Arab States and the Alienation of the Masses: Pre and post Arab Spring

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Abstract

State polices and the strategic choices of the ruling elite have alienated the Arab people. This paper analyzes the source of the Arab masses alienation by the state using the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) and the World Wide Governance Indicators along the following dimensions: lack of political participation; unstable democratic institutions; lack of political and social integration; socioeconomic deprivation; and poor governance. The analysis shows that the source of alienation of the Arab masses before the Arab Spring and after the Arab Spring are the same, indicating that the grievances of the Arab masses have not been addressed.

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Introduction

Waves of democratization swept many parts of the world; however the Arab world seemed to be one of the holdouts, thus giving rise to the notion of "Arab Exceptionalism." In the Arab world, undemocratic rule endured and authoritarianism showed remarkable resilience, in spite of internal and external pressure. Internally, the Arab masses have aspired for political reform and voiced demands for democratic transition. Externally, western pressure was placed on Arab regimes to democratize (albeit, this pressure has now receded as western powers prioritize security over the promotion of democracy). Western pressure intensified after 9/11 and the introduction of the Bush Administration so called "freedom Agenda." The US state Department launched the "Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) in 2002", this was followed by the US proposal for the "The Greater Middle East Initiative (GMEI) in 2004". Both had the goal of "promoting democracy in the region and accelerating reforms in governance, education, the economy, technology, development and the role of women" [1].

Arab regimes did not remain unresponsive; they had to bow to the internal and external pressure. However, the political reforms they initiated remained limited, cosmetic, and with a top down approach. The Arab regimes had no intention of conceding power or being fully accountable to the people; their main objective was to weather this wave of democratization while retaining their thrones. The matter of fact is that democracy did not materialize in Arab countries. No state made significant, un-retracted "steps toward freedoms [2]. The Arab people become disillusioned! Without the prospect of participating in politics and with the absence of conduits to implement change, the masses poured to the streets and the Arab Spring ensued.

At the same time, radicalism and terrorist organizations were on the rise in the Arab world. This new wave of radicalism and terrorism was different from the previous waves the world had experienced before. Previous waves of radicalism and terrorism leaned on ideological and nationalistic motivations; in contrast, the new wave of radicalism and terrorism utilized narratives. These narratives were more than just "misused, misinterpreted, and instrumentalized" religious narratives. A close look at the narratives utilized by Al-Qaida and ISIS reveals that political and socioeconomic grievances are effectively utilized to discredit the legitimacy of Arab regimes, influence public opinion, and acquire new followers. These narratives are commonly combined with distinctive terms seated in matters of political oppression, state corruption, ineffective governance, inequality and socio-economic deprivation.

The failure of Arab countries to make the transition to democracy and the rise of radicalism cannot be solely thrown on the

shoulders of Arab regimes. A reductions approach is misleading and leads to invalid conclusions. Democratic transition is extremely complex and implies more than one nominal change and period, multiple characteristics and different variables [3]. The literature explaining transition to democracy can be categorized into four different approaches: structure-oriented approach, process-oriented approach, institutional context-oriented approach and political economy approaches [4]. From analyzing these approaches, it becomes clear that the strategic choices of the ruling elite in Arab countries, although not the sole factor, are very critical in hindering transition to democracy.

What is said about democratic transition can also be said about the rise of radicalism and terrorist organizations in the Arab world. Radicalism is not a simple reality, it is multidimensional and its causes are varied and intertwined, thus a reductionist approach fails to account for the complexity of the issue [5]. Cause of radicalism in the Arab world include among others: socio-economic root causes; demographic pressure and the youth bulge; political root causes, western intervention, and the unhealed rift between modernity and traditional societies. Here again, Arab states are not the sole root cause, yet, their contribution to the rise of radicalism cannot be denied.

Arab regimes have managed to hold onto power, but at the same time have managed to alienate the Arab masses. According to the 2016 Arab Public Opinion Survey; 55% of the respondents had negative views of their home countries' political situations, furthermore, Arab public attitudes towards the government as a whole were overwhelmingly negative [6]. The nature of this alienation is basically the same before the Arab Spring and after it. Before the Arab Spring the majority of the people in the Arab streets would voice their discontent with the policies of their governments and demand freedom, dignity, better governance, accountability and greater political participation. In short they were asking for a new social contract. A minority went or was driven down the path of radicalization. After the Arab Spring; with the unfolding tragic events and the bloodshed, destruction and the atrocities committed by terrorist organizations and by regimes determined to hold onto power at all cost, a portion of those who were calling for political reform and democracy abandoned their demands preferring to priorities security and safety above all. This is true even among youth who were the most vocal and the most active during the days of the Arab Spring. According to the 2016 Arab Youth Survey, more than half of youth surveyed agreed with the statement: "Given the current circumstances in the Middle East, promoting stability in the region is more

important than promoting democracy" [7]. However their silence is not a sign of satisfaction with the policies of their governments. Their alienation is genuine but masked by fear.

Alienation of Arab Masses: Drivers

The following sub-sections are devoted to explaining how Arab states have managed to alienate the masses. The policies and the performances of the Arab States are analyzed and compared with developing countries and countries in transition in order to identify drawback in the Arab region and how they contribute to the alienation of the Arab masses. In this regard, the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) is used to paint a broad picture of: political participation; stability of democratic institutions; political and social integration; and level of socioeconomic development. In addition, the World Wide Governance Indicators are used to determine the quality governance of Arab States along the following dimensions: control of corruption; government effectiveness; regulatory quality; and rule of law.

Lack of Political Participation

Political participation is basically the voice and influence of citizens in politics. In authoritarian states, political participation is exclusive to the ruling elite. Elections in authoritarian states, if held at all, are neither fair nor free. These elections do not reflect the voice and the will of

the people, rather, they are shows put to demonstrate regime legitimacy.

Political participation allows for superior policy choices and outcomes due to pooling of knowledge and information [8]. In addition, participating in politics is beneficial for both the moral and civic health of the individual, and the nation alike. Theoretical literatures on procedural utility and the psychological benefits of political participation suggest that people who participate in political activities will be more satisfied with their lives because of the resulting feelings of autonomy, competence and relatedness [9].

The Arab public believes in and demands political systems that allow them to opportunity to participate in politics. In the 2016 Arab Public Opinion Survey, 77% of Arabs believe that democracy is the most appropriate system of government for their home countries when asked to compare democracy to other types of rule, such as authoritarian regimes or representative democracies where electoral competition is limited to either Islamist or non-Islamist/secular political parties, or to theocracies. More importantly, the majority of Arabs believe that their society is prepared for democracy [10].

Political participation in Arab countries in comparison to other developing and in transition countries is depicted in Figure 1. The score on the political participation indicator is based on the following criteria: to what extent are political representatives determined by general, free and

fair elections; to what extent do democratically elected political representatives have the effective power to govern, or to what extent are there veto powers and political enclaves; to what extent can individuals form and join independent political or

civic groups, to what extent can these groups operate and assemble freely; and to what extent can citizens, organizations and the mass media express opinions freely [11].

Figure 1: Political Participation
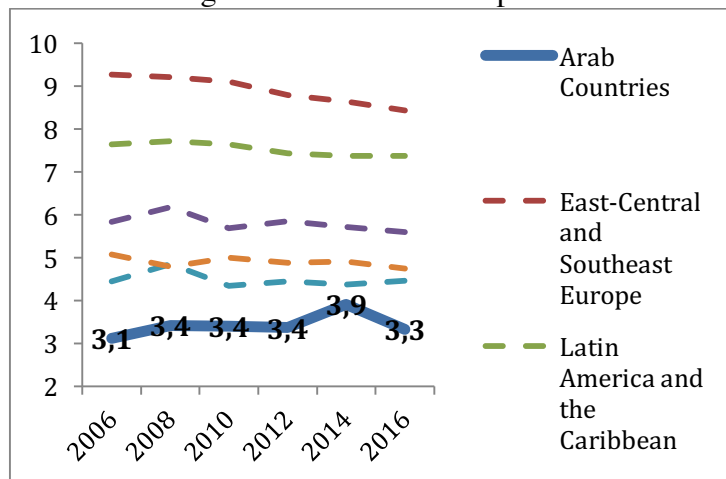
Source: Author's calculation based on the BTI Index, 2016

As the Figure reveals, the level of political participation in Arab countries is lower than all other country groups, indicating that the Arab people do not decide who rules and that they do not enjoy political freedoms. Although political participation in Arab countries did register an improvement in the years leading to the Arab Spring and peaked in 2014, it has now receded to levels below that achieved in 2008.

The lack of political participation in Arab countries deprives people from means to

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Unstable Democratic Institutions

Democratic institutions are a perquisite for the consolidation of democracy. The failure of Arab countries to transition to democratic rule after the

implement change. Some of the frustrated turn to radicalism and violent extremism believing it is the only available option to induce change. The majority of people suffer from sub-optimal outcomes due to policies and choices by the ruling elite. Many are stripped of life satisfaction and happiness that is associated with political participation. The end result is people alienated by the State and the ruling elite

Arab Spring demonstrates that without stable democratic institutions, democratic transition will be weak and open to interventions by actors such

as the military. Since the 1970s, some Arab countries initiated political reforms and embarked on efforts to democratize. However, this was done without building strong and effective democratic institutions. The result has been that political reforms and democratization efforts remained cosmetic with a top down approach thus failing to meet the expectation of the Arab public.

The factors that facilitate or hinder the building of effective democratic institutions in Arab countries are varied and can be located at different levels: international, state, and society. Although states are not the sole factor when it comes to building democratic institutions, their role cannot be emphasized enough. The stability of democratic institutions in Arab countries in comparison to other developing and in transition countries is depicted in Figure 2. The score on the stability of democratic institutions indicator is based on the following criteria: Do democratic institutions (national, regional and local governments, the parliament, the judiciary and the public administration) exist and are they capable of performing effectively free from extensive, counterproductive friction; and, to what extent are democratic institutions accepted as legitimate by the relevant actors. The relevant actors are all individuals and organizations that are able to concentrate political power. This includes government bodies, political parties, associations, interest groups and civic organizations, as well as groups with potential veto powers, such as the military or the clergy [12].

Figure 2: Stability of Democratic Institutions
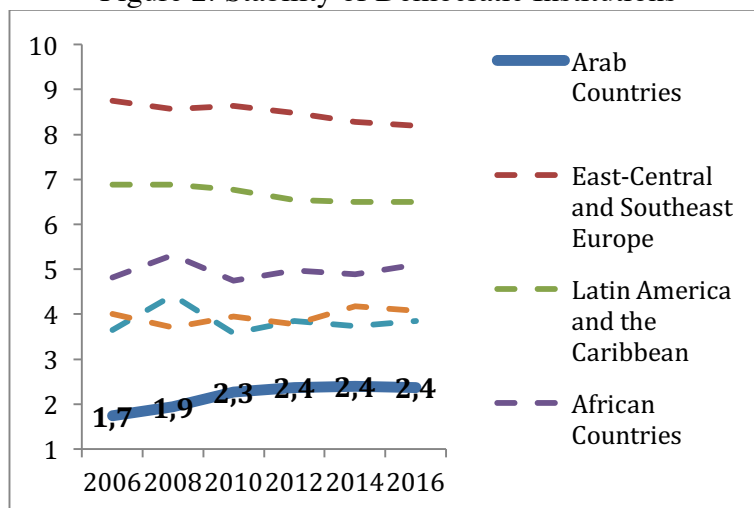
Source: Author's calculation based on the BTI Index, 2016

As the figure shows, the stability of democratic institutions in Arab countries is very weak, registering dismal scores before and after the Arab Spring. In addition, the Arab countries' score on the stability of democratic institutions indicator has stagnated and failed to record any improvement since 2012. The analysis demonstrates that Democratic institutions in Arab countries are not capable of performing, and that they are not adequately accepted and supported by

the state and the actors possessing political power. The result has been, as mentioned earlier, that political reforms and democratization efforts in Arab countries remained cosmetic with a top down approach thus failing to meet the
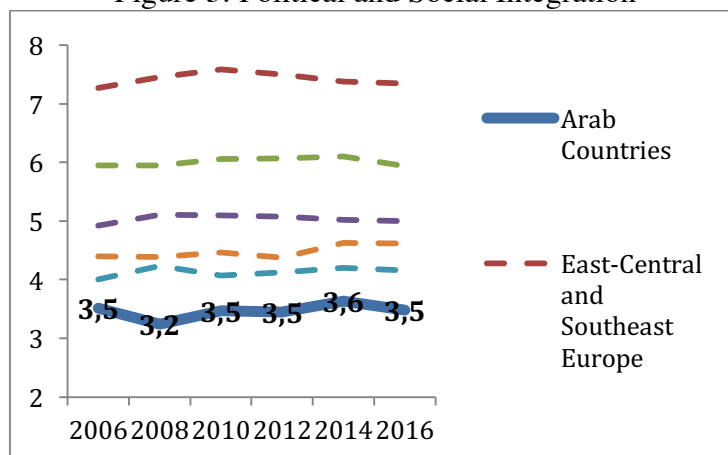
Lack of Political and Social Integration

Arab countries have to deal with issues of tribalism, sectarianism, and ethnic nepotism. In this regard, political and social integration becomes highly critical as it has the potential to transfer people loyalties from tribes, ethnicities, and sects to a larger political system. Political and social integration in Arab countries in comparison to other developing and in transition countries is depicted in Figure 3. The score on the political and social integration indicator is based on the following criteria: to what extent is there a stable and socially rooted party system able to articulate

expectation of the Arab public. This has led to the emergence of a gap between the state and the people thus paving the way for the alienation of the masses by the states.

and aggregate societal interests; to what extent is there a network of cooperative associations or interest groups to mediate between society and the political system; how strong is the citizens' approval of democratic norms and procedures; to what extent have social self-organization and the construction of social capital advanced [13]. As seen from the criteria, two elements are directly related to the State; which are the State's attitudes and policies towards political parties, associations and interest groups.

Figure 3: Political and Social Integration

Source: Author's calculation based on the BTI Index, 2016

The figure illustrates the low level of political and social integration in Arab countries. Furthermore, political and social integration has not improved over the last decade, registering a score in 2016

equivalent to that in 2006. Arab regimes possess excessive powers. In some Arab countries, political parties are rendered weak with government policies designed to marginalize

them. For example; in Jordan elections are based on the single vote, an electoral system designed to encourage citizens to vote based on tribal affiliations and not along party lines. In Egypt, the parties' law imposes high barriers for

establishment of parties, while in Algeria the electoral process is dominated by regime-aligned parties. In the Gulf countries, political parties are banned all together and there is no sign that this ban will be lifted anytime soon.

Where political parties are weak, associations fill part of the gap thus giving them the opportunity to influence politics. The "engineers", "lawyers", and "doctors" associations in Jordan are good examples of influential associations. Nonetheless, associations in Arab countries do not fair much better than political parties and are subject to marginalization by government policies. In the Gulf countries the picture is gloomier. The few interest group and NGO that exist are under the direct control of government or part of the regime.

Under the above described circumstances, stable and strong patterns of representation for mediating between society and the state cannot emerge. The lack of proper meditation between the state and society leaves people frustrated and forces them to put their loyalty in their tribes, ethnicities, and sects rather than the state. The end result is that people do not develop a common sense of belonging and become alienated and less protective of the state and society alike.

Socioeconomic Deprivation

Poverty, inequality, and low levels of human development lead people to feelings of socio-economic deprivation. Soci-oeconomic deprivation is a main cause of people's exclusion from society. When people blame their governments for their deprivation and exclusion, they become alienated. In its extremes cases, this alienation leads to political violence, uprisings and

revolt against the state. Figure 4 shows the level of socioeconomic development in Arab countries in comparison to other developing and in transition countries. The score on the level of socioeconomic development level is based on the following criterion: To what extent are significant parts of the population fundamentally excluded from society due to poverty and inequality [14].

The figure demonstrates that in the years preceding the Arab Spring, the level of socio-economic development in Arab countries was improving, surpassing the Post-Soviet Eurasia countries and largely closing the gap with Asia and Oceania countries and with Latin America and the Caribbean countries. Yet, the people in the

Arab World were not satisfied with this improvement in their socioeconomic development levels and continued to feel that they are socio-economically deprived. The 2011 Arab Public Opinion Survey revealed that the overwhelming majority of Arab people were dissatisfied with the economic situation of their countries (39%

completely dissatisfied, 28% somewhat dissatisfied vs. 8% very satisfied, 20% somewhat satisfied, and 6% who did not know or declined to answer) [15]. Furthermore, one slogan that was frequently heard in demonstrations during the

Arab Spring was 'bread', 'freedom', 'social justice'. This slogan leaves no doubt that the feelings of socio-economic deprivation were at the heart of people alienation and frustration.

Figure 4: Level of Socioeconomic Development
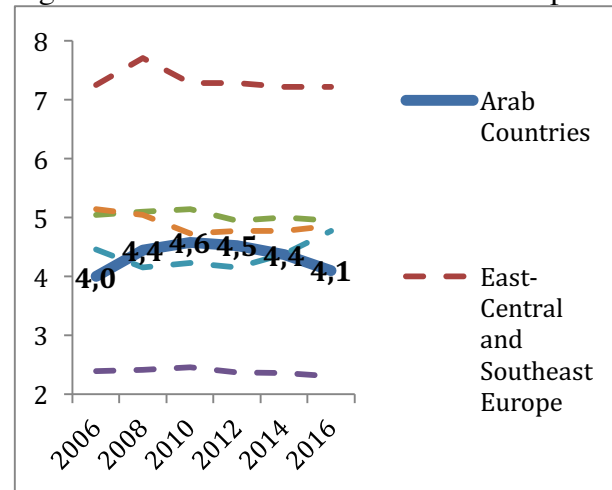
Source: Author's calculation based on the BTI Index, 2016

On the one hand, the socio-economic development level in Arab countries was improving in the days preceding the Arab Spring, yet the people were feeling socioeconomically deprived to the extreme degree that led them to revolt and take to the streets. This presents a contradiction; however, it's a contradiction on the surface and a deep analysis reveals that what is at play in this case is not absolute deprivation but rather relative deprivation. Relative deprivation as a concept has been used by social scientists to explain feeling of frustration by people, as a source of social movements, and in extreme cases as a source of political violence such as revolts [16]. Simply put relative deprivation refers to the gap between what people believe they deserve and what they

actually receive. People in the Arab world believe that they deserve to enjoy high levels of socioeconomic development; whereas, the realities on the ground fall short of meeting these expectations.

This begs the question: why do people in the Arab World feel entitled to high levels of socioeconomic development? The answer to this question lies in social imaginary. Social imaginary can be defined as: "*patterned convocations of the social whole. These deep-seated modes of understanding provide largely pre-reflexive parameters within which people imagine their social existence—expressed, for example, in conceptions of 'the global,' 'the national,' 'the moral order of our time'* " [17]. The social

imaginary of the Arab people is deeply shaped by their history. The Arab people perceive their history as being full of glory, conquests, and advancements in the sciences and arts. The Arab people yearn to the times they established the great empires of Umayyad and Abbasid when they were leaders of the world. They remember with great pride the magnificent cities of Damascus, Baghdad, Córdoba, and Granada when they were at the center of human civilization. The Arab people have grown up with the legends of Umar bin Khattab, Khalid bin Waleed, Umar bin Abdullaziz and Harun al-Rashid, and their stories of great heroism, justice, integrity, and defense of human dignity. It is this history that has shaped the Arab people's perception of themselves, others, and the place and status they deserve in this world. When the Arab people compare their current status with what they believe they deserve, they can only feel disappointed and frustrated.

This disappointment and frustration is transformed into resentment towards the state elites that they blame for the misery and deprivation. The feelings of resentment are both political and socio-economic in nature.

Social imaginary of the Arab people shapes their perception of themselves (themselves in a previous glorious history as compared to current times). But this is not the only way social imaginary works. Social imaginary shapes the Arab people's perception of the 'other'. The other here is no other than the 'West'. The history of the Arab people is deeply entangled with the West. It is a long history characterized by competition. When the Arab people evaluate their socioeconomic status, they evaluate it in comparison with the West. In such a comparison, the Arab people cannot help but feel socioeconomically deprived.

Poor Governance

It has become increasingly accepted that peace, security and development are decisively shaped by good governance and institutions [18]. A 2016 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Survey of 105 of the most accomplished thinkers in the Arab World revealed a broad consensus that poor governance is the root cause of many of the Arab World problems [19]. This is not new information. The Arab Spring uprisings brought to the fore the inadequacy of the region's outdated social contracts in the face of current political and economic challenges. Yet, Arab governments still seem not to have gotten the message [20].

As poor governance lays at the heart of many of the Arab World problems, good governance has been prescribed as the cure. Consequently, it is no surprise that the Arab people have vented anger and frustration with the state of poor governance in their countries and have always demanded good governance. Governance has many dimensions and this article analyzes governance in the Arab World using the Worldwide Governance Indicators along four dimensions: control of corruption, government effectiveness, regularity quality, and rule of law. The measures of governance are in units of a standard normal

distribution, with mean zero, standard deviation of one, and running from -2.5 (weak governance performance) to +2.5 (strong governance performance). The aggregate score for Arab countries along the four dimension of governance is shown in Figure 5.

Corruption can be simply defined as the "abuse of public office for private gain" [21]. The impact of corruption on economic development, bureaucratic effectiveness, and democratic transition can be an area of debate and disagreement; however, overwhelming evidence shows that corruption negatively affects people's perception of state legitimacy. Numerous research points out that corruption is a root cause of people's distrust in the state leading to issues of state legitimacy [22] [23] [24].

Figure 5 (upper left side) shows the control of corruption indicator in Arab countries. The indicator captures perceptions of the extent to which public power is exercised for private gain, including both petty and grand forms of corruption, as well as the "capture" of the state by elites and private interests [25]. As the figure reveals, perception of corruption in Arab countries is in negative territory indicating that the perception of corruption is high. Whatever improvements achieved in the area of control of corruption in the years prior to the Arab spring have been erased. Today's perception of corruption in the Arab world is higher than it was a decade ago. This leads the Arab masses to distrust the ruling elite and question their legitimacy.

Figure 5: Governance Performance in Arab Countries
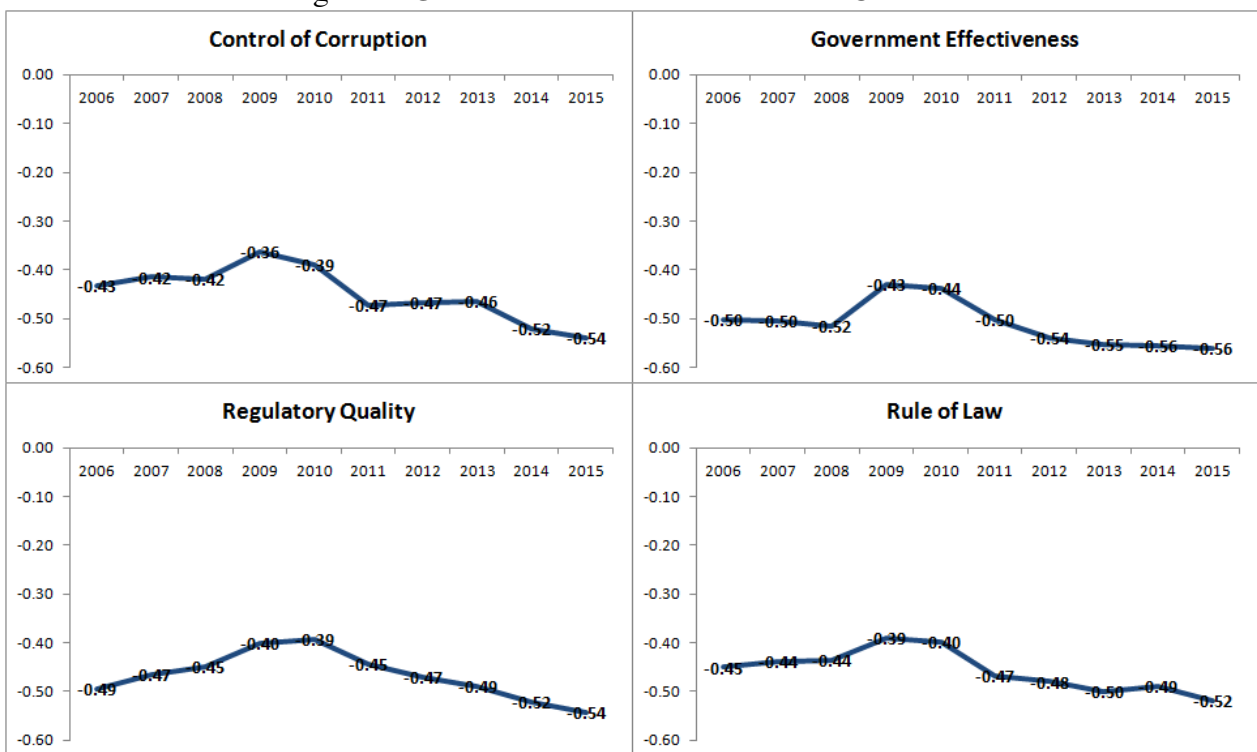
Source: Author's calculation based on the Worldwide Governance Indicators, 2016 update.

Government ineffectiveness in providing public services (i.e. health, education) is a major source of people's dissatisfaction with their governments. The consequences of government ineffectiveness however go beyond people dissatisfaction to include other serious ramifications. When governments fail to provide services effectively, a void is created which is then filled by non state actors including radical and terrorist organizations. By filling the void left by states and by providing services to the population, radical and terrorist organizations gain a footing in society and an audience to propagate their views and ideology. People dissatisfaction with their government coupled with the rise of radical and terrorist organizations create a gap between the people and the state.

Figure 5 (upper right side) shows the government effectiveness indicator in Arab countries. The indicator captures perceptions of the quality of public services; the quality of the civil service and the degree of its independence from political pressures; the quality of policy formulation and implementation; and the credibility of the government's commitment to such policies [26]. The figure shows that governments in the Arab world have not been effective in providing services to their population. Although an improvement in government effectiveness was observed in the years 2009 and 2010, all improvements have been wiped out and the current score of Arab governments on the government effectiveness indicator has regressed to record low values not seen in the past decade.

The regulatory quality indicator captures perceptions of the ability of the government to formulate and implement sound policies and regulations that permit and promote private sector development [27]. Arab countries performance on this indicator is shown in Figure 5 (lower left side). As the figure reveals, Arab countries have historically performed poorly on this indicator despite the temporarily improvement experienced before the Arab Spring.

A high quality regulatory environment is a prerequisite for entrepreneurship and the growth and proliferation of Small and Medium Size Enterprises (SMEs); key areas for the employment and empowerment of youth in particular. Without a high quality regulatory environment and without the potential to realize their business ideas and dreams, youth become excluded from the economy. In the Arab World, young males need to demonstrate some economic assets such as a place of accommodation, a vehicle, and a stable source of income before they can get married. Economic exclusion thus leads to social exclusion. Being excluded from society altogether leaves youth alienated from the state.

People are more content and society is better off when the political system establishes rules for all to abide by. Dicey described the rule of law as acting in three ways: the predominance of regular law as opposed to the influence of arbitrary power; equality before the law; and, that constitutional laws are not the source but the consequence of the rights of individuals [28].

Although Arab governments are rhetorically supportive of the concept, what counts are the practices of the governments and the application of the concept. The rule of law in Arab countries is presented in Figure 5 (lower right side). Rule of law captures perceptions of the extent to which agents have confidence in and abide by the rules of society, and in particular the quality of contract enforcement, property rights, the police, and the courts, as well as the likelihood of crime and violence.

As the figure makes clear, the rule of law is weak in Arab countries. Arbitrary rule has long plagued the Arab world. Its attendant consequences—injustice, cruelty, corruption, and degradation—have cultivated a deep sense of political anger and resentment among the people of the region. In fact, outrage over such arbitrary rule proved to be one of the primary triggers for the spate of uprisings that seized the region in 2011– 2012 [29]. In light of this, it is unfortunate that the rule of law has deteriorated further after the Arab Spring.

Conclusion

The Arab masses are not satisfied with the state of affairs in their countries. The governments and the ruling elite are the target of their frustration and anger. State polices and the strategic choices of the ruling elite have caused the Arab masses alienation by the state. The drivers of this alienation before the Arab Spring and after the Arab Spring are the same and include: lack of political participation; unstable democratic institutions; lack of political and social integration; socioeconomic deprivation; and poor governance. Although it is unfair to blame all the mentioned shortcomings on the state, the role of the state in the alienation of the Arab masses cannot be ignored.

When the uprisings of the Arab Spring took place, the hope was that Arab regimes will hear the messages sent by the people and embark on a reform process that will address the grievances of the Arab people. Unfortunately as the analysis in this paper shows, Arab countries have not recorded any improvement in the areas of: allowing more political participation; building stable democratic institutions; enhancing political and social integration; elimination socioeconomic deprivation, and improving governance. On the contrary, in all of these areas a regression has occurred after the Arab Spring.

A wise saying proclaims: *"The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result."* The root causes of the Arab masses alienation that led to the Arab Spring have not been addressed. New uprisings and more instability and violence in the Arab World are thus not farfetched scenarios. This necessitates that actor at the: state, society, and international level adopt a new approach. At the state level, the ruling elite must realize that the

traditional tools they have deployed to quell dissent are running their course and a paradigm shift is need. Democratization, socioeconomic development and good governance are not escapable. At the society level, the tragic events and the humanitarian suffering that unfolded in the wake of the Arab Spring in some of the Arab Spring countries (i.e. Syria, Yemen, Libya) direct the Arab masses to the wisdom of seeking reform in a peaceful and gradual manner. At the international level; Western powers have traditionally supported autocratic and oppressive regimes in Arab countries who were willing to secure Western economic and strategic interests. The rise of ISIS and the instability in the region have proven this policy to be short sighted and contrary to Western interest on the long run. The prioritization of security over democracy by Western powers is a fallacy. Both democracy and security can be simultaneously sought. Western powers must genuinely support reform in the Arab World.

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