

Promoting Strong and Inclusive Institutions in the Middle East

by [Maurizio Geri \(/experts/maurizio-geri\)](#)

Feb 25, 2016

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/alhajt-aly-tzyz-mwssat-qwyt-wshamlt-fy-alshrq-alawst\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Maurizio Geri \(/experts/maurizio-geri\)](#)

Maurizio Geri is an analyst on peace, security and defense for different think tanks and NATO, based in Rome and Brussels. Geri is a contributor to Fikra Forum.



Articles & Testimony

The main lesson imparted by the Arab Spring at the five year mark is that toppling dictators does not clear a straight path to democracy. Without establishing strong and inclusive institutions to make democratization sustainable following regime change, civil wars have broken out in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen, while a strongman worse than his predecessor now commands Egypt.

Tunisia is a conditional success. Its Nobel-prize winning civil institutions endure but cannot ensure continued stability against worsening economic problems. Even though reforms and liberalizing methods are spurring a small GDP growth, the rising unemployment rate is quickly outpacing job creation.

The other Arab Spring countries have been unconditional failures. Egypt returned to a dictatorship and is now led by a suppressive police-military apparatus that has taken to imprisoning, torturing, and killing Egyptians who criticize the regime. Recent events suggest that the regime may now be targeting foreigners, as seen with Italian researcher Giulio Regeni. Egypt's neighbor Libya has fared even worse and could face military intervention by Western powers in response to ISIS's expansion into the country. While peace talks are in place, there is no clear unitary stable government in sight, democratic or otherwise.

Yemen's civil war worsens daily as Saudi Arabia and the Iranian-supported Houthi resistance further entwine themselves into an apparently intractable battle. This conflict has left 6,000 Yemenis dead and many more starving even as the international community remains silent.

Finally, Syria presents the most extreme example of failure. The Syrian peace negotiation process seems fated to produce only tenuous results. Senior U.S. officials have already doubted the staying power of a temporary cessation of hostilities to provide humanitarian aid. A peace deal or even an indefinite cease-fire seems out of the question. The near-uniform disinterest in halting the fighting suggests Syria's darkest days may still lie ahead, and the Syrian conflict may either morph into a lengthy civil war among rebel groups fashioned as warlords similar to 1990s Afghanistan or shift from a proxy war into a direct sectarian war among states, with non-aligned forces such as ISIS and Kurds in the middle. Saudi Arabia's movement of ground troops to Turkey's Incirlik base makes the latter outcome increasingly likely. Meanwhile, the negotiations have also allowed rivals Russia and Turkey to arbitrarily

bomb the region under the excuse of fighting terrorism. As John McCain said at the recent Munich Security Conference, “this is diplomacy in the service of military aggression”.

Syria and Yemen have hopefully taught observers that defending civilian populations is a requisite for democratization efforts to take hold. Indiscriminately killing villagers to win a proxy war against regional or global rivals should be considered a crime against humanity by the United Nations, which has recently denounced the “extermination” by Assad forces but has not yet mentioned other military interventions.

Other cases, in particular Egypt, Libya and Iraq, illustrate that overthrowing authoritarian regimes without clear development of a strong civil society results in disaster. The process of democratization does not self-sustain. Sometimes civil society can be better built by maintaining and engaging with an authoritarian government, as the United States is currently attempting in Iran and Cuba.

Morocco serves as a regional example of this success. While it remains a constitutional monarchy, after the Arab Spring protests the government implemented democratic reforms to the constitution. Today, the process of gradual democratization continues with few signs of the disastrous unrest that is shaping most of the region.

Morocco’s focus on stable state structures should inform state rebuilding as well. To avoid another disaster like the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, rebuilding former state structures should be a priority when removing dictators. A focus on strong and inclusive institutions is a reliable way of ensuring the survival of a functioning government, sustainable development, and ultimately an effective democracy. Political scientists have developed two fundamental theories for this process: the concept of “political order in changing societies” and the concept of “inclusiveness in diverse societies.”

In his 1968 book *Political Order in Changing Societies*, Samuel Huntington explained how the functional capacity of the state is fundamental to guaranteeing order in transitional societies. Francis Fukuyama recently recuperated this concept of his former rival in *Political Order and Political Decay*, arguing that state building is fundamental for the stability of a democracy. The absence of state building helps explain the many failures of imposed democratizations. Today, we need to begin implementing this theory, not only to support democratization but to stymie radicalization and violent extremism as well. Strong institutions, like solid constitutions, stable economic structures, and clear check and balance procedures can be one of the most powerful antidotes against terrorism. But they don't have to be repressive and authoritarian institutions. Sisi’s model of a stable authoritarian state in Egypt as a “bastion against extremism” has only fueled radicalization through its brutal repression.

Strong institutions can and must be incorporated into a democratic state. And while Tunisia is too young to demonstrate this model, Turkey presents a qualified example of the benefits of robust institutional democracy. Nevertheless, the current limits of Turkish institutions on “inclusiveness” challenge and have begun to corrode some elements of its democracy. Turkey underscores the other core definitions of healthy institutions: combined strength and inclusiveness. The concept of “inclusiveness in diverse societies” is based on the studies of Daron Acemoglu, James Robinson, and Will Kymlicka. Acemoglu and Robinson famously argued in their book *Why Nations Fail* that both historical and contemporary nations fall apart because of a lack of inclusiveness -- the equal distribution of power in both political and economic institutions.

Inclusive political institutions must incorporate consensus or power sharing that allows the different elements of the political, cultural, and economical spectrum to feel included when dictators are replaced by someone from another ethnic or religious group. Leaders like Al Maliki in Iraq demonstrate the perils of ignoring inclusivity. The Yemeni civil war also stemmed from this issue, when President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi’s concept of forced decentralization began excluding the Houthis, who eventually retaliated. Inclusive governments also prevent power concentration and risk of corruption. Inclusive economic institutions at the civil society level, like trade unions or

farmer organizations, ensure that citizens have a voice in the economic and political debate. These efforts towards inclusiveness on both a governmental and non-governmental level contributed to the success of the Tunisian transition. Moreover, Giulio Regeni was studying this possibility by researching the empowerment of Egyptian trade unions before he was killed.

Kymlicka also supports the concept of inclusiveness in his book *Politics in the Vernacular*, but emphasizes that state institutions need to ensure justice for ethnocultural groups and national minorities. One model for this type of inclusive institutions among Muslim democracies today may perhaps be Indonesia, the largest Muslim country. And the Middle East may greatly benefit from alternatives to the version of Muslim governance exhibited in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries by looking towards Muslim Southeast Asia.

There are two stories in the Middle East. The first is of weak institutions and diverse societies in violent flux. The second is more optimistic and features different ethnic, religious, and cultural communities cohabiting in a relatively peaceful manner for centuries. Only recently, with the advent of the colonial era and Western support to authoritarian regimes, have cleavages hardened and become tools for political ideologies. Local elites have fueled this sectarianism in an attempt to retain control via the Latin concept of *divide et impera* – divide and rule.

It remains to be seen whether Europe, the United States, and the United Nations incorporate these important elements into their policies for the region. The UN agencies could have a strong role in this, as the mandates of the UNDP, FAO, and ILO stress the organizations' responsibilities to support local governance and with strong and inclusive political and civilian institutions within them, such as farming organizations or trade unions. But as per usual, the success of these goals rests on the political will of the states that influence those agencies and of their leaders. Hope for insuring inclusive institutions may arrive with the new leaders of 2017, namely the new UN Secretary General and the new U.S. president.

Until next year, it appears that we must wait and hope that our future leaders will pursue more sustainable political visions than those currently being implemented in the Middle East, looking at the long term outcomes or “shadows of the future” as they are defined in the international game theory. In the short term, leaders must deal with the dramatic and tragic results of the past few years' poorly planned democratization efforts. As usual, the local populations are the ones who suffer most from the “great games” and the inadequacy of international politics and leaderships.

Maurizio Geri is a PhD Candidate and Research Assistant in International Studies at Old Dominion University . This item was originally published on [the Fikra website \(http://fikraforum.org/?p=8727&lang=en#.VtQPgfkrLIU\)](http://fikraforum.org/?p=8727&lang=en#.VtQPgfkrLIU). ❖

Fikra Forum

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

[Energy & Economics \(/policy-analysis/energy-economics\)](/policy-analysis/energy-economics)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Egypt \(/policy-analysis/egypt\)](/policy-analysis/egypt)

[Iraq \(/policy-analysis/iraq\)](/policy-analysis/iraq)

[North Africa \(/policy-analysis/north-africa\)](/policy-analysis/north-africa)

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](/policy-analysis/syria)

[Turkey \(/policy-analysis/turkey\)](/policy-analysis/turkey)