence in the capital, Mogadishu. Though the presence of Emirati troops in the Horn of Africa has not been verified,[24] the UAE government makes no secret of its ambitious foreign policy in the Horn—one which has captured analyst attention.[25] Combined with its alliance with Israel, the UAE's military interventions in the Arab World and the Horn of Africa are the most ambitious, revisionist, and reactionary of the regional players.

The latest entrant into the regional military chess match is Turkey. Like Saudi Arabia's, Turkey's military interventions can be characterized as "conservative" in the sense that they seek to protect Turkey's strategic gains. However, unlike Saudi Arabia's, Turkey's strategic gains span such a large geographical area that Turkey finds itself stretched from Azerbaijan in the east to Libya in the west. In addition to intervening directly and indirectly in Syria to push back the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces from west of the Euphrates River and Assad regime troops from Idlib respectively, Turkey has sent drones and military aid to forces loyal to the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA). As in Syria, Turkey's intervention in Libya proved decisive in reversing the course of the ongoing battles and swinging them to the advantage of its allies.[26] In Azerbaijan as in Libya, Turkey has sent Syrian mercenaries to fight with its allies in the Azeri assault on Nagorno-Karabakh.

Taken as a collective, regional state interventions in crisis countries have exacerbated sectarian strife and worsened human security. The human toll of these interventions has been very high. No place in which regional actors have interfered is poised for stability, let alone prosperity and development, in the near future.

International Players

The regional state interventions cannot be understood without the international context of global power engagement in the region. The most important actor in this context has been the United States (US), whose perceived "withdrawal" or "disengagement" from the region during the presidency of Barack Obama was an invitation for regional actors to fill the void. In truth, the US has neither withdrawn from the region nor has it disengaged from it. For example, troops withdrawal from Iraq was symbolic rather than strategic, and US air warfare activity in the mid-2010s reached unprecedentedly high levels.[27] However, the US applied a "laissez faire" approach towards regional interventions, neither deterring them nor actively encouraging them. Its deliberate refusal to counteract or negotiate Iranian intervention in the region as a concession during nuclear talks was particularly noteworthy. Combined with Obama's "red line" on chemical weapons usage in Syria, the US has largely allowed the region to fall into the hands of the largest criminal bidder. The Obama administration made a calculated decision in the early days of the Arab Spring to limit its military engagement to the "War on Terror" paradigm. The Trump administration maintained this foreign policy, despite varying the rhetoric.

The US's laissez faire approach toward regional interventions invited another global power to interfere militarily (and decisively) in the region: Russia. Despite significant Iranian support and extensive chemical weapons usage, the Assad regime was on the cusp of falling once again in 2015. Russian air power and logistical support were instrumental in tilting the balance of the Syrian war in the direction of Al-Assad. Russia continues to provide air cover for Assad's troops' incursions into Idlib, with a notably high human toll. Elsewhere, Russia has also been involved in supporting the Libyan National Army (LNA) under Khalifa Haftar in Libya—cultivating him as a client (alongside Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and France).[28] Russia has become a power broker in the region, extending its ties with the Gulf countries, Egypt, and Israel while making its contempt for democracy and democracy promotion visible for all to see.[29] In a region that is the most exempt from international accountability and international law enforcement, this heightened level of engagement and enforcement was to be expected.

Thus, international power interventions in crisis countries have also exacerbated human insecurity and exacted a very high human toll. It is unclear what the end game for international powers is, as the region is in such political flux that any temporary order based on the suppression of the citizenry is unlikely to have much longevity.

Non-State Actors

The last ten years have also seen a rise in the military involvement of non-state actors. These have often come with Islamist/sectarian identifications, and they have flourished the most where states have failed the most. Primary among these are Hezbollah in Lebanon, ISIS in Iraq and Syria, Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) in Syria, Ansar Al-Shari'a in Egypt, and Ansar Allah in Yemen. In Iraq, a plethora of non-state militias have emerged and gathered under the previously mentioned Popular Mobilization Forces (Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi).

Two things must be emphasized in discussing non-state military actors. First, their activity is often subsumed under (and thus negligible in comparison to) state military activity. Indeed, many of these militias are state proxies. Even the most well-armed and well-trained of these militias do not possess the resources that state actors do. Their influence tends to be exaggerated in the media and in policy discourse due to the dominance of the state security paradigm and the implicit and explicit bias towards state violence. A cursory run-through of civilian casualty figures from Syria and Iraq will show that state actors have often exacted the highest human toll. That these non-state actors are capable of

and willing to commit crimes on a massive scale (amounting to genocide and ethnic cleansing) should not cloud the fact that state actors have been more damaging.

The second point that must be emphasized is that these groups have emerged because of a failure of political processes and representative institutions in host communities. There are few promising political processes in the Arab World today; Tunisia and Sudan might be the most promising, and they are mired in great difficulties. So long as Arab states refuse to build just and equitable social orders, the influence and impact of non-state actors is likely to increase. The reemergence of ISIS in Iraq after the military defeat of Al-Qaida there should serve as a reminder of this point. As such, the security threat that these groups pose (which is considerable) is unlikely to be sufficiently addressed through piecemeal policies lacking a holistic approach to community development.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Arab World is in flux. What is certain is that a return to the pre-2011 order, both politically and economically, is impossible. That is why counter-revolutionary movements and regimes in the region have been as violent and vindictive as they have been. The political and security environments are currently in stasis, but they are unlikely to be sustainable as they are built on shaky foundations at best. The Arab security state is making a comeback without its rentier elements —hence populations are unlikely to be appeased by avoiding the Syria/Yemen/Iraq scenario that their rulers threaten them with. This is why there was a reignition of protest activity in 2018-2019 which persists today.

Prediction in this landscape would not be prudent. There is an emerging alliance of revisionist reactionaries led by Israel and the United Arab Emirates, but even within that alliance there are fissures and tensions. Saudi Arabia and the UAE, for example, have known differences which have surfaced of late over Dubai's regional commercial prominence and the Yemen war. Sisi's Egypt has also had some tactical differences with this alliance. While the Iranian-led alliance is seemingly more concrete (with the Assad regime, Iraqi factions, and Hezbollah), it is more of a patron-client relationship than an alliance per se: that "alliance" sways with Iran. The Turkey-Qatar alliance has thus far held up, but it is wholly dependent on the fate of Recep Tayyip Erdogan's rule in Turkey (which as of this writing is facing a severe test in Turkey's rapidly depreciating currency). The UAE and Israel, and to a lesser extent Qatar, are the only states unlikely to face pressure from their populations about their political choices. The others need to reckon with their own citizenry. Thus, alliance patterns are not expected to be long-lived, and state behavior is unlikely to follow even the most conservative predictions. Within-country developments in Saudi Arabia, for example, are a fresh reminder of the perils of prediction.

Nevertheless, the last ten years have been instructive as to how international diplomatic and non-governmental actors can position themselves. The following recommendations emanate from the previous analysis and the recent developments:

1. Recognize the limits of the sovereigntist/statist paradigm that is pervasive in the international legal infrastructure and maintain self-reflexivity. Arab state actors have made their preferences clear over the last ten years: they will resist all political change, even if that means the destruction of their societies. They have committed the largest number of war crimes in the Arab World. They make no secret of their invocation of sovereigntist/statist discourse and practice to exclude broad communities from service provision and justify criminal behavior.[30] Indeed this is the case not only in the Arab Region, but elsewhere as well (e.g., Ethiopia, China, and so on). International diplomatic and non-governmental actors must be cognizant of the implications (ethical and practical) of going through Arab State institutions.[31]

2. Recognize the implications of "neutrality," which often privileges the powerful and privileged in the regional order. The Arab State, however, is not a neutral arbiter of conflicts and fissures within its society and has politicized almost all aspects of its existence. It is a protagonist in these conflicts and fissures, one that benefits from "neutrality." International actors must always keep this in mind and reckon with the shortcomings of the "neutrality" approach.

3. While maintaining a commitment to universal values (primary among which is human rights), international actors must be cautious of adopting legal and theoretical frameworks (labor rights, representative institutions, judiciary) that assume a supportive legal and institutional infrastructure. This infrastructure, while present in the Arab World, operates with great restrictions, and prioritizes regime continuity and survival rather than the welfare of citizens and groups. Thus, going through trade unions, parliaments, courts, and other similar institutions may alter or compromise the missions of international actors throughout the region. Resources must be dedicated (research, consultancy, community focus groups, and so on) to assess the application of certain frameworks in Arab countries.

4. Foster relationships with independent (non-state) entities in Arab countries: research centers, advocacy groups, independent media, and NGOs. This can provide more comprehensive feedback about the impacts of international actors' interventions and how these can be augmented. This might necessitate that international actors be creative about building relationships with populations rather than state institutions. Workshops, training sessions, and conferences with entities known for their independence can go a long way in communicating an investment in societies, rather than state relations. Some research and investment in finding out the political inclinations of each organization would help.

5. Finally, international diplomatic and non-governmental actors must encourage states that are committed to universal values (human rights, good governance, and the rule of law) to be more forceful in counterbalancing those that are not. The Arab region has been held hostage for far too long by international power jostling. It is time for international legal institutions to enforce international law in the Arab world. This would signal to regional powers and state actors alike that they cannot continue to act with impunity. Unfortunately, the last ten years have been accompanied by a complete collapse of the international legal framework as it applies to the Arab region, only for it to be replaced by the security and statist paradigm— which has known global sponsors (Russia, China, and to a lesser extent the US). International actors must demand more from states that ostensibly respect and advocate international law and universal values. These states must live up their responsibility as the international order they have built and led comes under significant duress.

ENDNOTES

1 The views expressed in this paper are those of the author.

2 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jan/15/jordanians-protest-over-food-prices

3 https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2011/0223/Saudi-Arabia-s-King-Abdullah-promises-36-billion-in-benefits

4 https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2011/2/14/timeline-egypts-revolution

5 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/mar/09/morocco-constitutional-reform-king

6 https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2011/0531/Syria-s-Assad-offers-amnesty-to-politi-cal-prisoners

7 Arab regimes' alarm about the developments of 2011, and the seeming apathy of the US and Western governments towards propping them up, is on best display in Jeffrey Goldberg's (2013) profile of Jor-dan's King Abdullah II. Here the King manages to express his alarm by criticizing various leaders and groups in his country, in the region, and indeed in the world—except in the US and Israel.

8 https://carnegieendowment.org/2013/07/17/egypt-s-wide-state-reassembles-itself-pub-52431

9 https://ar.qantara.de/content/tdyt-lzm-fy-swry-nhyr-ltr-lwtny-llsr-lswry

10 Even in the Maghreb, which did not witness significant violence or civil strife, Morocco's king had a minor cabinet reshuffle that stripped the ruling Islamist party (Party of Justice and Development) of some significant cabinet posts.

11 https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/protests-in-the-arab-world-the-second-wave/

12 https://www.icc-cpi.int/darfur/albashir

13 https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.ZS?most_recent_value_desc=false&locations=YE

14 In addition to the article by Malik and Awadallah (2013), Jordan has identified this as a challenge in its National Employment Strategy of 2011. See: http://www.mol.gov.jo/EBV4.0/Root_Storage/AR/EB_Info_Page/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8 %AC%D9%8A%D8%A9_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D8%B7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9_%D9%84%D9 %84%D8%AA%D8%B4%D8%BA%D9%8A%D9%84.pdf

15 https://www.brookings.edu/research/youth-employment-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa-revis-iting-and-reframing-the-challenge/#footnote-1

16 https://carnegie-mec.org/2011/09/13/private-sector-in-arab-world-positive-role-needed-to-dispel-negative-perceptions-pub-46335

17 https://www.arabbarometer.org/2020/09/public-misgivings-of-private-affairs-trust-in-private-institu-tions-of-the-arab-world/

18 https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?most_recent_value_desc=false

19 http://www.mol.gov.jo/EBV4.0/Root_Storage/AR/EB_Info_Page/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B3 %D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%A9_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88 %D8%B7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9_%D9%84%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B4%D8%BA%D9%8A%D9%84. pdf

20 https://www.arabbarometer.org/2021/07/bearing-the-brunt-covids-impact-on-mena-women-at-home-and-at-work/

21 Discussions about reforming the Social Security law in the late 2000s aimed to provide support for employers in the form of "maternity insurance." This clause was enacted in the Social Security Law of 2014.

22 The level of support is contested, though at the very least Ansar Allah receives propaganda support from Iran's proxy media outlets in the Arab World, such as Al-Mayadeen, Al-Manar, and Al-Akhbar.

23 https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/syria/.premium-syria-s-300-missiles-israel-jets-iran-soleimani-hezbollah-1.8841093

24 https://www.dw.com/en/fact-check-are-other-nations-involved-in-the-war-in-tigray/a-56891431

25 https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/united-ar-ab- emirates/b65-united-arab-emirates-horn-africa

26 https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/12/why-turkey-intervened-in-libya/

27 https://airwars.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Airwars-report_Web-FINAL1.compressed.pdf

28 https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/exploiting-chaos-russia-libya

29 https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/24/brief-guide-to-russia-s-return-to-middle-east-pub-80134

30 https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/02/syria-covid-19-vaccine-access-should-be-expanded-fair#

31 https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/oct/21/assad-regime-siphons-mil-lions-in-aid-by-manipulating-syrias-currency

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