



MNA Knowledge and Learning ...Fast Brief



DOES THE MIDDLE EAST & NORTH AFRICA REGION EXPERIENCE 'CONFLICT TRAPS' ?

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Introduction - The Concept of a Conflict Trap:

The 2011 World Development Report (WDR) on 'Conflict, Security and Development' has reaffirmed global research that conflict is in many respects a self-perpetuating cycle. Put simply, factors related to the onset of conflict are reinforced by ensuing violence trapping countries in a cycle which is hard to break, with ominous implications for development assistance. How does this model fit the evidence from the MENA region?

The best known exposition of the conflict trap is based on economic factors. Collier *et al.* wrote in 2003 that a "country that first falls into the trap may have a risk of new war that is 10 times higher just after that war has ended than before the war started. If the country succeeds in maintaining post-conflict peace for 10 years or so, the risk is considerably reduced, but remains at a higher level than before the conflict".² According to this 2003 study, war not only erodes and complicates economic conditions, it also allows particular groups to accumulate wealth and, hence, gain a financial stake in continued or renewed violence. Accordingly, in the post-conflict phase, a

significant portion of the population has no economic stake in peace, given high levels of poverty and unemployment, while others have a material incentive for conflict to recur.

The Relatively Influential Role of Governance Quality in Driving Conflict Risk in MENA:

Scholars have recently found that economic factors may be a less significant driver of conflict in the MENA region than in other parts of the world.³ Per capita income has a relatively weak impact upon conflict risk, and several MENA countries have demonstrated an impressive ability to recover economically after war or to continue growing amid conflict (e.g., the Lebanese Civil War).⁴ It appears that the linkages between economic decline and increased levels of conflict in MENA are tenuous at best. Even though case studies (as well as recent experience in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere) suggest that high unemployment combined with large youth bulges likely play a contributory role, development agencies should look to broader models to explain the drivers of conflict.

As the 2011 WDR 2011 itself suggests, some of the most integral drivers of conflict and fragility may relate to institutions and the quality of governance. The WDR states "areas with the weakest institutions and governance are the most vulnerable to repeated violence and the least able to respond to internal and

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² Paul Collier, V. L. Elliott, Håvard Hegre, Anke Hoefler, Marta Reynal-Querol, and Nicholas Sambanis, *Breaking the conflict trap: Civil war and development policy* (Washington, DC: World Bank and Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 104.

³ Nicholas Sambanis and Julia Choucair-Vizoso, "Conflict and Development in the Middle East and North Africa", background paper for the 2011 World Bank Study on Conflict and Development in the MENA Region, 2010.

⁴ Scott Gates, Håvard Hegre, Håvard Møkleiv Nygård, and Håvard Strand, "Consequences of Armed Conflict in the MENA Region", a background paper to the World Bank Study on Conflict and Fragility in the MENA Region.

external stresses". Examining the role of institutions in the MENA region in managing or driving conflict, recent research suggests that poor governance tends to increase conflict risk, particularly the potential for conflict recurrence.⁵ Countries with positive governance ratings according to a wide range of criteria are between 30 and 50 percent less likely to experience conflict recurrence than poorly governed countries.⁶ Not only does the data suggest that governance deficits may increase conflict risk, research also demonstrates that conflict itself erodes governance, thus generating what has been labeled a "political conflict trap".

Political Conflict Traps in MENA: A political conflict trap has a similar dynamic to an economic conflict trap. Conflict within the MENA region drives leaders to become increasingly authoritarian. They may increase oppression and narrow or eliminate opportunities for political expression or opposition. Spending on the military and other security services increases, and a so-called "garrison state" is established. Such a state of affairs persists not only during the conflict but also in the post-conflict years as leaders come to fear that any loosening of their political and military grip could invite further opposition.⁷

This vicious cycle may also limit economic growth, curtail public spending on non-security sectors (e.g., health, education, welfare, etc.), and lead to widespread discontentment. Devoid of legitimate channels to express dissatisfaction peacefully, citizenry may turn to protests, riots, violent extremism, insurgency, or outright civil war. The state responds to these challenges by further oppression charging the political conflict cycle. The erosion of political legitimacy and the social contract between the state and its citizenry has clear detrimental impacts on development progress.

⁵ Håvard Hegre and Håvard Mokleiv Nygård, "The Governance-Conflict Trap in the ESCWA Region", a paper for the UN-ESCWA study on "The Governance Deficit and Conflict Relapse in the ESCWA Region", Jan. 2011.

⁶ The aspects of governance considered in this study include the following: formal political institutions, political exclusion and repression, the rule of law, corruption, bureaucratic quality, military influence in politics, and economic policies.

⁷ See Gates, *et al.*, "Consequences of Armed Conflict in the MENA Region".

A recent study by the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) found that while globally conflict often acts as a catalyst for social change, forcing leaders to become more participatory and to grant increased civil liberties, such transformative outcomes of conflict have been less evident in the MENA region. While the ongoing political transitions in Egypt, Tunisia, and elsewhere may challenge this trend, regimes waging war in MENA have typically survived and endured much longer than anywhere else in the world.⁸ To explain this difference, one study compared the global replacement of autocracy with democracy, the so-called "third wave of democratization" (Fig. 1) with the continuation of autocracy - mediated by an increase in incomplete/semi-democracies - in MENA (Fig. 2).⁹

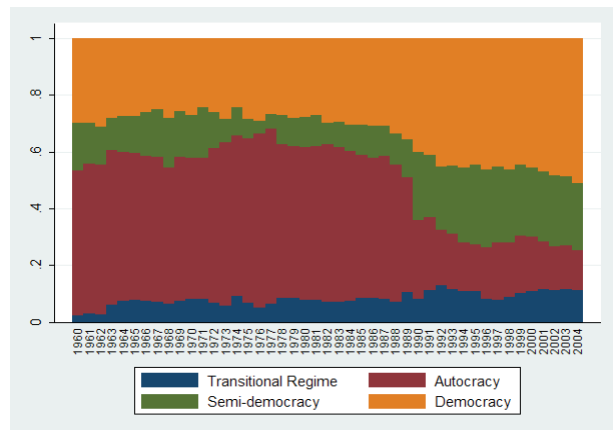


Figure 1

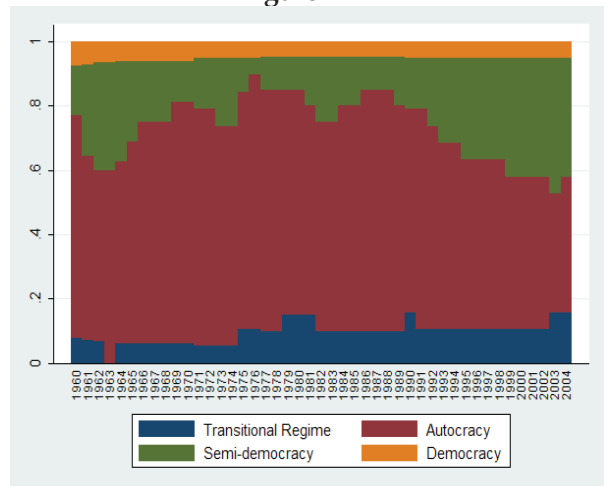


Figure 2

⁸ Gates, *et al.*, "Consequences of Armed Conflict in the MENA Region". The paper was produced for the MNA Regional Study on Conflict Fragility and Development, see MNA Fast Brief no.68.

⁹ *Ibid.*

What Accounts for Entrenched Authoritarianism in MENA? As Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate, according to the PRIO study, the maintenance of autocracy in MENA is, in global terms, unique. In other parts of the world, new elites have led – whether peacefully or through rebellion and conflict – to the institutions of new and more inclusive political systems. The outcome has been, in many respects, transformative. While political change has been common in the MENA region in the past several decades, it has commonly led to the institution of new elites practicing new forms of exclusion. Put another way, political change has commonly brought countries from one autocratic and poorly governed regime to another rather than from one regime type (autocracy) to another (democracy). Natural resource revenues, or “rents”, play a major role in the maintenance of autocracy and weak governance in MENA.

Resource Curses and Rentier States: The recent MNA Fast Brief no. 82, entitled “The “Resource Curse” in MENA: Resource Wealth, Economic Shocks and Conflict Risk”, suggests that resource endowments have a significant impact upon institutional quality (and hence upon governance and conflict risk).¹⁰ Research in this field suggests that oil and gas resources, which are particularly prevalent within MENA and which are difficult to “capture”, are used to sustain a coercive state insulated from civil society.

Semi-democracies propped up by oil money also have less incentive to promote internal economic development (i.e. to expand their tax base) or to enhance their political legitimacy among their own citizenry and civil society¹¹. So-called ‘rentier states’, those which benefit from substantial natural resource rents, are free from most governments’ obligation to earn a degree of popular support and legitimacy in order to facilitate taxation. Indeed, oil-rich states not only have little interest in extracting taxes from their citizens, they also have less

need to diversify their economies.¹² As such the countries remain vulnerable to price shocks in the price of oil – which research shows may increase conflict risk – and are unlikely to develop new industries which are able to provide employment for large youth cohorts.

Accordingly it may be more accurate to view MENA’s conflict trap as neither simply economic or political but rather as a dynamic interaction between the two, which hinders growth and impedes genuine improvements in governance.

Conclusion: When assessing conflict traps in MENA, drivers of conflict are better understood as more than individual statistical correlates which operate in isolation. They fuel one another in a process which may defy statistical analysis. Considering the recent political changes in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere other less measureable dynamics are at play. In particular the transmission of uprising and outspoken political opposition – what some have referred to as the “Contagion” or “Copycat Effects” – suggests that hard to measure dynamics may drive democratic pressure and increase the potential for conflict (while also creating opportunity for the sorts of transformational political changes seen in other regions). For development actors, the premium on broad analysis to accommodate and respond to these dynamics is self-evident.

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¹⁰ See also Ross, Mazaheri, and Kaiser: “The “Resource Curse” in MENA? Resource Wealth, Economic Shocks and Conflict Risk” (2011)

¹¹ Nazih N Ayubi, *Over-stating the Arab State* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1995): 400

¹² This dynamic is labelled a “modernization effect” by Hegre and Nygard. See Hegre and Nygaard, “ the Governance-Conflict Trap in the ESCWA Region” and Ross, Mazaheri and Kaiser: *The ‘resource Curse in MENA’: Resource Wealth, Economic Shocks and Conflict Risk”*.