Chapter 2
Failing States and Losing Sovereignty?
Reflecting on the State and Politics in the MENA Region

Abstract The MENA region is engulfed in crisis. This predicament emanates from domestic factors like the artificial nature of the state and rentier economies to external actors supporting regimes against their citizens. As a result of this, several states are failing and are losing their sovereignty in the process. States, however, have been complicit in their own demise as they have eroded their own capacities to govern by nepotistic practices and by turning their citizens against them as well as supporting non-state actors in an effort to gain a strategic advantage in their region. State elites need to create more inclusive economies and polities and engage more constructively with their citizens who increasingly embrace secular and democratic norms if they are to survive this crisis.

Keywords Conflict · Corruption · Democracy · Institution-building · Rentier economies

2.1 Introduction

That the MENA region is undergoing a crisis of immense proportions cannot be denied. The British House of Lords’ Select Committee on International Relations (2017) summarizes the extent of this crisis well: “The region is violently disfigured by inter- and intra-state conflict and by sectarian divisions. Power has been fragmented. Non-state actors, who are active in region, are both a symptom of state weakness and amplify the threats to states. The economic bedrock of the region – exports of hydrocarbons – is under threat”. In an equally blunt and bleak assessment, Daniel Coats (2019), the Director of National Intelligence in the USA opines, “Political turmoil, economic fragility, and civil and proxy wars are likely to characterize the Middle East and North Africa in the coming year, as the region undergoes a realignment of the balance of regional power, wealth and resource management, and the relationships among governments, non-state political groups, and wider populations”. Despite the pessimism in these statements, there are reasons
for hope as young people embrace democratic norms, as governments realize that it cannot be business as usual, as technology penetrates the deepest deserts and as the world becomes ever more integrated. Whilst this chapter maps out the multi-faceted nature of the crisis besetting state and governance in the region, it emphasizes that there are positive aspects, which if policy-makers capitalize on, can lead to a region at peace with itself and with others.

2.2 Reflecting on the Nature of the State in the MENA Region

Any attempt at understanding the nature of the state in this troubled region would need to begin by reflecting on the level of “stateness”, the dearth of democratization and the toxic interface between religion and political elites. Finally these three phenomena have to be understood in a historical context whilst also understanding the regional context in which this is being played out.

2.2.1 On “Stateness” and Institution-Building

In his seminal book, *State-Building: Governance and World Order in the Twenty-First Century*, Francis Fukuyama (2004) notes that before democratization, human rights and the like you need to have highly developed and functional state institutions. Without this level of “stateness”, neither is democratic political society possible nor is effective governance achievable. Here, it is important to note that most states in the region are largely artificial creations of former colonial powers emanating from the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916. The agreement emanates was the outcome of secret meetings between the British and French during World War I undertaken by Sir Mark Sykes and Francois Georges-Picot to carve up the Ottoman Empire following its dissolution after the War. Contemporary states and its territorial domains in the region had its origins in the subsequent Sykes-Picot Line (Wright 2016). Only three states are an exception to this norm: Egypt, Iran/Persia and Morocco (Boserup 2017). All three states consequently have a strong sense of national identity.

The artificial nature of MENA states is clearly evident in how these states came into being. It was Sir Percy Cox, the British High Commissioner to Baghdad, who, late one night in November 1922 in a desert camp in Uqair, drew the borders of Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Contemporary Iraq arose out of the decision by Cox to combine Baghdad, Basra and Mosul – all former Ottoman provinces (Dietl 2010). None of the arbitrary lines drawn by Cox to demarcate territorial borders made much sense if one’s aim was to create “nation-states”. For instance, the Shia-Sunni sectarian divide was scarcely given thought to by these colonial architects of the
modern nation-state in the MENA region. The British also alternatively incentivized and pressurized seven small sheikhdoms to form what we now refer to as the United Arab Emirates (UAE). More than just birthing these states, former colonial powers appointed the leadership, restructured and trained the bureaucracy and established and equipped the armed forces – all this along the lines of the former colonial power (ibid, 2010). Small wonder, then, that states in the region are regarded as foreign structures and citizens in the region generally feel a sense of alienation from their governments. This popular alienation and disenchantment was to fuel the Islamist search in the region for states to pursue an authentic shari’a with such devastating consequences – whether in the form of President Morsi’s Ikhwan in Egypt or the more radical Islamist alternatives provided by the likes of Al Qaeda and Islamic State.

In historic terms, the contemporary nature of the states also means there is no sense of a common national identity, little institutional consolidation and therefore little allegiance on the part of citizens towards the state. The “State of Palestine” is a case in point. It was only in 2012 when Mahmud Abbas, the head of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), formally declared the state of Palestine. It went on to be formally recognized as a non-member observer state by the United Nations General Assembly. Historically, however, Palestine as a nation-state never existed. Foreign powers – Ottoman, British, Jordan, Egypt or Israel – have always been in control of the land of Palestine (Robinson 2011).

2.2.2 The Democracy Deficit

The second characteristic that states of the MENA region share is the dearth of democracies. Samuel Huntington (1991) envisaged democratization in waves with the third wave beginning in the 1970s. Yet, democratization scarcely touched the shores of the MENA region until the start of the Arab Spring in Tunisia in December 2010. Since those heady days, authoritarianism has staged a ferocious comeback which has witnessed a reversal of freedom across the region. The brutal assault undertaken against hapless Egyptians on the part of General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi who came to power following a 2014 coup is perhaps the most callous and extreme representative of this trend. Sadly, Egypt is not an exception to the regional norm. In their 2019 survey of freedom in the world, Freedom House (2019) noted that of the 18 countries in the MENA region with a combined population of 442.8 million people, 67 percent of countries were not free, 22 percent partly free and only 11 percent can be classified as free. To put it differently, of the 442.8 million citizens in MENA countries, only 4 percent were free, whilst 13 percent were partly free and a staggering 83 percent were not free. Gulshan Dietl (2010) describes the nature of the states in the region as characterized by “...hereditary leaders; spoils of power have been retained within small elite groups; co-optation and corruption of opponents and suppression of dissent...”.
What accounts for this persistence for such authoritarianism? Several reasons have been advanced. One reason relates back to the weakness of institutional structures and artificial nature of polities in the region. The artificial nature of the state lends it a high degree of fragility and this is seen in the fact that whether in its monarchical, republican or theocratic manifestation, it is largely authoritarian at its core. This authoritarianism stems from largely from the fact that political elites also recognize that the fragility of the polity cannot withstand the stresses and strains of a competitive political environment which liberal democratization will necessitate. Authoritarianism, therefore, is a symptom of state weakness.

Dietrich Jung (2010) examines the longevity of authoritarianism in the Arab Gulf from the perspective of the family and clan-based nature of political authority. Consider the hereditary monarchies such as the al-Khalifa in Bahrain, the al-Sabah in Kuwait, Qaboos in Oman, al-Saud in Saudi Arabia, al Nahyan in Abu Dhabi, al-Maktoum in Dubai, al-Qasimi in Sharjah and Ras al-Khaima, al-Naimi in Ajman, al-Mualla in Umm al-Qaiwan and as-Sharqi in Fujara (ibid, 2010). The proprietorial nature of their rule is self-evident when the family names the polity after themselves – consider here names like Saudi Arabia or Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan (Magen 2013). Neither is family rule confined to monarchies. De facto hereditary rule exists in republics too. In Syria, Hafez al-Assad was succeeded by his son Bashar. Both Gaddafi in Libya and Mubarak in Egypt were grooming their sons to succeed them.

A third issue contributing to this authoritarianism lay in the fact the MENA region is home to 50 percent of the world’s oil and gas reserves (Tagliapietra 2017). Far from being a blessing, this has turned into a resource curse as it has facilitated the development of “rentier states or economies”. This was a term developed by the Iranian economist Hossien Mahdavy to explain how countries blessed with hydrocarbons earn external revenues or rents for their products (Zahirnejad 2016). Through the sale of this oil and gas largesse on international markets, states in the region have been able to build to withstand societal pressures of democratization by breaking the umbilical cord between taxation and representative government (Jung 2010). Taxation, after all, always brings with it the demand for representation. In Qatar, for instance, the Emir provides employment, subsidies and social order in exchange for political quiescence (Ahmed and Gao 2010). Indeed, Qatar is the world major exporter of liquefied nature gas and its 250,000 citizens has the highest GDP per capita in the world (Tsypokymia 2016). Given the limited presence of hydrocarbons, the UAE has established alternative sources of rents. These include leasing property and by renting plots in the Emirates’ free zones. UAE legislation prevented foreign nationals from actually purchasing land (Khatoon 2010). As a result, state elites secured rents seemingly in perpetuity.

Political elites make use of “rents” to buy off dissent, to co-opt the political opposition and civil society, to provide employment in an expansion of patronage networks and clientelism and arm and pay for a security apparatus whole sole purpose is to keep the incumbent in power. Following the fall of Mubarak and as Riyadh feared the tide of the Arab Springing washing its shores, the Al Sauds spent
US$ 170 billion to pacify a restive population – raising civil servants salaries and creating jobs by embarking on infrastructure projects (Magen 2013). “Rents” then were used to co-opt the populace. In the process, prospects of democracy are stymied.

Oil exports account for 80 percent of Tehran’s foreign currency reserves and 60 percent of government revenues (Zahirnejad 2016). These “rents” are used for a wide-ranging system of subsidies from food, education, water, fuel and electricity. Regimes which make use of such subsidies buy legitimacy for itself in the short term. The long-term consequences, however, are disastrous as subsidies hamper economic growth, create inefficiencies and negatively impact on the balance of payment and the fiscal position of the government (Hameed 2010).

The authoritarian disposition of regional states is also aided and abetted by foreign actors. The nexus between the oil-producing states of the region and Washington is evinced in the phenomenon of the “petro-dollar” where oil was exchanged for US dollars and contributed to the hegemony of the currency as it was regarded as the world’s reserve currency. Over the years, the USA has removed those regimes which threatened this petrodollar such as Iran’s democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh. In 1953, the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) played an instrumental role in the coup which toppled Mossadegh and went on to support the Shah and the brutality he unleashed on hapless Iranians (Wu and Lanz 2019). The USA has continued to have a variety of security relationships with despot in the region – these include defence cooperation agreements, the sales of arms, the establishment of military bases as well as access rights and the prepositioning of military assets (Zulfqar 2018). Despite the rhetoric from Washington for greater freedom and democracy in the region, US commercial and security interests worked to consolidate the power of authoritarian incumbents across the MENA region.

In recent years, Moscow and Beijing has increasing made their presence felt. Both China and Russia are concerned with their restive Muslim populations in the Xinjiang and North Caucuses respectively who look to Middle East Islamist movements for inspiration if not support. Both Beijing and Moscow also have extensive commercial interests in the region to protect. In the case of Beijing, the Middle East is China’s number one source of imported petroleum. Moreover, President Xi’s Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road Initiative have resulted in Beijing constructing and financing ports from Egypt and Israel to Turkey and Jordan. In the case of Russia, their commercial interests include energy, investments and arms sales (Zulfqar 2018). On the issue of arms sales, Moscow is the now the largest supplier of arms in the MENA region after the USA. Indeed, Russian armed sales have increased by 125 percent between the 1999–2008 and 2009–2018 periods (Kuimova 2019). Despite their geopolitical rivalries, the USA, China and Russia’s policies have worked to promote regime security as opposed to the human security of citizens in MENA countries – thereby undermining democratic prospects.
2.2.3 The Interface Between Religion and Politics

Any political system needs a modicum of legitimacy to survive (Jung 2010). Many of the MENA states have turned to religion to legitimate their rule. Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam, has seen the ruling family legitimizing their governance as an organic development of *shura* (consultative) processes in the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad (Dietl 2010). Indeed, even in its first iteration in 1744, the House of Saud bent religious traditions to serve political objectives. In 1932, as he consolidated the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Abd-al-Aziz-al-Saud further fused Wahhabi Islam with political power merging religious loyalties with patriotism and the House of Saud. Traditional Arabic concepts like *Assabiyah* (group solidarity) were also employed to ensure that the body politic recognized the leadership of the King as the sole authority in the land (Pattnaik 2010). The Al-Sauds is not alone in this.

In Qatar, the state actively disseminates religiously inspired statist ideologies. The aim is to force out secular or liberal Islamic alternatives which may threaten the absolute authority of the ruling Al Thani family (Ahmed and Gao 2010). In Morocco, meanwhile, the ruling Alaouite Dynasty which has been in power since 1631 draws its legitimacy from claims that they are descended from the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatima and her husband Ali who was both a cousin of the Prophet as well as the fourth Caliph (Marc Henry 2015).

It is, however, in Iran where the nexus between religion and state is most graphically seen. Following the 1979 Iranian revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini introduced the concept of *velayat-e-faqih* (the rule of the Supreme Jurisprudent). Under this system, the country was transformed into a religious guardianship. Mahnaz Zahirnejad (2016) poignantly describes this system as follows:

> Velayat-e-faqih posits a population in need of a guardian, much as minors need guardians. The people are, in other words, subjects not citizens. This, the most popular of all modern revolutions resulted in the creation of a state whose constitution places absolute power in the hands of an unelected, unimpeachable man, and whose basic political philosophy posits people as subjects, and pliable tools of the faqih.

Perhaps, more than any other factor, this notion of religious guardianship has prevented Iran from developing into a vibrant democracy.

2.3 The Regional Context

State weakness, authoritarianism, religious fundamentalism and the like often finds expression in violence. Such violence and its consequences often then spills over into neighbouring states as refugees, weapons, fighters and terror tactics cross ever permeable borders (Magen 2013). The resultant political and security vacuums created are either then exploited by neighbouring and foreign states for their own national interests or alternatively, need to involve themselves militarily in the affected country in order to prevent attacks being staged on them by non-state actors.
using the territory of the neighbouring state. In the process, regional conflict complexes arise. According to Peter Wallensteen and Margareta Sollenberg (1998), these arise where localized conflict dynamics develop mutually reinforcing connections amongst geographically contiguous or proximate states. This makes such conflicts difficult to resolve on a national basis and necessitates regional solutions. Because we live in a globalizing world, where insecurity anywhere threatens security everywhere, the existence of these regional conflict complexes also incites international intervention – both positive and negative.

Unfortunately, the MENA region has several of these regional conflict complexes existing and these serve to erode the capacities of states, strengthens the hands of non-state actors whilst resulting in further fragmentation of these states. The Libyan imbroglio provides one such example of localized conflicts becoming both regionalized and internationalized. Colonel (rtd.) Jacques Neriah (2019) succinctly explains this complexity,

Today, Turkey is fully involved in the fighting in Libya, siding with the Tripoli Government of National Union against the Saudi-Emirati-Egyptian-French-Italian-backed Field Marshall Khalifa Haftar. Turkey is ready, according to press reports, to send troops into battle against the Benghazi forces, led by former CIA agent Haftar.

In such a situation, there can be no settlement of the Libyan question without ensuring that regional and international actors are brought into any peace process. Such a feat will be difficult to accomplish given the competing interests of internal and external actors.

The humanitarian consequences of such regional conflict complexes is all too evident in the case of Syria which witnessed 6.1 million people internally displaced and a further 6.7 million who have been transformed into refugees as a direct result of the scorched-earth policies pursued by President Bashar al-Assad. The majority of these refugees have fled to neighbouring states and currently Turkey hosts 3.6 million refugees, Lebanon hosts 944,000, whilst Jordan hosts 676,00, Iraq 253,000 and Egypt 133,000 (Todd 2019). Such large numbers of refugees in host states whose own citizens’ quality of life has precipitously fallen given economic contraction has resulted in escalating tensions between locals and refugees and further undermines security in host nations. The human costs of such conflict is all too apparent in the fact that the MENA region shares with Sub-Saharan Africa the dubious reputation of being the only regions where starvation has actually increased since the 1990s (Magen 2013).

The need to approach such regional conflict systems multilaterally is imperative. This multilateralism, for it to work, necessitates either a regional hegemon or a regional organization to coax other states to get onto the same page. Egypt attempted to play such a role in the 1950s and 1960s (Fawcett 2017). At this current juncture, there are no states with the capacity and strategic foresight that could play such a role. Moreover, there is no single dominant foreign actor who could play such a role. The USA, under the Trump administration, seems less inclined to get involved with this troubled region. In any event, Pax Americana is weakening whilst Russian and Chinese influence is growing in the region. The European Union, meanwhile, is too
internally divided to play a constructive role in the MENA region’s many conflicts. The latter was obvious following the targeted killing of Iranian General Qassem Suleimani by the USA on 3 January 2020 (Chotiner 2020). Whilst Britain largely stood by Washington’s decision, Paris and Berlin’s positions were closer to that of Moscow.

This leaves the issue of whether a regional organization could play such a role. Despite the existence of such structures like the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Arab League, these are scarcely the functional equivalents of the European Union (EU) or the Organization of American States (OAS) or indeed the African Union (AU) (Magen 2013). Weak and fragile states after all make a weak and fragile union of such states. Weak states are also prone not to share their limited powers with a regional organization. Indeed, the very fragility of their makes political elites reluctant to countenance shared conceptions of sovereignty. As a result, their reluctance to provide some powers to a regional body dooms any regional effort to collectively respond to a security threat. New regionalism theory also posits successful regional organizations arise from common values (Solomon 2010). The Qatar-GCC dispute or the fact that both the UAE and Egypt abandoned the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen speaks to the absence of such shared values (Neriah 2019). Under the circumstances, there is every likelihood for conflict dynamics to escalate in the short-to-medium term in the region.

To further compound matters, it needs to be borne in mind that structures like the Arab League and the GCC are fundamentally a collection of authoritarian states and as such will never be in a position to advance human rights or democratization in member states in the manner that the EU has done or the AU is attempting to do (Alijl and Aghdam 2017). This also intensifies the security dilemma in these states as human security needs of citizens are diametrically opposed to the venal desires of self-serving political elites whose security forces primary function is to maintain regime security at the cost of ordinary citizens. That this is neither tenable nor sustainable is all too evident on the streets of Beirut, Basra or Tehran as analysts speak of a second Arab Spring.

2.4 Ineffective Governance

The dearth of democratization, the development of rentier states with resultant patronage networks all serve to undermine effective governance. Mahmoud Abdelbaky (2012) notes that MENA countries perform poorly on governance quality – lagging behind countries with similar characteristics in East Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America. Family rule, as described above, lends itself towards ineffective governance since people are chosen on the basis of their familial connections as opposed to the skill sets they possess. Consider the ruling Al-Khalifah family which has ruled Bahrain since 1783 and where the Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, Interior Minister and the Defence Minister are all members of the royal family. Indeed the Al-Khalifahs have monopolized all the most important
bureaucratic and military positions in the country at national and provincial levels (Kumar 2010). Small wonder, then, that the country has lurched from crisis to crisis as a symptom of poor policy-making and implementation. In Saudi Arabia, there are 25,000 princes (Magen 2013). Many of these are provided with senior posts in the civil service by virtue of their royal blood – to the detriment of governance. Neither is this phenomenon only confined to monarchies. In Syria, recruitment into the civil service is done on the basis of membership of the Ba’athist party or by nepotism for family members or clan members. As the World Bank (2003) notes in their report in this regard, “Government posts are only very rarely perceived as carrying a responsibility that entails specific skills and requires an ethic of public accountability. Rather, they constitute a reward to those who made the right choice by enlisting in the ranks of the many political organizations of the Ba’ath party and by displaying active support to its command”. As in the case of Bahrain, the World Bank’s conclusion is inescapable: clientelism weakens Syrian governance.

Under these circumstances of nepotism and patronage, corruption grows more endemic. During his 23-year reign Tunisia’s President Ben Ali and his wife, Leila Trabelsi, used the presidency to enrich themselves, their extended families and their political allies. Just before Ben Ali was forced to flee the country following the protests in his country, it was estimated that his wife’s and his families owned more than half of Tunisia’s businesses. In Libya, meanwhile, during the reign of Gaddafi, similar corruption was taking place. According to one US cable, the Gaddafi “... family and its close political allies owned outright or have a considerable stake in most things worth owning, buying or selling in Libya” (The Centre for Constitutional Transitions, the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance and the United Nations Development Programme 2014). In the case of Bashar al-Assad’s Syria, it is estimated that 85 percent of Syria’s oil revenues are deposited into the family’s private bank accounts and that of their political allies (ibid, 2014). None of these are isolated examples. Transparency International’s 2017 Annual Corruption Perceptions Index provides an unflattering picture for most MENA countries. Whilst Denmark and New Zealand is regarded the least corrupt at joint number 1, MENA countries perform poorly (Table 2.1).

2.4.1 Transparency International: Corruption Perceptions Index (2017)

As corruption becomes more an organic part of the state, an uneven spread of national wealth is the natural outcome (Dietl 2010). This widening divide serves to further alienate citizens which render governments increasingly vulnerable to popular protests and uprisings. Repression, then, is often deployed on the part of state elites to hang onto power. Perhaps, the most egregious example of such repression occurred in 1982 when the Syrian city of Hama rebelled under the yoke of Bashar al-Assad – the current president’s father. Following an artillery barrage
last for several days, bulldozers were sent in to flatten neighbourhoods. Soldiers followed these and shot survivors whilst combing through the rubble. Twenty thousand Syrians were massacred in Hama in 1982 (The Guardian 2011). Hama underscores a central truism of governance in the MENA region where state (read elite) security is purchased at the expense of human security of ordinary citizens. Such repression entails a close proximity between the political leadership and the upper echelons of the military. In the process, civil-military relations is undermined through growing politicization of the armed forces and as the men in uniform play an enhanced role in policy formulation. Algeria provides a quintessential example of this phenomenon. The post of Defence Minister was always occupied by a senior military officer. More often than not, the Defence Minister also held the post of President. For instance, Houari Boumediene, Chadli Bendjedid and Liamine Zeroual were both the Minister of Defence and Head of State (Gaunb 2016).

2.5 The Demise of the State?

It is clear that the European Westphalian state system which was imported into the MENA region by colonial powers through the Sykes-Picot Line is under threat. In this section, we consider the challenge from three factors: the rise of non-state actors, the region’s youthful demographic profile and revisiting the nexus between religion and politics, and re-examining the challenge posed to rentier states as a result of new technological developments.
2.5 The Demise of the State?

2.5.1 The Rise of Non-state Actors

Few states in the region can claim to have comprehensive, supreme, unqualified and exclusive sovereignty over its territorial domain (Dietl 2010). In Yemen, for instance, there is no central government controlling its entire territory. Yemen, today, consists of at least three large, armed coalitions of actors who separately control a part of the *de jure* territory of what was Yemen (Boserup 2017). Consider, too, the large swathes of territory – the size of Britain – Islamic State (IS) controlled at its apogee in Iraq and Syria. This territory held a population of ten million, had its own army, police force, judicial system and an annual budget of approximately US$ 2 billion. To all intents and purposes, IS had a *de facto* state within the borders of two *de jure* states (Solomon 2016). Neither could Baghdad nor Damascus dislodge the presence of this terrorist group from its territory on its own – thereby making a mockery of the sovereignty of these states. The existence of quasi-states like Iraqi Kurdistan and Democratic Federation of Rojava – another Kurdish enclave within Syria – further highlights the phenomenon of state fragmentation in the MENA region (Del Sarto 2017). In similar vein, Cairo seems to be losing its forever-tenuous grip over the Sinai (Boserup 2017).

Perhaps, a more graphic illustration of the rise of non-state actors (NSAs) and the decline of states in the region is the Lebanese Shia-militia Hizbullah. From humble beginnings, this non-state actor now controls large parts of the country and is acknowledged to be militarily stronger than the Lebanon’s own armed forces (Magen 2013). Hizbullah, however, is more than just a Lebanese actor. Its fighters helped to save embattled Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and it has trained other Iranian proxies in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Yemen (Neriah 2019). Moreover, with each passing day, Hizbullah grows stronger with the separation between it and the Lebanese state increasingly becoming blurred (Salloukh 2019).

At the same time, the rise of these NSAs have been aided and abetted by states in the region pursuing their own short-term interests. Hizbullah was created by Tehran in 1982 as it sought to improve its strategic reach through proxies. Such actions, of course, provoke sharp reactions. Blowback for Iran’s proxy policy, thereby expanding its strategic influence, was not long in coming. During the November 2019 protests in the historically significant Iraqi town of Karbala, Iraqi protests stormed the Iranian consulate, burned down the outer wall and lowered the Iranian flag as they protested over the influence of Iranian-backed proxies in their own country’s affairs (Arab News 2019). Of course, Tehran is not alone in pursuing such a strategy. Qatar has contributed US$ 3 billion to anti-Assad forces in the first 2 years of the Syrian civil war (Johny 2016). Doha has also supported Muslim Brotherhood activities in the region (Tsopokhyemia 2016). This was to cause tensions with the GCC countries. Ankara, meanwhile, has allowed IS fighters from Europe and Asia to infiltrate into Iraq and Syria. Turkey has also trained and supplied Islamist militants in Egypt and Libya (Neriah 2019). As with Iran, such policies have already turned public sentiment against President Erdogan and his neo-Ottoman aspirations.
2.5.2 The Challenge of Demographics

Challenges to the state also exist in more subtle forms. Consider here the youth bulge. A quarter of the population in MENA countries are aged between 15 and 24 years. In some countries, this youth bulge is even more pronounced. In Jordan, for instance, 70 percent of the population are under the age of 30. Whilst such a youthful population might be considered a boon in ageing Japan or some countries in the West, where economic conditions are depressed, this is not the case in the MENA region. Here, youth such bear the brunt of unemployment such as in Egypt where more than 3 in 10 young people are without work (Selected Committee on International Relations 2017). Confronted with endemic corruption and poor governance which exacerbates their plight, MENA youth have lost trust in the state. Political trust “...refers to peoples’ acknowledgement of the government’s authority and their willingness to accept the outcomes of the government’s decision making at they believe politicians acts fairly...” (Spierings 2017). Synchronizing 40 Arab Barometer and World Values Surveys for MENA counties before and after the Arab Spring, Niels Springer demonstrates how this political trust is in short supply amongst the youth who often view their political leadership with contempt (ibid, 2017).

Left out of formal political processes, increasingly alienated from traditional structures and authority, including religion, youth in the region has becoming more restive. Aided with the penetration of new technologies, youth have increasingly turned to social media to organize and mobilize on the streets as they vent their frustration with their political disempowerment and socio-economic alienation and against the ancient regimes in their respective countries. Throughout 2019, Algerian youth mobilized against the autocrats in power complaining about unemployment and corruption. Their protests saw off octogenarian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika who attempted to still cling onto power (Guerin 2019). Not satisfied with Bouteflika’s exit, the youth continued to take to the streets demanding sweeping government reforms which would end both repression and government corruption (BBC News 2019). In Lebanon, similar themes are at play. The country is one of the most unequal in the world. The country’s top 1 percent own 25 percent of the wealth in the country. Protestors on Beirut’s streets are calling for thawra (revolution) as they rail against corruption, maladministration and the sectarian nature of political power. This thawra has already resulted in the resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri in October 2019 (Mounzer 2019). As in the case of Algeria, Lebanese youth are demanding for a more democratic and more economically responsive state and remain on the street until the entire political class steps down. As Tony Badran (2019) noted, the current political class in one form or another and the families from which it is constituted from has been in power since the days of the civil war. In Iraq, the youth have taken to the streets demanding an end to maladministration, corruption, the malevolent influence of Iran in Iraq as well as the annulment of the 2005 constitution which distributed power along sectarian lines. Despite an attempt to remain in power through brute repression which resulted in the security forces killing 500 people, the Prime Minister was compelled to step down (Bengio 2020). This
begs the question why despite the repression, youthful protestors are continuing to gain momentum? This answer lay in the dispersed, if not leaderless nature of protests taking place in the MENA region. The fact that these new movements are less hierarchical and more horizontally structures with power dispersed has resulted in governments being unable to quell protests by tried and tested measures such as co-option, incarceration or execution of leaders.

Given diminishing economic opportunities, corruption and increasing security concerns, the desire to emigrate has seen a huge spike out of MENA countries. According to the Arab Barometer, the number of those who wish to leave Jordan increased by 23 points between 2016 and 2019. The figure for Morocco increased by 17 points and for Egypt 10 points for the same timeframe (Robbins 2019). To put it differently, one in three of citizens want to emigrate from the MENA countries. Unsurprisingly, given the demographic pyramid, it is young people aged between 18 and 29 years old who are most likely to emigrate. Whilst this may provide some comfort to the inept and authoritarian regimes in the region, as this emigration may serve to relieve some demographic pressures, it also has a downside. As the Arab Barometer demonstrates, those most likely to emigrate are also those who are better educated (ibid, 2019). The resultant brain-drain would have a further deleterious impact on economies already taking strain.

2.5.3 Revisiting Religion and Politics

The fact that states have used religion, and in some cases, a very fundamental notion of faith to bolster their flagging authority is akin to opening up a Pandora’s Box with several states being unable to control the consequences letting religion into the public sphere. The growth of Al Qaeda, Islamic State and numerous other militant Islamist formations is one dire consequence of this unhealthy mixture of governance and faith (Andersen 2017). Despite the loss of its erstwhile capital, Raqqa, and the territory it once controlled, the ideology of IS continues to grow. Alex Schmid (2017) notes that there remains strong sympathy for the militant Islamist cause. Twenty-nine percent of Egyptians he notes believes that a suicide bombing is justified or sometimes justified. The corresponding figure for the Palestinian territory is 40 percent. In an exhaustive survey conducted by Pew and European Social Survey of 42 percent of the global Muslim population, it was found that 17.38 percent of Muslims or 295 million people expressed terror sympathies. Similarly, the Qatar-based Al Jazeera television network found in a poll of its Arabic language viewers found that 81 percent of the 56,881 polled were in favour of the victories of IS in Iraq and Syria (Solomon 2017).

Neither is this crisis confined to the Sunni world. In Iran, the entire edifice of velayat-e-faqih is under threat. When clerics control the state and seek to justify that control on the basis of religious edicts, it should come as no surprise when things go badly that citizens blame them and question their qualifications to run the apparatus of state. Such is it with Iran’s Supreme Leader – Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Khamenei
lacked the support of his predecessor, the Islamic Republic’s founder – Ayatollah Khomeini. As Glen Segell (2020) has noted, Iran’s first constitution required the Supreme Leader to be selected on the basis of popular acclaim. However, the constitution was amended in 1989 to allow his accession to the office of Supreme Leader without this requirement as he was unable to secure such popular acclaim. In that sense, the legitimacy of the Supreme Leader was called into question from the very beginning.

For the past three decades, Khamenei’s rule and that of the entire Iranian system of governance has been increasingly challenged by restless Iranians who have experienced a climate of fear and intimidation as countless human rights reports would attest to as well as declining living standards. Rampant inflation and unemployment, especially amongst the youth, have further eroded living standards. With the Trump administration exiting the nuclear deal and imposing sanctions on Tehran, Iranian GDP contracted by 3.9 percent in 2018 and 3.8 percent in 2019. The Iranian Rial according to the World Bank is also expected to depreciate more than any other currency in 2020 (Razzaqi 2019). Oil revenues, meanwhile, have plummeted as oil exports experienced a precipitous drop from 2.5 million barrels per day before sanctions to just 1 million barrels per day after the imposition of sanctions (Turak 2019). To be clear, sanctions exacerbated the plight of both the regime and ordinary Iranians. The economy with its huge subsidies and rentier state, as described earlier, was the core reason for Iran on its current downward trajectory. Consider too, that the economy is further distorted by the fact that the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps controls an estimated 20 percent of the economy (ibid, 2019). This translates into an uncompetitive economy – one which privileges parasites as opposed to productive members of the economy.

Consider also the endemic corruption in the country which according to Transparency International ranks 130 out of 168 countries surveyed. According to Iranian politician, Mostafa Kavakebian, such systemic corruption constitutes the gravest of dangers confronting Tehran (Vatanka 2017). Two possible reasons account for the seriousness with which Kavakebian views the threat constituted by corruption. First, it has touched the highest echelons of power. Both Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Sadeq Larijani, the head of the judiciary, have accused each other of “massive financial corruption”. Meanwhile, the president’s younger brother, Hossein Fereidun, is accused of not only abusing his government position but also engaging in fraudulent banking transitions. Second, this is supposed to be the “Islamic” Republic of Iran. It is supposed to represent integrity and virtue (ibid, 2017). The fact that Iran is increasingly becoming synonymous with corruption makes a mockery of a rationale for theocratic rule.

In an effort to acquire some breathing space for a struggling economy, Tehran in November 2019 affected a 50 percent hike for rationed fuel and 200 percent for fuel in the free market (Razzaqi 2019). The result was as instantaneous as it was predictable. Iranians took to the streets across one hundred cities blaming the government for their financial woes. Ayatollah Khamenei seemed to be at odds with himself regarding a suitable response. On the one hand he criticized Rouhani’s government for the imposition of the fuel hike but on the other hand called
demonstrators “anarchists and hooligans” (Itzchakov 2019). Despite this initial vacillation, Khamenei exhorted his inner circle: “The Islamic Republic is in danger. Do whatever it takes to end it. You have my order” (Staff 2020). Despite the government’s repressive methods, the protests gathered momentum. Police and Basij forces were deployed. The Internet was blocked, 1500 protestors were killed and 7000 were arrested (ibid, 2020).

Despite a brief lull in protests, following Qassem Suleimani’s death, protestors were back on the streets after the regime admitted that its own air defences “unintentionally” shot down Ukrainian International Airlines flight PS 752 on 8 January 2020. This resulted in the deaths of all 176 people on board, the majority of whom were Iranian. The fact that Tehran initially denied this and tried to cover this up infuriated Iranians even further (Behravesh 2020). What is different about these protests from those which emanated from the 2009 Green Revolution where Iranians seemed content with reforming the system is that the Iranian streets wants an end to the current system. Iranians are aware of the connection between their leadership’s penchant for financially and materially supporting regional proxies and their own financial woes. Hence some of the slogans they were chanting were: “No to Gaza, no to Lebanon” and “Leave Syria, think of us” (Caschetta 2019). Other protestors made clear that they seek an end to clerical rule as they chanted: “We don’t want the ayatollahs” and “Death to the Dictator” (ibid, 2019). Other protestors were more explicit denouncing the principle of guardianship – the foundation principle of the Islamic Republic (Bahravesh 2020).

Mehdi Karroubi, a Green Revolution leader, in a public statement declared that Khamenei was singularly unqualified to be Supreme Leader. Whilst Faezeh Hashemi, daughter of former Iranian President Akbar Rafsanjani, called on Khamenei to step down (ibid, 2020). After all, how can one be a Supreme Leader and call on your troops to mow down innocent citizens or be Supreme Leader of an Islamic Republic and preside over a corrupt government? Far from the conventional scholarship on Iranian politics which speaks of the conflict between reformists and conservatives, Iran confronts a far more existential crisis. Under the circumstances, one can only but concur with Ayatolah Khamenei. The Islamic Republic is in danger. The danger, however, does not emanate from some foreign capital. The danger lies from the autocratic and corrupt leadership governing Iran. Indeed, governance in the Islamic Republic makes the best case as to why Iran should be a secular republic.

2.5.4 Re-examining Rentier Economies in the Light of Technological Developments

The rentier economy, and therefore the state system in the MENA region, is also taking strain. In Dubai, a bubble economy has developed over the years as a result of over-building and property speculation. Currently, the property market has been on a
downward trajectory for the past 5 years with house prices plummeting by 30 per cent. This, in turn, holds negative consequences for the city’s banks as bad loans and defaults increase. Consequently, there have been calls to halt home construction for 2 years if an economic disaster is to be avoided (Fattah and el-Din 2019).

More pressing than the challenges confronted by Dubai is the calamity confronted with by oil and gas producers in the region on account of decarbonization policies and the advancement and adoption of low-carbon technologies. Oil and gas prices will remain subdued whilst competitive alternatives like solar and wind energy challenge the dominance of hydrocarbons (Selected Committee on International Relations 2017). Despite the rhetoric of economic diversification, MENA oil exporters are neither politically willing to make the necessary sacrifices and tough choices this will entail nor are they equipped for a rapidly decarbonizing future (Tagliapietra 2017). This holds serious consequences for these regimes. How do these regimes continue to maintain the structural inefficiencies, the clientelistic relations and resultant patronage networks? How can they policy reduce subsidies and institute taxes without giving political rights? The difficulties in engaging in such radical reforms are exemplified in Saudi Arabia. Its Vision 2030 Plan aims to reduce subsidies, institute taxes and reduce dependence on hydrocarbons as well as developing a thriving private sector. Already, this newly launched initiative has run into trouble with civil servants and religious conservatives expressing their discontent (Coats 2019).

These developments also hold negative implications for regime security on the international stage. Consider here the case of shale gas production in the USA. This has directly resulted in the decline of oil revenues for key MENA producers as oil prices were lowered as a symptom of a decrease in demand (Selected Committee on International Relations 2017). How does Washington justify the expenditure of American blood and treasure to support the region’s autocrats when these hydrocarbons mean less to the US economy? President Trump has raised this issue several times on the campaign trail but this is a trend which started already during the Obama Administration who wanted extricate himself from the Middle East quagmire and pivot the USA to Asia given the real challenge to Pax Americana from China (Zulfqar 2018).

Whilst the state system in the MENA region is confronted with enormous challenges, these are far from unprecedented or insurmountable as African countries such as Ethiopia and Sierra Leone can attest to. States are fundamental for the regulation of conflict in society and for ensuring the well-being and prosperity of its citizens. Without the state promoting harmony, anarchy will assume. The disintegration of post-Gaddafi Libya and the catastrophe of the failed state of Yemen are salutary lessons in the dangers of statelessness. Moreover, the Marxist nirvana of the withering away of the state, the anarchist penchant to resist all authority and some capitalists who argue that we do not need states, just the all-powerful market to serve as a regulatory authority does not exist in the real world (Fukuyama 2011). What is, however, needed is the reconfiguration of political authority and re-building of effective institutions which are inclusive, legitimate and effective. The reforms required need to go beyond state institutions and also undertake moving away
from rentier economies which encourage clientelism and patronage networks. This is imperative if one want to arrive at an independent middle class which is the bedrock of any liberal democracy. As Moore et al. (1963) succinctly stated, “No bourgeoisie, no democracy”. At present, however, the political will to undertake such radical reforms are sorely lacking. As Bruce Maddy Weitzmann eloquently observes, Arab states have reached a Shakespearean moment: “to be or not to be” (Wietzman 2016).

2.6 Signs of Hope?

Not all developments provide a pessimistic reading of the MENA region. There is also reason to hope on of values change in the Arab world as a result of processes of urbanization, modernization and globalization facilitated by modern technology. Arab society, according to Malek Abduljaber (2018), after a thorough analysis of the latest evidence from the World Values Survey and Arab Barometer, is of the opinion is becoming more secular, liberal and egalitarian in their values – moving away from religion, tradition and ethnocentrism. In the process, Arab societies are getting more tolerant of the proverbial – be it non-Muslims, Americans, other Westerners or indeed the state of Israel. Indeed, support for recognizing Israel as a state has reached unprecedented levels. Arabs are also increasingly embracing their Jewish heritage. A million Jews used to reside in the Arab world before the majority were unceremoniously forced to leave their homeland on account of the establishment of the state of Israel. Today, in both Egypt and Lebanon, the state is investing millions of dollars to restore synagogues. Iraq, meanwhile, seeks to renew contacts with Iraqi Jews. Sudan’s Minister of Religious Affairs – Nasser Aladin – has also pleaded for Sudanese Jews who have emigrated to return to their country (Cohen 2020). All this highlight the growing tolerance in Arab society – a refreshing break from the past.

Research from the Arab Barometer clearly demonstrates that eight out of ten Arabs in the MENA region believe that democracy is the best system of government. The Arab Barometer clearly proved that with every survey, more and more Arabs are embracing democratic norms (Rahman 2018). This is a positive development and proves that the authoritarian tendencies of the political leadership in these countries are out of step with the desires of their citizens. Moreover, it disproves the thesis put forward by some scholars that Islam, Muslims and Arabs, in particular, are exceptional in their rejection of democracy and modernity (Solomon and Tausch 2020). The Green Revolution in Iran in 2009, followed by the Arab Uprising in 2010 and more recent pro-democracy, anti-corruption wave in Algeria, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and Sudan in 2019 and 2020 reinforce the findings of the Arab Barometer. At the same time, Arab support for democracy is mixed. The Arab Barometer makes clear that four in ten Arabs in the MENA region believe that democracy is indecisive and a third maintain that democracy cannot maintain security and stability (Rahman 2018). This is not difficult to fathom why. For those experiencing death and destruction in post-Gaddafi Libya, the yoke of Gaddafi seems a wonderful period of stability.
Similarly, in Iraq, the oppressive rule of Saddam Hussein seems peaceful in comparison to the chaos and uncertainty currently gripping their country. The lesson is clear: if democratic norms are to take route in the countries of the MENA region, it would need to be go beyond merely genuine elections, freedom of assembly and expression and so forth. It would need to deliver security and stability to its citizens. The latter can only come about with the state appointing competent people in key positions which would mean that current patterns of governance based on patronage and nepotism needs to end.

Further research conducted by Ciftci et al. (2019) demonstrate that the relationship between Muslim religiosity and democratic support need not be negative. Religiously observant Muslims constitutes those who adopt a more orthodox view attempting to create a social order based on divine laws as well as those are more modernist in orientation and who subscribe to religious pluralism and tolerance. Whilst groups like the Muslim Brotherhood is more inclined towards the orthodox perspective, recent survey data suggests that more Muslims in the region are subscribing to the modernist orientation.

The Arab Youth Survey of 2019, which was conducted in 15 countries in the Gulf, Levant and North Africa and involved 3,300 face-to-face surveys found that 18–24 year olds in the region were becoming more secular in their attitudes blaming religion and sectarianism for the various conflicts in their region. Moreover, 66 percent believe that religion is playing too big a role in the Middle East, whilst half agree that the “Arab world’s religious values are holding the Arab world back” (Sanderson 2009). Explaining this change in attitudes, Mohammad Shahrou, an academic at the University of Damascus, explains that the region’s youth are confronted with a “deep intellectual dilemma when it came to reconciling conservative teachings with the world they inhabit”. In addition, he opines that access to the Internet has “allowed them to keep pace with worldwide developments, opening their minds to virtually all cultures and civilizations” (Sanderson 2009).

Other polls such as that conducted by BBC News Arabic not only reinforces this trend but also points out the implications for Islamist organizations. The BBC’s polls involved 25,000 people from Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Morocco, West Bank + Gaza, Sudan, Tunisia and Yemen. The survey demonstrated that trust in Islamist groups and organizations fell calamitously across the MENA region. In Jordan and Morocco, trust in the Muslim Brotherhood declined by 20 percent since 2012–2013, whilst in Sudan, support for the Brotherhood dropped further by 25 percent – from 49 percent to a mere 24 percent. Support for Ennahdah in Tunisia also declined by 24 percent whilst Palestinian support for Hamas declined to 22 percent from 48 percent over the 2012–2019 period (The National 2019).

There are signs that Islamist parties are taking this shifting public opinion to heart and are also beginning to understand the importance political pluralism, tolerance and moderation. No doubt, their newfound respect for the democratic space was fuelled by the manner in which their parent organization – Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood – was brutally turned out of office on 3 July 2013 in a military coup. The coup at the time had popular support on account of the both the incompetence displayed by Egypt’s Islamists as well as the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood, once
in power, attempted to Islamize society (Solomon and Tausch 2020). In Morocco, the Islamist-inspired Justice and Development Party (PJD) won 107 out of 395 votes in the 2011 parliamentary elections. By moderating its stance and focusing on the genuine needs and aspiration of citizens as well as exercising power through coalitions, the PJD won a majority in polls in 2018. In similar fashion, Tunisia’s Ennahda compromised on key constitutional issues, its leader Rachid Ghannouchi did not seek the presidency and turned power over to a government made up of technocrats (Ghafar and Hess 2018). The examples of Morocco and Tunisia suggest that pragmatic Islamists could be co-opted into formal political processes, thereby enhancing democracies.

2.7 Conclusion

A cross-road in history, a crucial turning is what the ancient Greeks meant when they used the term “crisis” (Magen 2013). Such turning points can be blessing or curse depending on the decisions made, the path taken. Whilst the MENA region is undergoing tremendous social strife, political instability and economic challenges, it is also true that such change holds not only peril but promise if the correct decisions are taken on the part of the region’s policy-makers.

Given the enormity of the challenges posed, what is clear is that the policymakers cannot make superficial changes, as is their wont, in an effort to support a status quo which is well past its sell-by date. For instance, with the start of the Arab Spring protests knocking on his kingdom’s door, the Moroccan king, offered his subjects a number of liberal constitutional amendments. These were designed to assuage public opinion and thereby preserve the grip of the monarchy (Angrist 2010). An instructive lesson for today’s policy-makers emanate from the Ottoman Empire. The ascendant Ottomans challenged the might of Italy, Spain and Venice for control of the Mediterranean. In 1529 and 1683, the Sultan’s forces lay siege to Vienna, the capital of the Habsburg Empire. Shortly, thereafter, however, the fortunes of the Ottoman Empire began to wane. In an effort to reverse this decline, there was an attempt on the part of Ottoman elites to emulate European institutions like parliaments, modernize the military, reform education and embrace modern technology (Angrist 2010). However, the reforms were too little, too late and much too superficial. Ottoman decline proved terminal. Current piece-meal reforms in the MENA region seem to be following this Ottoman example. Policy-makers need to be more courageous and need to embark upon deep-seated structural reforms if the region’s citizens are to have a peaceful and prosperous future.

A key element of the structural reforms needed lay in the realm of institution-building. Whilst most Arabs, and especially the young are embracing democratic norms, the truth is that a ballot paper can neither miraculously feed a voter nor provide housing and employment for the unemployed. Citizens therefore need institutions which not only reflect democratic norms of accountability but also effectiveness. Reflecting on this, the inimitable Francis Fukuyama (2011) states:
Democracy’s failure, then, lies in concept than in execution; most people around the world would strongly prefer to live in a society in which their government was accountable and effective, where it delivered the sorts of services demanded by citizens in a timely and cost-effective way. But few governments are actually able to do both, because institutions are weak, corrupt, lacking capacity, or in some cases absent altogether. The passion of protesters and democracy advocates around the world, from South Africa to Korea to Romania to Ukraine, might be sufficient to bring about “regime change” from authoritarian to democratic government, but the latter will not succeed without a long, costly, laborious, and difficult practice of institution-building.

Institutional-building, then, is the first step towards structural reforms needed. Such institution-building will not occur unless they are staffed with individuals who are competent. In other words, civil servants are appointed on what they know (their respective skill-sets) as opposed to who they know (patronage networks). Patronage networks need to end and the effectiveness and legitimacy of institutions can be restored. For ruling elites in the MENA region, it would necessitate painful political sacrifices they have been loath to make. Whilst telling one’s cousin that by virtue of his royal blood he may no longer head up a particular government department may be painful, what is at stake is the existence of the polity itself. Moreover, with declining oil revenues, decarbonization, globalization, urbanization and a youthful demographic pyramid, the status quo is no longer sustainable.

For the region’s citizens too, a new realization has to be made. The days for waiting for the largesse of the state are over. Taxes have to be paid for public services like health, education, the building of roads and the like (Fukuyama 2011). In return for their taxes, they gain representative government. What is then needed is a new social compact between political elites and the people they govern – a new social contract, if you will.

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