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## **Instability and State Weakness: The 'Post-Revolutionary' Challenge in the Arab World**

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The uprisings across in the Arab world that began in December 2010 were widely heralded as the catalyst for fundamental change to a region that desperately needed to be shaken up. However, while the heterogeneous protest movements in the various Arab states were generally of one mind in demanding the end of authoritarian rule, in most cases they failed to produce a cohesive plan for the post-revolutionary transition.

Apart from the partial exception of Tunisia (where the spark for the uprisings was first lit), the divisions within the protest movements, along with the absence of a functioning and developed civil society, have inhibited the process of political change. Further complicating efforts to establish a new political order has been the legitimacy deficit of existing political institutions and the resilience of networks of power and patronage.

As a result, the post-revolutionary period in countries where leaders have been toppled has been replete with challenges, including the exacerbation of pre-existing divisions, rendering extremely difficult the creation of strong and functioning states.

In general, state weakness is not a new phenomenon in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, but has been significantly exacerbated during last two years. State weakness can be measured by the degree of the regime's legitimacy, its capacity to deliver social and political goods, and its ability to guarantee a basic level of security. While states that fulfill these functions are considered strong and stable, a state that is utterly unable to meet any of these criteria is perceived as "failed."

Pessimistic observers, including [Henry Kissinger](#), have recently noted that "lawlessness" may come to dominate the Middle East. They point to Yemen, Libya, Iraq, and the Sinai Peninsula as example of this "cascade of state failure."

To be sure, this one-size-fit-all approach leaves much to be desired when referring to as diverse a region, politically, economically, and culturally, as the Middle East.

Even so, there seems to be truth in the notion that the post-revolutionary stabilization period in most countries is witnessing the exacerbation of pre-existing cleavages and weakening of central authority.

Already prior to the Arab Spring events, the MENA region provided important examples for analyzing the problem of state weakness, with half of the twenty-two Arab League member states defined as weak states, varying between highly dysfunctional states like Yemen or Sudan and weak but far from collapsing countries like Lebanon. However, since the beginning of the Arab uprisings, there has been a general deterioration in the level of internal stability of MENA states. For example, the new Libyan authorities have been confronting monumental difficulties in their effort to reassert control and accumulate sufficient legitimacy following their overthrow of the Qaddafi's regime. The country is highly fragmented, with competing tribal loyalties having always taken precedence over a common national identity, and lacks strong central political institutions. One of the toughest tasks the new government faces is how to assert authority over tribes, cities, and provinces, which are resisting attempts to bring about a measure of centralized control. This difficulty is related to the problem in establishing a monopoly on the use of force and dismantling existing armed groups. Their proliferation is especially a problem given the fact that the Libyan security sector, already weak during the Qaddafi regime, has been in a nearly total state of disarray following Qaddafi's overthrow. Although security sectors reforms are being implemented and a large-scale DDR (disarm, demobilize, reintegrate) program does exist, the establishment of a cohesive and well-functioning Libyan state seems to be a remote possibility for now.

Syria, of course, is currently the "hottest" of all Arab arenas. Even before the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in March 2011, Syria was listed as the 48<sup>th</sup> most unstable state in the world by [Foreign Policy's index of Failed States](#). Now it is ranked 23<sup>rd</sup>. The initial clashes between the Syrian regime and the anti-Assad opposition forces have escalated exponentially in the past few months, leaving the country in a state of full civil war. The depth of the cleavage between the pro-regime forces and the opposition groups, and the wounds that the ongoing war will leave on Syria's political and social fabric suggest that Syria's high degree of state weakness and instability will extend even to the post-conflict stage. Whoever will be left standing will face the daunting task of having to unite a deeply polarized country, reign in a vast number of active militias and armed groups, and rebuild social and political institutions.

The case of Yemen, currently ranked as the 8<sup>th</sup> most unstable and weak state in the world, is even more extreme. The Yemeni authorities are trying to tackle simultaneously a violent uprising with sectarian connotations in the north, a separatist struggle in the south, and growing jihadist activities with global connections. This challenge is especially daunting as Yemen is also among the poorest and least developed states in region, with the central government lacking internal legitimacy and the capacity to deliver social and political goods.

The ongoing turmoil in the region has accelerated existing trends that pose a number of important challenges to the human security of the region.

Firstly, failing states represent a challenge to regional stability. This is especially the case because of the large involvement of external actors in the domestic affairs of

weak and failing states. The weakness of the central government and the proliferation of groups competing with the state represent an excellent opportunity for external third parties seeking to expand their influence on the region. The Lebanese civil war between 1975-1990 serves as a reminder of the dangers of protagonists becoming surrogates for regional and international conflicts. Currently, both Iraq and Yemen are increasingly looking like potential arenas for similar struggles between the different regional and global powers invested in the region. Similarly, the conflict in Syria is becoming increasingly more regionalized.

Secondly, failing states are problematic from a human security and humanitarian perspective. Such states are often unable to provide security as well as basic social and political goods, contributing to heightened precariousness of the living conditions of the population. The recent example of famines in both Somalia and Yemen tragically highlight the human cost of prolonged internal instability and endemic state failure. Similarly, the ongoing war in Syria is resulting in a humanitarian crisis, with large numbers of both internally displaced persons within Syria and refugees seeking safety in neighboring states – Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and Northern Iraq.

A third challenge stemming from failing states is the terrorist challenge. Failing states present international and regional terrorist organizations with a convenient base of operations, and are more likely than other states to host such groups on their soil. Fourth is the crime challenge. Similar to terrorist organizations, criminal organizations take advantage of governments' loose control in failing states to advance their interests.

A final security challenge is the increased threat of proliferation of non-conventional arms. As Syria implodes, the concern that Syria's chemical and biological weapons may not be secured, or may be transferred by the regime to its Hizballah ally has heightened.

The Arab Spring accelerated a pre-existing trend within the MENA region, one characterized by state weakness and instability. This widespread weakness stems from a number of factors, including the unrepresentative and unpopular nature of the ruling political institutions, the lack of a cohesive and unitary citizenship discourse, the failure to provide social and political goods to all citizens, and the difficulties in preventing the proliferation of non-state armed groups and alternative pockets of authority within the country's territory.

Given the structural nature of the problems faced by MENA states, it is unlikely that the regime changes induced by the Arab uprisings will lead to a rapid improvement of the situation. As a result, at least in the short term, it is fair to expect continued instability and state weakness, with all that that implies for regional stability.

What's more, the longer and deeper the crisis,, the greater the likelihood that other regional actors will become more involved in the various flash points by supporting one or another of the warring protagonists. This in turn will pose new challenges to regional peace and stability.

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