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PAPERS

The Arab State

Assisting or
Obstructing
Development?

Paul Salem

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*The international
community should
maintain a significant
amount of pressure
and conditionality
on Arab regimes
if they want to be
full players in the
global economic and
political community.*

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About the Author

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Summary

Good governance is key to improving peoples' lives; but the Arab world falls short on many governance indicators. Most Arab states remain highly authoritarian, although there is a growing dynamism in civil society and among opposition parties, both secular and Islamist. Problems in governance have impeded development in the Arab world and limited the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

There are strong historical causes for the current state of governance in the Arab world. Nevertheless, progress has been made in limited but significant ways. This should be reinforced by strengthening civil society, reinforcing electoral progress, supporting parliaments and the judiciary, enhancing local government, improving governance performance, and empowering women. The international community should play an important role in this process.

Although full democracy in the Arab world is a distant goal, broader participation in the political process, with a marked effect on human development, can be achieved.

The State and Arab Human Development

The state is the crucial institution for improving people's lives. Good governance was adopted as a pillar of the UN Millennium Declaration and has been integrated into the thinking and programming of the UN Development Programme (UNDP). Successive UNDP Arab Human Development Reports have decried the freedom and democratic deficits in the Arab world and emphasized the need to build more effective, responsive, and participatory states there.[1] Effective and democratic government is identified as a human good in itself and also a key factor in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It involves the development of the institutions of the state, but also involves empowerment of civil society and promotion of the international values and standards of human rights. The Arab state has provided for some elements of human security and development, but it has significant deficits at many levels.

This paper will review the condition of governance and the state in the Arab world, examine the causes for current conditions, and suggest ways forward toward building a more capable, responsive, and participatory state, with a more empowered civil society and better adherence to, and integration of,

international human rights agreements and norms. The Arab countries present a diverse picture relating to the achievement of the MDGs for 2015. The oil-rich countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) appear on track to meeting most of these goals. The worst-off countries in the region—such as Yemen, Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti, and currently Iraq and Palestine—seem likely to miss most of the MDG 2015 targets. The majority of middle-income Arab countries in the Maghreb and Mashrek will meet some individual goals and fail to meet others.[2]

These results are not surprising: The oil-rich Gulf states have ample resources and tiny populations, giving them an exceptional advantage. Some, such as the United Arab Emirates, have made rapid progress in governance, which has had a positive competitive and demonstration effect for other GCC states. In the low-income countries—whether because of lack of resources, armed conflict, or both—the reasons for the state's inability to achieve its country's MDG goals are rather clear. In the middle-income countries, MDGs generally have been integrated into state programs gradually, but the inconsistent performance of state institutions has given rise to varied results across sectors.

In general, the Arab world faces a number of development and human security challenges. The population of around 320 million is still growing quickly and already straining land, water, and infrastructure resources. Roughly 60 percent of the population is under the age of 25; with unemployment already at an official 14 percent (second only to sub-Saharan Africa), more than 50 million jobs will need to be created in the next ten years to accommodate this youth bulge. Poverty persists at around 40 percent; women and marginalized groups are particularly affected. Illiteracy remains at around 30 percent as a regional average. These rates climb as high as 60 percent in some countries, and are uniformly higher among women than men.[3]

Arable land is already scarce; it is being eroded by rapid urbanization and threatened by creeping desertification, climate change, and rising sea levels. Scarce water resources are being threatened by dropping water tables, groundwater pollution, and mismanagement. In addition, 57 percent of the region's surface water resources originate outside the region. Arab economies have achieved modest GDP growth rates, but these have not kept up with population growth. GDP growth has not generated equivalent employment; economies remain largely rentier economies relying on hydrocarbon and raw material exports or transit fees, tourism, and foreign aid. These economies have been very vulnerable to world energy price and demand fluctuations as well as sharp spikes in food prices.

Security and political challenges threaten regional stability, too. After 60 years the Israeli–Arab conflict shows no signs of resolution. It has devastated Palestine, gravely affected Lebanon, and significantly affected Syria, Jordan, and Egypt. It has also created an open-ended Palestinian refugee crisis. The U.S.-led occupation of Iraq has led to regional massive suffering there,

increased regional instability, and created an Iraqi refugee crisis. International tensions with Iran threaten new forms of conflict. Internal divisions have led to civil war in Sudan, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, and quasi civil war in Algeria and Palestine; Somalia has collapsed. International efforts to resolve the Arab–Israeli conflict have come to naught, and regional mechanisms to manage conflict—particularly through the League of Arab States—have proven ineffective. Although Arab–Turkish relations have improved markedly, Arab–Iranian relations are tense. Inter-Arab relations are also tenuous, with rival states vying for leadership and different states lining up along different regional and international axes.

In the past two decades the international and foreign donor community has emphasized good governance as a key element of development assistance. This supply-side approach to democratic assistance has improved some elements of governance and responsiveness, strengthening civil society and enabling more meaningful elections. On the demand side, there has been a strong push for democratization from civil society and opposition parties. However, none of the incumbent regimes has made a commitment to real democratization. Political reforms are made grudgingly, partly as a concession to Western pressure and partly as a way to let off steam internally. Without clear domestic demand for such measures, the impact of this assistance remains limited.

Recently, new donors have emerged, including China and the oil-rich Gulf states; Russia, India, Brazil, and South Africa might not be far behind. These donors emphasize state-to-state energy and labor deals and infrastructure projects and are not sensitive to democratic or rights issues. Even the West has soured somewhat on democracy promotion after the debacles during George W. Bush's presidency, shifting its attention to pressing issues such as climate change and the global economic crisis. These trends threaten to further weaken momentum for democratization and to uncouple development from democratic progress, good governance, and respect for rights. In the Arab world, the principal obstacles to human development are the absence of freedom, marginalization of women, and perseverance of repressive, unresponsive, and basically un-participatory Arab states.

The Arab state itself is very far from the goals of good governance. Although there is remarkable dynamism in Arab civil society and among opposition political parties (secular and Islamist), virtually all Arab states remain authoritarian. Those that aren't—Lebanon, Iraq, and Palestine—are riven by internal division or foreign domination. This paper focuses on the condition of Arab governance, the causes for this condition, and suggestions for moving beyond it.

The State and Governance in the Arab World

The Arab world scores low on most World Bank governance indicators. In terms of "Voice and Accountability," the Arab region ranks worst in the world,

even below sub-Saharan Africa. On the five other indicators—Political Stability and Absence of Violence, Government Effectiveness, Regulatory Quality, Rule of Law, and Control of Corruption—the Arab region ranks second worst in the world, behind sub-Saharan Africa.[4] These dismal rankings indicate a serious pattern that requires examination and explanation.

According to the Arab Democracy Index, the first democracy index put together by a group of Arab think tanks, none of the Arab states is in an "advanced democratic transition," but some show some "democratic tendencies." The index examines four categories of governance: strong and accountable public institutions; respect for rights and freedoms; rule of law; and equality and social justice. It finds encouraging tendencies in all categories, but also finds that the situation described in constitutional and legal texts is much more favorable than what actually takes place. The index finds significant variation among the eight Arab countries examined—Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen—but concludes that none has experienced a real breakthrough to good governance and democratic practice.[5]

Among students of good governance, many elements delimit the outlines of an effective, responsive, and capable state. Those elements include political stability, government effectiveness, participation and accountability, rule of law, transparency, responsiveness, and equity. These elements can serve as a guide to examining the Arab situation.

Typologies of Arab States

In a more detailed review, one could examine the various subtypes of Arab states and investigate further the variations of governance performance among them. But in a summary review such as this, limited space necessitates a broader approach.

There are various ways to categorize Arab states. One common approach is to distinguish oil exporters from oil importers. This underlines the great differences in capacities and resources that distinguish states in the oil-rich countries—particularly in the Gulf—from resource-poor countries in which the state has meager resources to face development challenges. This typology does not easily account, however, for the dramatically different politics of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, or of the GCC states and the oil-rich states of Algeria and Libya.

Another typology is based on high-income, middle-income, and low-income countries. This typology again highlights the great differences between the GCC states and other Arab states, and is useful for illustrating the plight of low-income countries such as Yemen, Somalia, and Sudan, virtually all of which are failed or failing states. This typology, however, does not explain the significant state and governance differences within each category: Lebanon versus Syria, Yemen versus Sudan, or—again—Kuwait versus Saudi Arabia.

A third typology is based on type of regime, primarily between monarchies and republics. It underlines the different bases underpinning these regimes' legitimacy and institutions. Despite the significance of this, it does not explain the fairly high level of political participation in some monarchies (for example, Kuwait and Morocco) as compared with others, nor the low level of participation in some republics (such as Syria) compared with others (such as Yemen).

A fourth typology considers authoritarian states and power-sharing democracies. Only three states currently fit the second category: the dysfunctional cases of Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine. None has an entrenched despotism, as in all other Arab cases, but each suffers from serious external intervention and internal division.

A fifth typology focuses on the differences between countries that have undergone serious conflict and those that have not. That would put countries devastated by external and internal war (such as Palestine, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Somalia, Sudan, and Algeria) on one side, and those countries that have not, on the other. This is essential in examining post-conflict dynamics and designing appropriate aid approaches, but it does not provide much insight into the varied political conditions of countries as diverse as Yemen, Lebanon, and Sudan.

All of these typologies are useful, and a more detailed report would explore them; however, there is much that is common in the situation of Arab governance. Highlighting these commonalities is essential to gaining a broad picture of the condition of Arab governance and the general obstacles that it presents to human development.

Political Stability

Stability and security are among the most valuable public goods that a state can provide its citizens, yet the Arab state has not performed this duty well. Regional and international conflict have destabilized the region. The 1948 establishment of Israel, the displacement of the Palestinian population, and subsequent conventional and nonconventional wars have destroyed Palestinian security and affected Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt to varying degrees. The U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq that began in 2003 destroyed the tense stability there, eroded security, and unleashed regional and sectarian tensions. Israeli and American tensions with Iran over its nuclear program could unleash another regional war. Within Arab countries, civil war has ravaged Lebanon, Sudan, Yemen, Somalia, Iraq, and Palestine. National unity in those countries has been weak, and the state could not prevent the militarization of communal tensions.

In other cases, the state itself has been engaged in a form of internal war: the Algerian and Syrian states against their respective Islamists, and Saddam Hussein's Iraq against the Kurds and the Shi'a. Where the state did not engage in open conflict, the level of intelligence-gathering and repressive measures

that it has undertaken to control sectors of society often constitutes a threat to citizens' security. Political opponents of the regime are imprisoned and sometimes tortured; communities that are regarded as hostile are collectively marginalized and punished; members of the media and civil society are monitored and frequently harassed; and citizens who run afoul of influential political or security officials can find their access to justice blocked.

Yet in many Arab countries the state has maintained a modicum of stability—albeit tense stability. In Morocco, Tunisia, today's Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, today's Syria, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states, citizens can expect a fair amount of stability, even if this stability comes with a heavy dose of repression and intelligence control. The Arab world's regular crime rates are among the world's lowest—but for reasons that revert to social and cultural patterns, rather than achievements by the state.

Participation and Accountability

Despite the growth of civil society and wider margins of expression and political debate, the majority of Arab states remain authoritarian. Where participation exists it is limited in scope and impact. Among the monarchical and republican authoritarian states, power is concentrated in the head of state. The king, emir, or president dominates the state—not only the executive branch, but also the judiciary and legislative branches. And through the use and abuse of the intelligence services, the executive can have undue influence over the media and civil society. In many cases this domination is reinforced by Emergency Rule or Martial Law and has been further reinforced since September 11 by a slew of "anti-terrorism" laws granting further powers to the intelligence services and executive branch. Monarchs are not subject to electoral challenge, and republican presidents have mastered the art of stage-managing presidential elections so that the outcome is never in doubt.

Nevertheless, political participation has generally increased over the past two decades. Elections once were rare in the Arab world, but most countries now hold regular parliamentary and local elections. The republics hold presidential elections or plebiscites. This is partly because society and elites are gradually accepting the discourse of democracy, and partly because once-revolutionary and charismatic regimes are seeing their legitimacy decline. Increasing pressure from the international community also plays a part.

Parliamentary elections are perhaps the most significant. All but Saudi Arabia and a few gulf emirates have elected parliaments. Participation in these elections is significant with regard to political parties and voters. These elections have become part of the legitimizing political discourse of incumbent regimes, and electoral politics is now accepted widely throughout the political spectrum. Parliamentary elections have become central events on the political

calendar of many Arab countries, focusing public attention and serving as tests of competing movements' popularity. Incumbent regimes have learned to tightly control such elections, using laws that suit them and weaken or outlaw opposition parties, especially Islamists. They also repress or influence parties and candidates and control or rig election outcomes. However, in most cases, elected parliaments themselves have very little power. The ruling party typically has secured a dominant majority in parliament, but the executive branch remains extremely dominant over the legislative branch. The powers of the monarch or president remain overwhelming, and the influence of the intelligence services is pervasive. The monarch or president is generally beyond parliamentary accountability. The officials that heads of state appoint to assist them might be subject to parliamentary questioning and accountability, but that serves as a cushion to the head of state, who is not held accountable.

Rulers in the Arab world have learned to accommodate parliamentary elections as a sop to public demands. These contests are an arena for engaging and deflating political demands and tensions without truly empowering the public or jeopardizing rulers' hold on power. They have elaborated a form of "participatory authoritarianism" that might be a stable end point rather than a "transitional" stage toward full democratization.

Local elections have also become common in the Arab world. Even Saudi Arabia, which does not hold parliamentary elections, recently allowed partial municipal elections. These local elections are in principle a step forward for the region: They engage citizens in local issues and open up public space for local and regional politics and participation. These elections engage family and tribal affiliations as well as national political parties. The patterns of state manipulation and repression also apply to local and regional elections, although margins of freedom and participation exist in some cases.

The problem with local participation, again, is that the elected local bodies have very little power. The Arab state remains extremely centralized. The bulk of decision making and revenue is hoarded at the center, and little is shared with local bodies. State elites regard local bodies essentially as arms of the central state that fit into a hierarchical, top-down structure, rather than autonomous elements of a genuinely decentralized state structure. Local bodies control virtually no resources or decisions; they are dependent on the centrally appointed governors or district magistrates to get anything done.

Presidential elections are controlled more carefully than their parliamentary or local counterparts. The state occasionally can risk a surprising result in a marginalized parliament, but no such risk can be countenanced for the presidency. Some states have placed constitutional and legal constraints on the ability of rival presidential candidates to run, but otherwise the state uses the full panoply of its coercive and co-optive power to bully parties, candidates, and voters to ensure the result that the sitting president wants. For considerations of

domestic and international propriety, the usual question is whether to engineer the traditional 99 percent majorities, or a more seemly majority of 75 percent to 90 percent.

Political participation has improved over the past two decades: Most Arab states are now, at least in principle, multiparty polities that hold regular elections. However, the scope and impact of this participation remains very limited. Except in the three unstable cases of Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq, voters cannot choose or change their rulers, nor can they participate politically to force rulers to change major policies.

Civil Society and Media

Important forms of participation such as civil-society organizations (CSOs) have emerged outside of institutional political channels and in the Arab world these have grown notably since the late 1980s. This is partly due to the paralysis of mainstream political life and the growing interests and demands of increasingly complex and urbanized societies. States preferred to encourage the growth of civil society over political society, because they regarded civil society as a safe arena that could absorb citizen participation without directly challenging political power and decision making. The growth of civil society reflects the receding ability of the state to deliver essential social services and an increasing role for civil-society organizations to fill the gap, and it reflects growing funding for civil society, mainly from the West.

Today there are an estimated 130,000 CSOs in the Arab world. Some are advocacy and issue-oriented groups addressing issues such as human rights, women's rights, rights for the disabled, democracy, and the environment. Many more are service-oriented or have traditional religious, tribal, or communal identities. A few have taken up the cause of marginalized groups (such as the handicapped, the displaced, or disappeared), but there is no strong indigenous movement to champion the causes of the poor. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with such a focus turned quickly from independent, grassroots advocates into paid service providers for the poor, under contract with government ministries or foreign donors. During the 1990s there were hopes that civil society could be the harbinger of political change, as it appeared to have been in Eastern and Central Europe. These hopes were misplaced. Civil-society groups do affect political and policy discourse, but they have not been able to mobilize mass followings, unseat a political establishment, or force major political change.[6]

In addition to CSOs, Arab states have a web of established labor unions, employee syndicates, and professional associations. In states that adopted the slogans of revolutionary socialism in the 1950s and 1960s (such as Egypt, Algeria, Syria, and pre-2003 Iraq), the state "nationalized" these bodies and controls appointments and elections within them.

In countries where this did not take place (Morocco, Lebanon, Jordan, and Yemen), labor movements and employee unions have been weakened by the global decline in leftism and by years of marginalization or repression. Business and professional syndicates long have been largely co-opted by the incumbent power structure because their interests are largely dependent on good relations with the state and its top decision makers. These bodies suffer from the persistence of leaders who made their mark several decades ago; with these leaders deeply entrenched, there is little room for young leadership.

Talk of a new social contract in the Arab world, in which civil society would be a key partner with the state and the private sector, is overblown. The state remains the hegemonic player, and its relationship with civil society is one of convenience rather than partnership. The state is happy for civil society to perform social-service functions that it no longer cares to shoulder. It would rather trumpet its tolerance of civil society than be forced to grant more robust political freedom and participation. The private sector is still largely dependent on state-controlled resources and contracts. It does not represent the independent capital and entrepreneurial examples that championed change in Asia or Latin America, nor does it represent a revolutionary bourgeoisie in the historic sense.

Access to non-state media has improved. State information ministries once held a monopoly on television broadcasts; today citizens can view hundreds of international television channels and dozens of pan-Arab channels. Many of the Arab channels host widely watched talk shows in which political and policy choices are hotly debated. Private television stations have also emerged alongside state providers in many Arab states, and more private newspapers have been launched in the past decade.

The Internet has provided new public space for political voice and indirect participation. With growing Internet penetration in Arab societies, youths are building and participating in online communities, chat rooms, blogs, and other forms of communication and interaction. These virtual meeting spaces have a large impact on forming opinion and have been the arena for the organization of political actions and protests in recent years.[7]

The business community has evolved platforms in which business leaders debate and attempt to influence policy and, occasionally, politics. The business community has grown in influence in oil-rich countries as well as in oil-importing countries, where the state has turned to privatization and private-sector investment as engines for growth. Although these business communities remain extremely dependent on state resources and decision making, they have become increasingly engaged in debating economic policy and fielding individuals for elections and decision-making posts.

Although the Arab state remains highly authoritarian and is not moving toward real democratization, it is operating in an increasingly complex and diversified political and socioeconomic environment; it interacts with and manages an increasingly complex society and polity.

Rule of Law

Almost all Arab states now have written constitutions; only decades ago several, especially in the Gulf, did not. These constitutions help give a clear structure to institutional and legal arrangements and enshrine, at least on paper, important principles including authority of the people, separation of powers, independent judiciary, individual liberties, and equality before the law. However, as the Arab Democracy Index pointed out, there is a wide gap between what is on paper and what occurs in practice; most respondents gave very low scores for actual rule of law in the Arab states. In practice, the executive branch dominates other branches. Citizens are allowed only limited, managed participation, and rights are circumscribed by strong intelligence services. A number of constitutions give the head of the executive branch sweeping powers, delimit individual rights for national or state interests, and restrict political parties and national elections. Egypt's 2007 constitutional revision actually made the system more authoritarian.

Exacerbating the problem is the fact that in a number of countries, a state of emergency or martial law—declared decades ago—remains in force. After September 11, 2001, most states passed anti-terror laws that expanded government powers for the intelligence services. Many constitutions in the region have an ideological or religious ethos as well as a strong state-security logic: Liberties and rights that are often listed in these constitutions are generally listed as being regulated by law and subject to the higher ideological and state-security interests enshrined in the constitution. The state gives rights and liberties, and the state can take them away.

Although the Arab states have signed on to most international charters on human and socio-political rights, the Arab Charter on Human Rights issued by the Arab states in 2004 violates a number of international standards. The death penalty remains common in Arab states, as do political detention and—in some cases—torture. In virtually all Arab legal codes, women are consistently discriminated against.

In six countries (Kuwait, Libya, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) the formation of political parties is illegal; in many others, the formation and operation of parties is subject to complex legal restrictions. Civil-society organizations are legal in most Arab countries, but in many their operations and financing are subject to official interference and sanction.

Independent judiciaries exist in theory, but the executive branch and/or the head of state generally controls appointments and advancement of judges as well as the budget and administration of this branch. Judges effectively do not enjoy job security or real immunity from pressure or sanction. Consequently, the judicial branch is institutionally dominated by the executive branch, and powerful intelligence services can pressure judges and plaintiffs.

These restrictions prevent the judiciary from being a real counterbalance to the executive branch; rather, it is a subsidiary branch that provides a mediocre quality and quantity of justice to the general public but cannot challenge the executive or entrenched elites. Courts are influenced by corruption, which helps protect the wealthy. Judiciaries' jurisdiction has been further circumscribed by the proliferation of military and state security courts to deal with cases of "terrorism" and "threats to state security." The judiciary has very limited autonomy and power in the Arab world; it is weakened by meager resources and large caseloads, making the wheels of justice slow and unresponsive.

Transparency

State secrecy is the default mode within the region. This is partly the legacy of the Ottoman and colonial states, but also the logic of revolutionary or one-party states, where state security required military-style secrecy, and monarchies, where affairs of state are effectively private affairs of the ruling family. In some Gulf monarchies, oil revenues accrue directly to the ruling family, which then accords part of those revenues to the state budget. In some cases, undesignated land within the country belongs by default to the ruling family and is parcelled out to members of the family, its allies, and friends.

Politics often is defined by a squabble for the spoils of power including access to the country's resources, raw materials, or lucrative government contracts. Power networks are often defined by nepotism and cronyism. Powerful leaders and politicians feed a reinforcing group of business relatives and friends, and government spoils feed a client base that is brought out for elections or other political occasions to reinforce the power of the ruling elite. Some of the oil-rich states have dramatically improved their civil service through high pay and professional training and oversight, but the very low pay scales and low morale of oil-importing countries encourage a widespread pattern of petty corruption. Real campaigns against corruption have not taken hold in Arab countries. In the countries where rulers have modernized their civil service and reduced administrative petty corruption (for example, some of the Gulf emirates), the problem of grand corruption remains, in that the ruler or ruling family still owns most of the country and economy.

The Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index gives an encouraging range of scores for Arab countries, but this is misleading. The index effectively measures the amount of corruption that the citizen or businessperson would encounter in a particular country. Most Arab countries score poorly, but some Gulf countries score very well.[8] This is largely because the corruption is on a much grander and holistic scale, leaving the day-to-day affairs of business uncluttered by petty corruption. In all Arab countries the resources of the country and the state are, by various means, monopolized by the ruling elite and the coterie surrounding them.

Some meager progress has been made toward raising transparency and anti-corruption concerns. In many parliaments, the issue of government corruption and demands for more transparency have become key political issues. Some parliaments set up anti-corruption committees or commissions that are beginning to provide some institutional sanctuary for anti-corruption activities, and an Arab Parliamentarians Against Corruption network has been established. A majority of Arab countries have seen NGOs spring up and work to raise public awareness of the nature and cost of corruption. These organizations work with like-minded parliamentarians and officials to pass transparency and anti-corruption legislation; they have succeeded in a number of Arab countries. Work to create and pass right-to-information legislation is underway. Given the overwhelming dominance of the executive branch and intelligence services, these are only meager advances in a lopsided contest against heavily entrenched political, economic, and coercive ruling elites.

Responsiveness

In the top-down, patron-client structure of most Arab countries, state institutions are responsive—to the needs of the ruler, not those of the ruled. Rulers are effectively not accountable to the public because they are nearly impossible to remove or replace through elections; they have no incentive to be responsive. They need to do enough to maintain a minimum of stability and avoid undue popular protest or backlash, but not much more. Entry into and advancement in the civil service is only nominally on a meritocratic basis, but significant responsibility or advancement is clearly linked to political support from a key minister or high official.

The Arab state developed a significant array of public services between the 1950s and 1970s, but these services are sluggishly and inefficiently provided. The distribution of services is more often linked to political patronage than to true responsiveness to public needs. The weakness of local and district administrations also cuts down on responsiveness, because the elected bodies closest to the needs of the people are largely powerless or dominated by officials of the central government.

The absence of stakeholders in delivering services is problematic because the distance between those discharging services and those receiving them is great. Central authorities are never forced to interact with stakeholders' needs or to understand them in detail. For example, almost all Arab states have adhered to the main declarations and conventions related to the empowerment of women. Yet these broad commitments are not translated into interacting with the wide variety of women's conditions and designing or delivering basic services in ways that can positively affect and empower women in urban and rural communities and across the socioeconomic spectrum.

Changes in media—greater press freedom and broader Internet access—have brought new forums for airing and debating government shortcomings, raising the stakes for these generally unresponsive systems. Several decades ago, before such forums existed, the state effectively stifled discussion of government shortcomings or unresponsiveness; the current situation is much more dynamic. The average citizen remains largely powerless, but new media, CSOs and emerging opposition groups have opened the doors for new discussion of certain issues at the national level. This debate affects the political, security and business elites, and decision makers occasionally are compelled to respond by changing a policy or firing an official. Responsiveness remains the exception rather than the norm in Arab government; it is not institutionalized within the state's decision-making centers.

Government Effectiveness

Arab societies have been transformed over the past five decades. Almost all indicators—including life expectancy, health, education, infrastructure, and women's integration—show positive momentum since the 1950s. The problem is that progress has slowed or stalled, failing to keep up with continued rapid progress around the world.

In the 1970s Arab development indicators were satisfactory when compared with those of other developing regions. Today's indicators show the Arab world largely standing still while other developing regions, especially in Asia and Latin America, have moved forward. Latin America reached a plateau in the 1970s, a period marked by authoritarian governments and state-dominated economies. Since then, the region's countries have tapped into the dynamics of democratic governance and economic liberalization, although growth there has been accompanied by income inequality and social exclusion. In China, the ruling party itself changed course, maintaining political authoritarianism while embracing economic liberalization. The party has imposed a measure of internal accountability and effectiveness. In the Arab countries, while economic liberalism was pursued, the family-dominated ruling regimes have not allowed similar internal accountability or governance effectiveness, reinforcing instead crippling patterns of nepotism, cronyism, clientelism, and corruption.

While the Arab state remains a powerful—in some senses too powerful—player, it is better at broad security and control duties than at leading and mobilizing support for a transformative developmental project. The Arab Democracy Index reveals the extent to which the state is seen as powerful (in a security and authoritarian sense) but ineffective in responding to people's needs or providing for social justice. Effective governance is based on good policy. Good policy is the result of a rich debate among officials, experts, and stakeholders in government and society. Good implementation relies on

a meritocratic civil service and an accountable structure of officials at the national, regional, and local levels. In closed authoritarian systems, without even *internal* meritocracy and accountability, it is nearly impossible to make or implement good policy. Even in cases that once seemed successful, such as the Emirate of Dubai, the absence of transparency and accountability has led to some spectacular failures.[9]

Equity

In the World Values Survey 2003, 70 percent of respondents in Arab countries said that they believe their "country is run for the benefit of the influential few."[10] This perception is easily explained: States in the region are authoritarian, and political, security, and economic power is concentrated in a few hands that rarely change through elections. Even in nonauthoritarian, semi-democratic countries such as Lebanon, political and economic power is still concentrated in a fixed oligarchy.

Economic restructuring, rising oil prices, and increasing globalization have limited wealth distribution and increased income disparities, particularly in oil-importing countries. The state has gradually withdrawn from providing welfare and wealth distribution, leaving citizens more vulnerable to market forces. In the rentier economies of the region, economic growth has translated into more benefits for those closest to power, not large-scale employment. Some well-placed and highly skilled elites have benefited from investment and trade opportunities that emerged through globalization, but the bulk of the population was either left out or offered low-skill, low-paid jobs. The gap between the incomes of the "best and the rest" has been growing ostentatiously.

Women continue to be the largest marginalized group in Arab society. They are discriminated against in law, weakened by social and traditional norms, and underrepresented in literacy, the workplace, and politics. Advances were made from the 1950s through the 1970s, but the conservative wave that has overtaken the region since the 1980s has had a negative impact on women. An exception to this trend was the new Personal Status Law (Qanoun al-Mudawanna) that was passed in Morocco in 2004 with backing from the king.

Sectarian and ethnic identity are major markers of inequity in the region. Minority groups in countries around the region—the Amazig in North Africa, the Dinka and Fur in Sudan, Arabs in Israel and the Palestinian Territories, Kurds in Saddam's Iraq and today's Syria, Shi'a in Saudi Arabia, and Houthis in Yemen—share a sense of disenfranchisement and marginalization. Part of this relates to actual policies of Arabization or, in some cases, imposition of religious norms or sectarian privileges; the other part relates to common grievances that end up being translated into ethnic or sectarian terms.

Despite a strong wave of nationalism and state patriotism in the 1950s and 1960s, nation-state identity has not supplanted ethnic, religious, or sectarian

identities. The political and social contract offered by the Arab state has been stalled and one-sided. This failure prevents residents from self-identifying primarily as citizens of a state rather than members of an ethnic or religious group. The citizen has almost no role in participating in his/her state, which deters him or her from considering that citizenship of primary importance.

Different countries have dealt with communal differences differently. Syria and Saddam's Iraq used an iron fist. Egypt and Jordan maintain a strong central authority but allow limited representation and rights to minority communities. Lebanon and today's Iraq have embraced communal diversity and made it a central tenet of power-sharing in the central government. In some countries, communal and tribal differences threaten the unity of the state: Lebanon and Iraq are such examples, as are Yemen and Sudan. Given the weakness of national identities and citizenship, sub-national group identities remain a serious challenge for Arab states.

Youths constitute the largest segment of Arab nations' populations, but they are marginalized. The political and economic system rewards connections more than initiative and innovation and is based on long-standing ruling groups. In most countries the system favors older generations in positions of political and economic power. Youths enter society and are immediately hit hard: high rates of unemployment, few openings for political participation, little hope for change, a harshly repressive state, and a repressive socio-cultural superstructure. Most states regard them as a problem and deal with them through low-grade public employment and security measures. A few turn to radical and violent politics; many seek employment abroad, or succumb to disappointment and disillusionment.

The rural-urban divide is a major marker of inequality. Rapid urbanization means the state is hard-pressed to keep up with infrastructure and services needs. The state feels threats to its security most acutely in cities and towns, which is where it pays most attention. This focus on urban issues has left the rural areas of most Arab countries with reduced access to government services and infrastructure.

In the 1950 and 1960s, and again in the 1980s and 1990s, Arab governments' economic models favored urban concerns over rural ones. Agriculture and rural development were not considered key priorities during the period of import substitution, nor in the more recent period of globalization. Economic centralization has followed government patterns of centralization, leading to great disparities of wealth and income between urban and rural areas, as well as disparity in basic educational, health, and social services.

Some human needs go unaddressed because of prejudices. The handicapped are often seen as an embarrassment to be hidden by families rather than a group that requires public attention. Most states have developed policies and programs for the handicapped, but needs still greatly outpace resources, and socio-cultural strictures remain a problem. Homosexuals, or those with

alternative sexual orientations, generally live secret or hunted lives. Their orientation is legally and culturally prohibited and can lead to jail terms or vigilante violence. Their health needs go largely ignored by the state because of their "outlaw" status, although these groups are more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS.

Arab civil society has vigorously promoted the values of equity and inclusion and organized CSOs and NGOs to tackle many of them. However, political, economic, and cultural realities present a formidable mountain to climb. With little hope for free elections that could bring about real change, it is difficult to bundle together these various demands for equity into an effective political instrument for actual change.

How Did We Get Here?

The boundaries of many Arab states were determined only recently, but the patterns of governance are long standing. The Middle East is the birthplace of civilization and the site of the first states in human history. The record of powerful states—from the early Egyptian and Mesopotamian states, through the Persian, Greco-Roman, Byzantine, Omayyad, Abbasid, and Mameluke states, culminating in the 500-year reign of the Ottoman state—reminds us that there is heavy baggage of inherited patterns of power as well as patterns of governance and state-society interaction.

The Islamic era developed a state model that merged those of the Persian and Byzantine empires with the legitimacy and legal and social institutions of Islam. The Persian and Byzantine states were based on an absolute ruler presiding over an imperial state; its main arms included a military, a strong intelligence service, and an extractionary tax collection arm. Subsequent Islamic states maintained the idea of an absolute central ruler aided by strong military, intelligence, and tax collection wings, but placed the state under the legitimizing mantle of Islam. Religious scholars (*ulema*) were granted authority for education and the interpretation and implementation of *sharia* law. Social justice has a strong place in Islamic political thought and is considered a pillar of good governance; but this largely meant that rulers should not seek to enrich themselves unduly, and implied a separation of functions among rulers, merchants, and *ulema,* rather than a distributive or social-justice role for the state itself.

The colonialism of the nineteenth century weakened indigenous governance structures and brought new, Western ideas of nationalism, democracy, civil society, and a secular state to the region. The anti-colonial movement that gained momentum in the early twentieth century adopted many of the West's ideas in its fight against Western domination. Ideas of nationalism and the secular state took root, as did ideas of democracy and civil society. Indeed, many of the states that emerged from the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War adopted liberal democratic constitutions and governance structures, albeit still under Western mandate or influence.

After the Second World War, the political mood began to change dramatically. The Soviet Union's emergence as a global power in World War II and an alternative political and economic model galvanized interest in socialism throughout the region. The establishment of Israel in 1948 fatally de-legitimized existing liberal democratic Arab states as they were seen as unable to confront Israel and sparked a sharp turn toward Arab nationalist militarism.

Military coups did away with aging liberal regimes in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Sudan, Algeria, Tunisia, and Yemen. Attempted coups hardened regime responses in other countries. The Cold War encouraged the evolution of repressive, conservative, pro-American states and repressive, semi-socialist, pro-Soviet states.

By the 1970s neither type of regime enjoyed legitimacy. Both the liberal democratic model that had galvanized support in the early twentieth century and the model of Soviet-style, state-led socialism that had gained momentum in the 1950s had lost credibility. This encouraged a shift away from both secular ideologies toward Islam. Political Islam had been part of the response to Western colonialism from the late nineteenth century throughout the twentieth century, but nationalism and socialism had overshadowed it since World War I. The Islamist movement accelerated as alternative political movements collapsed and power shifted from Egypt toward the religiously conservative Saudi Arabia and the Gulf.

Although Islamism broke through spectacularly in Iran, and less so in Sudan, the majority of Arab rulers managed to not be swept away by the wave. Their regimes adopted more conservative and Islamist mantles and slogans and cracked down hard on radical Islamists when necessary. They were supported by (or at least enjoyed the tacit acquiescence of) those who feared the rise of radical Islamists: the international community and much of their own intelligentsia and middle classes.

The Islamist wave has presented authoritarian regimes with a convenient reason to hamstring democratic development. In the 1960s and 1970s most Arab states had crippled nationalist, leftist, and liberal political parties. Their attempts to cripple the Islamists failed; members regrouped and radicalized in prison, took advantage of mosque networks, and fanned out into a society turning increasingly to religion. So as regime legitimacy faltered visibly in the 1980s, and regimes came under increasing internal and external pressure to open up political space, they could counter that doing so would open the door for radical Islamists. By this time that was somewhat true: Repressive states had devastated non-Islamist parties and movements, succeeding only in radicalizing previously moderate Islamists and empowering them by driving them underground and into society.

For the past two decades Arab regimes have argued that if they allowed democratization, radical Islamists would take over. Arab countries have not emulated Turkey, which gradually opened its political space to various

parties and encouraged Islamists to become more moderate as they share more power. Indeed, the Turkish example has been read as a warning by many Arab regimes: If they encourage Islamist parties to become more moderate, the parties will become more legitimate and popular claimants to a share of actual power. Consider the Algerian experience in the early 1990s: Elections led to an aborted Islamist victory, and then violent polarization and civil war.

The events of September 11, 2001, and the launching of the war on terror heightened already high tensions. The United States channeled security support to friendly Arab states to beef up their security and intelligence apparatuses, and the specter of radical Islamic terrorism became a resurgent reality in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Jordan, Lebanon, and North Africa. For many policy makers in the West, the logic of avoiding democratization for security reasons remains a decisive argument in policy toward Egypt, Palestine, Algeria, Tunisia, and other countries, much to the comfort of those regimes. However, a number of Arab countries have successfully included Islamists in politics, most notably Morocco, Kuwait, Yemen, Jordan, and Lebanon. Egypt and Algeria have partially included Islamists in the political process.

Non-Islamists worry about Islamists' stances toward women, individual liberty, non-Islamist people and parties, and permanent democracy. However, evidence from most countries in the region shows that Islamist groups, when allowed into a legitimate and institutional political process, generally have turned more moderate and pragmatic.

Today, most Arab regimes feel fairly secure and draw on a number of strengths. First, they enjoy strong support from the international community, for whom security issues have once again become the top priority. Second, they have developed very strong security and intelligence services that (like in Russia and China) control restive populations. Third, they have learned the art of allowing enough political space and participation to deflect some international and internal criticism and diffuse some internal tensions, but not so much as to allow any significant participation in power or real decision-making.

Fourth, the political economy of these regimes remains sustainable. Much of their revenue comes from raw material and external rent. This has created dependent and collaborative capitalist and entrepreneurial cliques that share the spoils of investment and economic growth with the regimes. The Islamists have not garnered enough appeal to become an unstoppable force, and lingering divisions between Islamists and non-Islamists prevent opposition movements from unifying their pressure against regimes.

Unless recent trends change sharply in unforeseen ways, the hold of authoritarian regimes in the Arab world should continue indefinitely. Yet much is going on in Arab political and civil society. As the Arab Democracy Index pointed out, although no Arab country has made a real transition to democracy, there are important "democratic tendencies" in many. So far, these tendencies appear

to be a flourishing within a persistently authoritarian state; it would be premature to characterize this as a foreseeable transitional stage to full democracy.

The Difficult Way Forward

The first part of this decade saw considerable reflection in the Arab world over the crisis of governance. It was partly a result of taking stock of the twentieth century, and partly the disappointment that the Arab world remained the only region missed by the wave of democratization that overtook Latin America, Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, and even much of sub-Saharan Africa, in the 1980s and 1990s. This reflection also stemmed from the UN identifying democratic governance as essential to achieving the Millennium Development Goals and was a positive reaction to the UNDP Arab Human Development Report of 2002. Civil-society groups issued a manifesto in Sanaa, Yemen, in January 2004 and another in Alexandria, Egypt, in March 2004. These called for lifting of martial law, respect for human and political rights, religious and sectarian tolerance, intellectual and political pluralism, free and fair elections, empowered parliaments, independent judiciaries, constitutional and legal reform, free media, and good governance. The manifestos also emphasized respect for self-determination and the ending of occupations in Palestine and Iraq.

The region seemed to be passing through an "activist moment": Significant civic action took place in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco. There was talk in Syria of a Damascus Spring, Lebanon witnessed a Cedar Revolution, Islamist and leftist opposition groups in Yemen formed a joint organization, Kuwaiti citizens protested to change their election law, Saudi men and women lobbied the king for change, Egyptian civil society organized the Kifaya movement to call for a limit to President Hosni Mubarak's long reign, Tunisian opposition groups formed the Eighteenth of October coalition, and Morocco passed a new personal status law (with the king's backing) that expanded women's rights.

Governments reacted to this heightened activism and responded to Western pressure after September 11, issuing "The Declaration on the Process of Reform and Modernization" in May 2004. The United States had identified authoritarianism as a root cause of terrorism and declared a "Freedom Agenda" in which it pressured Arab states to open up the political process and encouraged civil society and popular groups to demand more participation. The G8 adopted the U.S.-backed Broader Middle East Initiative in June 2004 to encourage this process. The European Union beefed up its support for reform and democratization through the ongoing Barcelona Process and the new EU Neighborhood Policy.

By 2007, this momentum had slowed. A wave of arrests followed the Damascus Spring; popular protest in Lebanon had devolved into sectarian

tensions and clashes; Kuwaiti reforms did not rid elections of tribalism and vote-buying, although four women did enter parliament; and Yemen's President Ali Abdullah Saleh outwitted his opponents, even while Yemen faced rebellions in the North and South. Egypt's Mubarak outlasted the protests and appeared to be preparing his son to succeed him through a rigged constitutional succession process that blocks viable alternatives. Civil war between Hamas and Fatah shattered Palestinian unity.

The United States had effectively dropped its Freedom Agenda after Hamas won elections in Palestine and the Muslim Brotherhood performed well in Egyptian elections. The security debacles that the United States faced in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as Israel's failure in its war against Hizbollah in 2006, told the United States that its War on Terror had empowered al-Qaeda and other groups hostile to the United States such as Hizbollah, Hamas, the Mahdi Army, and the Muslim Brotherhood. The United States quickly shifted from pressuring its Arab allies to democratize to encouraging them to redouble their efforts—with American aid—to crack down on terrorist and hostile groups. Arab regimes, many of which in 2005 were seriously worried about their future, could breathe more easily by 2007. The world's superpower was on their side again.

The EU had a similarly mixed record. It tried to link political and economic cooperation with Arab states to improvements in governance and respect for rights through the Barcelona Process that began in 1995 and the later Neighborhood Policy. The EU became a strong supporter of civil-society groups and reformers in the Arab region and generally nudged Arab governments to further open political space. Like the United States, the EU had serious security concerns; after the attacks in Madrid and London, it felt the need to work more closely with incumbent Arab regimes on security issues. The EU also has strong commercial interests, particularly in North Africa, and immediate concerns about immigration. Like the United States, the EU refused to recognize the results of the Palestinian elections of 2006, greatly damaging its soft power in the region. The EU supported civil-society groups and encouraged regimes to open up some political space and entertain more political participation. But its political and security concerns forced it to support incumbent regimes that it encourages to be more inclusive and participatory.[11]

Arab regimes recognize that emerging powers, such as Russia and China, present attractive models of economic development with political authoritarianism.

The arrival of the Obama administration, widely welcomed in the Arab world, has not yet had a clear effect on the democratization agenda.[12] The hope that followed President Barack Obama's replacement of Bush was severely weakened one month later by Israel's devastating war in Gaza. Obama took only tepid positions, and his administration failed to get Israel to agree to even a temporary settlement freeze on the West Bank. The administration came into office with an emphasis on repairing U.S.–Muslim relations (Obama's

Ankara and Cairo speeches), crisis management (in Iraq and Afghanistan), and conflict resolution (Iran and the Arab–Israeli arenas). Although Obama has expressed support for democratization and good governance, this has yet to transcend lip service and the continuation of existing civil-society and democratic-assistance programs. The U.S. emphasis on security cooperation with existing regimes remains a top priority.

The political economy of authoritarianism appears secure. Oil and gas prices promise to remain high into the foreseeable future, and international transfers to incumbent regimes for security cooperation will also remain significant. Emerging economic powers such as China, Russia, and India, as well as the financial powerhouses of the Gulf, will put more emphasis on energy, trade, and security than on reform. And the global economic crisis likely will encourage those rethinking the state's role in society to consider a greater state presence in the economy. Some states might face serious challenges from resource depletion and rising unemployment and poverty. Such difficulties are more likely to lead to state collapse or state violence than to reform.

Reform momentum in the region is slowing. Societies have been preoccupied by ongoing wars, sharp shifts in regional and international politics, rising sectarian tensions, tenacious regimes, failed attempts at change and reform, sharp rises in food and energy prices, the global financial crisis, and the decline or collapse of some regional economies (for example, Dubai).

The path forward may be clear in principle, but progress along it promises to be slow and difficult. Strong Arab states have reinforced their strength and are unlikely to be moved to fundamental change in the foreseeable future; those that have weakened (such as Somalia, Yemen, and Sudan) have moved toward collapse and state failure rather than democratization.

The strong Arab regimes have consolidated their executive branches' holds over state and society, strengthened their security and intelligence capacities, learned how to control elections and limit political openings, and preserved the political economic underpinnings of their power. The international community continues to value security over political change or serious reform by supporting and cooperating with existing regimes. Civil society and much of the political opposition are pessimistic about the possibility of real change and disillusioned with the sham opportunities of managed openings and elections. Electoral participation has been declining in recent elections. Parties that joined parliaments and governments have found that they enjoyed little real power to make decisions but nonetheless were blamed for governance failures, which cost them popularity. The society at large is increasingly concerned with economic and social hardships and is less available to focus on broader political and reform issues.

Even if this is not the moment for significant reform and democratic breakthrough, persistent efforts to spread and reinforce concepts and practices of good governance should not slacken. Considerable progress has been made.

Over the past two decades the concepts of democracy, good governance, and human rights have become the dominant discourse in the Arab world.

From the 1950s through the 1970s, the intelligentsia and many in Arab society considered authoritarian discourse legitimate, whether military/nationalist or revolutionary socialist single-party. Today virtually all political parties acknowledge, at least in principle, the superior legitimacy of democratic and participatory government with respect for rights and rule of law. Most monarchies' constitutions now include the principle of democracy and participatory government. Even most Islamist parties, which two decades ago spoke of a fully theocratic Islamic state, now speak of a democratic state with respect for rights—albeit one that adheres to Islamic principles in legislation and interpretation of human rights.

Reform toward more participatory and democratic government, although difficult, still seems the only way forward for most parties and activists in the region. Regime change through coups or one-party takeovers has been a very bitter experience, and Islamist takeovers in Iran, Sudan, or even Gaza have not presented attractive models. There is little widespread enthusiasm for revolution, rebellion, or armed insurrection, despite very high levels of frustration and desperation. The effects of such dramatic change in Iran, Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq, and Palestine have been discouraging.

Opinion polls throughout the region indicate widespread support for the general principles of democracy and good governance and a strong preference for peaceful, gradual change. The bulk of Arab civil society is committed to this form of change and will continue its activism in this direction despite the setbacks and disappointments. Large-scale change is not possible, so civil society will continue to press for partial change: more effective decentralization, more independent media, freer civil society, fairer elections, stronger judiciaries, more effective parliaments, better governance, and empowerment of women. Opposition parties have realized that they all value democratization and are uniting in broad coalitions—including Islamists and non-Islamists—to pressure incumbent regimes.

Regimes have met domestic and international pressure a third of the way by allowing limited political openings and holding managed elections, but they can no longer roll the clock back. Today's quantity and quality of political openings and participation might not be a transition to democracy, but regimes cannot easily revert to the *status quo ante*. The current plateau might be a better staging ground for future "democratic moments" if they arise.

There is no magic key or necessary sequence to democratization. In the 1980s and 1990s, some observers thought civil society might bring about democratic transformation; between 2003 and 2006, elections were trumpeted as the immediate route to democracy. Developmentalists have long argued that democratization could not take place without the painstaking socioeconomic empowerment of the population and marginalized groups. Each approach

contains elements of truth. However, resilient regimes in the Arab world (to say nothing of Russia, China, and other cases) have shown that they can absorb and adapt to a wide range of challenges. One cannot predict where and when the democratic breakthrough will emerge, if it emerges. There is no linear path to democracy. It is better to invest in a wide array of mutually reinforcing initiatives that inform, empower, include, and activate wide cross-sections of a population and a large number of state and non-state institutions than to try to pick winners through support of a narrow range of initiatives.

For the UN and the international community, the emphasis on democratization and good governance has been well-placed and has had a significant, if inconclusive, effect. These ideals have become the dominant paradigm, engaging civil society and political parties and forcing acknowledgement from virtually all regimes. The international community must maintain its moral and material commitment for democratization and good governance: support for civil society, media, judiciary, local government, parliaments, good governance units in the executive, women's groups, handicapped groups, and marginalized ethnic or regional groups. The international community should also maintain a significant amount of pressure and conditionality on Arab regimes if they want to be full players in the global economic and political community.

Notes

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