

Polarization and the Elusive Quest for Prosperity in the Arab World

by [Kathya K. Berrada \(/experts/kathya-k-berrada\)](/experts/kathya-k-berrada), [Nouh El Harmouzi \(/experts/nouh-el-harmouzi\)](/experts/nouh-el-harmouzi)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Kathya K. Berrada \(/experts/kathya-k-berrada\)](/experts/kathya-k-berrada)

Kathya K. Berrada is the Senior Program Manager at the Arab Center for Research and at the Averroes Academy for freedom and democracy. Her current research interests relate to Islamic reforms; countering violent extremism, and the role of civil society within the context of the post-Arab Spring

[Nouh El Harmouzi \(/experts/nouh-el-harmouzi\)](/experts/nouh-el-harmouzi)

Dr. Nouh El Harmouzi is the director of the Arab Center for Scientific Research and Humane Studies.



Brief Analysis

In spite of recent attempts to reinvigorate the Arab world, the failure to effectively address the region's polarization remains a major obstacle to development.

Ten years since the beginning of the Arab spring, the excitement and euphoria of the early days of street protests is no longer present. Instead, underneath a largely articulated disappointment, lies a palpable feeling of nostalgia across the Arab world for a lost unity expressed during those early days.

The early protests in Egypt's Tahrir Square represented a unique moment of unity between youth movements, liberals, socialists, and non-political factions of the Egyptian society. Powerful images of the Muslim crescent embracing the Christian cross with the words "We are all against the Regime" and the Coptic Christians creating a human chain to protect Muslims during Friday prayer were emblematic of this time. In Tunisia, the Jasmine Revolution also gave rise to a momentum of unity, as civil society actors, political forces, and ordinary Tunisian citizens joined hands to denounce corruption, poor living conditions, and a lack of freedom.

Yet later developments show how these movements failed to dismantle the deeply-rooted and paralyzing polarization affecting Arab countries—a polarization that has led to political crises, dead ends, cold and bloody conflicts, and long-standing civil wars.

Polarization is different in nature from disagreement, the latter being healthy and natural within societies and often serving as a building block for democratization. Polarization, on the other hand, occurs when we refuse to live next to a neighbor who does not share our opinion, belief system, or simply does not belong to our group—defined

religiously, socially, politically, ethnically, economically, or even generationally. Polarization is empowered by a primitive tribal instinct as we cluster ourselves in competing groups in zero-sum games. Within such arrangements, negotiations, consensus and compromise become impossible and are even perceived as betrayals.

There is an old Arab saying, which goes like this: *I against my brother. I and my brother against my cousin. I, my brother, and my cousin against the world.* While the saying indicates a capacity to unite against a perceived enemy or threat, it also suggests a circumstantial element and cannot conceal deep-seated cultural, social, and religious polarization, which jeopardizes the emergence and development of underlying operational social contracts in most countries of the Arab world.

While deadly polarization does not only affect this region, nor is it historically endemic to the Arab world, the failure to transcend it in favor of grounded consensus and social contracts continues to make this region one of the most **conflict-affected parts (<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/1758-5899.12682>)** of the world.

It is essential to highlight, however, that the scale and impacts of polarization vary from one Arab nation state to the other. The cases of Libya, Lebanon, and Morocco are worth comparing to grasp the different forms of polarization and its harmful impact on economic development and democratic transition.

Libya stands as one of the most socially-fragmented and politically-polarized countries of the Arab world. The iron hand of the Qaddafi regime sought to establish a form of forced popular unity, embedded in the concept of 'Jamahiriya'. Officially defined as a direct representation of the people and organized through popular councils, Jamahiriya was in practice nothing short of an autocratic and arbitrary regime. The Qaddafi regime also tried unsuccessfully to leverage the ideologies of Pan-Arabism and Pan-Africanism to call for regional unity. Now, ten years after the fall of the regime, a divided and fragmented Libya continues to struggle to put an end to violence and build state institutions, with external actors exacerbating existing clan and tribal conflicts by funneling money and weapons to opposing parties. Indeed, the country's **recent peace agreement (<https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/03/1088192>)** remains very fragile. As emphasized in the "Key Messages" during the new government's swearing-in ceremony on March 15, reconciliation, reunification, protection of human rights and ability to meet the basic needs of the people are major prerequisites for a lasting peace in Libya.

Lebanon is certainly another case in point; the most recent political blockage in the country is certainly neither the first nor the last in a long series of political and social fragmentations. With eleven officially recognized sects, Lebanon is the most multi-ethnic and religiously pluralistic society of the Arab world. Given this level of domestic heterogeneity, a confessional framework for power sharing has been favored as way to guarantee stability and, to some degree, political representation across confessional groups. While such an arrangement has ensured a form of stability, it has not prevented institutional disruption, political vacuums, or sectarian tensions. Indeed, the confessional arrangement framework appears to have entrenched sectarian identities, frozen power among traditional elites, and fostered clientelism on religious and sectarian grounds. The very arrangement initially designed to support co-existence and pluralism has ended up fueling further polarization, along with the high costs of inefficient state institutions, wasted energy and water, and recurrent political crises that all jeopardize the economic development of the country.

At the other geographic extreme of the Arab world, Morocco navigates a more subtle form of polarization. In Morocco, the Arab Spring inspired street protests—which came to be known as the 20 February Movement—saw generally opposed political factions of the extreme left and Islamists join together. Protesters did not call directly for a regime change, focusing instead on slogans demanding an end to corruption, along with better accountability and governance. The Moroccan monarchy, in fact, is often viewed as a symbol of unity and has been entrenched with four centuries of continuous ruling over the country. The political system in Morocco is a mixture of modern and more traditional and diffused components of state institutions. Often referred to by the generic term of 'Makhzen,'

this pre-colonial political system evolved around the Monarchy and its entourage while also delegating some forms of local management to a traditional bureaucracy. In the current period, the 'Makhzen' has proven its capacity to recast its traditional, patrimonial, and symbolic powers through modern political institutions in Morocco.

However, this hybrid governance structure also contributes to tensions and polarization, especially when it comes to the endorsement of social reforms and civil liberties. As such, Moroccan society is today highly polarized when it comes to issues such as reforming inheritance laws and the depenalization of sexual relationships and mixed marriages, making it impossible to hold calm national discussions on such issues. This polarization creates a situation in which archaic laws continue to officially exist in a complete dichotomy with the lives of many Moroccans.

These three examples demonstrate the varied yet pervasive nature of polarization and its deleterious effects across the Arab world. However, the expanse of traditional and social media across the Arab world have in some cases also served as regional polarizing forces.

Within an overall climate characterized by limited freedom of speech, Al-Jazeera appeared on the media scene in the 1990s representing a paradigm shift in the face of formally parochial Arab media. Al-Jazeera's motto 'opinion and the other opinion' signaled a dedication to cover multiple perspectives. However, this proclaimed objectivity was largely challenged during the Arab Spring; a number of its reporters and anchors resigned, accusing the channel of a lack of objectivity in its coverage of the protests and an underlying aim to advance a specific agenda with a clear pro-Qatar bias. Today, it is clear that the channel has its own political agenda and often feeds into the already polarized climate.

Nevertheless, the true and deadly danger of polarization is most clearly observed on social media, to the extent that some platforms have become the initial space for radicalization and recruitment for terrorist groups. Social media played an important role in mobilizing young activists during the early days of the Arab Spring, to the point that some refer to the movement as the Facebook or Twitter revolution. However, social media acted as the megaphone rather than a causal mechanism of the Arab spring—albeit a **particularly vital one** (<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/1/27/the-social-media-myth-about-the-arab-spring>) given the absence of free and open media in most of the countries of the region.

Yet as valid as the positive impacts of new technologies have been for freedom of speech in the Arab world, we cannot be oblivious to their downsides. The corollary to the democratization of information in cyber space has often been the elimination of objective standards of true and false in favor of arbitrary judgments and name-calling, which indeed exacerbate tensions and sharpen polarization. While acknowledging the potential of social media for political liberalization in the Arab world, the dangers of extreme polarization cannot be ignored and should be taken seriously.

In the absence of a real will to transcend polarization and to build bridges between different factions and parties, the political, social and economic situation in countries of the Arab world will continue to deteriorate toward further violent conflicts and an incapacity to build sustainable economic prosperity in the region.

Consensus and compromise are the missing links in the journey toward democratic transition and development in most countries of the Arab world. Until this issue is addressed directly and with the urgency it deserves, the persistence of strong polarization in the region threatens the success of any economic approach, no matter how innovative it may be.

As countries across the globe reexamine their economic models in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, many are discussing terms of economic and social reforms. Indeed, competing approaches to address issues of development have emerged: the World Economic Forum, for instance, suggests a new orientation it termed "**The Great Reset**".

[\(https://www.weforum.org/great-reset/\)](https://www.weforum.org/great-reset/) in which more place is given to sustainability as the way to rebuild societies following the Covid-19 pandemic. The World Bank, on the other hand, calls for a **new social contract** (<https://blogs.worldbank.org/arabvoices/mena-urgent-rebuild-social-contract-post-covid-recovery>) with greater room for safety nets, tech-oriented services, and modern utilities. While there is undeniably no shortage of suggested approaches, in the Arab world, at least, strong polarization will continue to make it difficult to endorse a specific approach, and even more complicated to implement it on the ground. Until these issues are addressed head-on by those in power, and as antagonistic parties remain unwilling to compromise, brighter futures for their countries will continue to be an elusive goal. ❖

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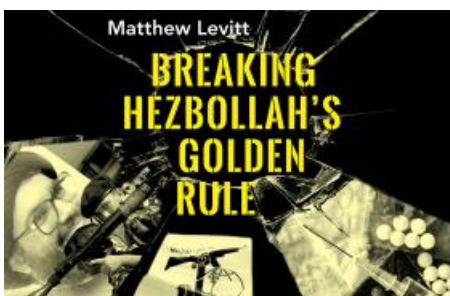
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