Failed Statehood
On the Causes of Upheaval and Conflict in the Middle East

by Andreas Jacobs

Failing statehood is the key variable for understanding not only the grim situation of the Middle East but also its regional and global implications. From this perspective, the upheavals of the Arab Spring and the subsequent setbacks become understandable, as does the rise of Islamist organizations and terrorist militias. In the medium term, the difficult response to this crisis must therefore be to abstain from supporting authoritarian regimes and to strengthen the efficiency of state structures instead.

In one of the most popular Egyptian motion pictures, the 1992 comedy "Terrorism and Kebab", the main character Ahmed, played by famous comedian Adel Imam, tries to obtain a school transfer for his son in the infamous administrative building "The Mogamma" in Cairo. Desperate and frustrated about the Kafkaesque bureaucracy and the condescending treatment he receives from government officials, he inadvertently starts a revolution on Tahrir Square. For lack of political consensus and agenda among his fellow revolutionaries, however, the revolution's central demand ultimately comes down to "Kebab for everyone!"

When some 20 years later long-standing despots were unseated by mass movements in Cairo and other parts of the Arab world, "Terrorism and Kebab" seemed almost prophetic to many observers. The fact is that frustration over arbitrary government and extensive state patronization, Islamist hypocrisy, the lack of consensus among the "revolutionaries", the role of the security forces, and eventually the realization that nothing will change after all had long become topics of Egyptian and Arab popular culture. However, what has often been overlooked both before and after the turmoil of 2011 was the real reason that fuelled the people's frustration in the Middle East – in the movie as well as in reality: the blatant neglect and abuse of the state's obligation to provide for the welfare of its citizens. Taking a closer look at this failure of governance in the Middle East renders both the upheavals of the so-called Arab Spring and its overall failure more understandable. Moreover, this angle provides important and often overlooked insights contributing to the understanding of radicalization and Islamist terrorism.

Postcolonial Promises

For decades, the Middle East has been labelled a crisis region. It has been a very long time now since the people in the region looked to their political systems with hope and confidence. But there was such a time once, a time of great promises. After the end of the colonial period, charismatic political leaders took the helm in the so-called "revolutionary" Arab states, especially in Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Syria and later also in Libya and South Yemen – leaders who wanted to put large-scale political utopias into practice: In the 1950s and 1960s, new ideologies, political reforms, a redistribution of societal resources and major economic pro-

jects were supposed to pave the way for a better future. All of this was based on an unspoken agreement between the new leaders and the people they ruled: "You largely renounce your right to have a say, and also a number of fundamental freedoms, and we give you what the colonial masters deprived you of: development, freedom and dignity."

But Nasserism, Baathism, Arab Socialism and the Great Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya failed to keep their promises. In revolutionary fervor, established political structures and traditional participation mechanisms were wiped out, giving way to new, often dysfunctional institutions. From the mid-1960s, most of these states were already governed by authoritarian systems which, rather than serving the population, operated in favor of their respective ethnic, religious and military elites and ruling families. The consequences were unmistakable. The utopias of Pan-Arabism faded away, as did the charisma of Nasser and Bourguiba. Promises of development could not be kept, and for large swaths of the population, living conditions remained deplorable. State-controlled media and propaganda machines made sure that external influences alone were blamed for these problems. To be sure, the effects of colonialism, the Middle East conflict and the influence exerted by the West did not affect the development of the region in a particularly positive way. This notwithstanding, the aforementioned factors were also welcome substitutes for the regimes' leaders to divert attention from their own failures, shortcomings, and crimes at home.

The increasingly obvious functional and ideological deficits of the postcolonial Arab states were quickly compensated by other actors. From the 1960s onwards, the decline of the Arab ideologies and rulers, who regarded themselves as "secular", was accompanied by the rise of the Islamists. The Muslim Brotherhood and others did not only offer new ideas but also provided educational opportunities, health care, interest-free loans and basic subsistence measures, tackling precisely those areas which the governments of these states had neglected or abandoned completely. Thus, the Islamists gained more and more support among the local population. At the same time, Egyptian ideology and Saudi piety provided the breeding ground for what we today call Salafism and Jihadism. However, the Islamists were dealing with states that neglected their citizens but not their security apparatuses. And thus, in the 1980s and 1990s, Islamist attempts to bring about reforms or revolutions were defeated in the bombardment of the Syrian city of Hama, in the prison cells of the Egyptian regime and in the Algerian civil war.

To this day, the regimes have not yet learned the lessons of the Islamist threat. Instead of cutting the ground from under the Islamist promises of salvation by implementing smart economic and social policies and public welfare measures, they continued to invest in elite projects and alleged stabilization measures. Meanwhile, the dire situation of large parts of the population was getting worse.

Revolution Turning Into a Nightmare

The leaders in the region eventually had to pay for this failure of governance. Hardly anyone had imagined that in the winter of 2010/2011 Tunisia would become the launchpad of the Arab Spring movement that subsequently seized the region, but many had had a sense of foreboding. The consequences of government failings had become just too palpable in most of the countries. In the atmosphere of revolutionary euphoria, most observers did not realize, though, that the calls for "development, freedom and social justice" heard on Tahrir Square and on Avenue Habib Bourguiba were echoing the postcolonial promises. Thus, the upheavals of 2011 must also be interpreted as a repudiation of the agreement made decades ago. By depriving the population of development, freedom and dignity, the rulers had failed to uphold their end of the postcolonial "bargain". Now the population no longer wanted to keep to their part of the agreement and demanded that their rulers step down.

However, state failure is not only an explanation for the causes of the Arab Spring; it also explains why the movement did not succeed. As in the movie "Terrorism and Kebab", there was not much of a consensus among the real-life heterogeneous protest movements either. The activists in Cairo, Tunis and Bengasi were

unable to agree on anything else than getting rid of their hated dictators. But as soon as Mubarak, Ben Ali and Gaddafi were ousted from office, the revolutionary movements fell apart into competing groups, each of them becoming less and less influential.

The corrupt and dysfunctional systems remained, their functional deficits now more palpable than ever without a "strong man" to take the lead. What was even worse was that in many cases the judiciary, the media, associations, political parties and government institutions were being discredited, which left exactly those actors that had always held the reins behind the scenes: security forces, Islamists, family clans and religious groups. As a result, the aftermath of the Arab Spring has largely been dominated by the power struggle between these actors – with violence, such as in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen, with a (so far) undisputed winner in Egypt, and with a little hope in Tunisia.

Stable Monarchies and Stable Autocrats?

And there is something else one realizes when looking at the upheavals and conflicts in the Middle East from the failed statehood angle: the apparent connection between a country's stability and its form of government. The Arab monarchies were the ones who survived the upheavals more or less unscathed. Analysts have often explained this by pointing out the greater legitimacy attributed to the traditional ruling houses of Morocco, Jordan and the Gulf States. This view, however, is an oversimplification. It is the functionality of the state and not the form of government that is of crucial importance.

After the end of the colonial period, the Arab monarchies did not promise any revolutionary policies but relied on continuity and on traditional mechanisms of participation and legitimization. This had little to do with democracy or the rule of law; nonetheless, in many cases it resulted in a better management of the government and its institutions. A comparison of Morocco and Egypt illustrates how the outcomes differ from each other. Both countries have comparable potentials and are dealing with similar problems and challenges. But whereas Morocco managed to set up a more or less functioning infrastructure even in remote parts of the country, Egypt is investing way too much money in extravagant prestige projects, while leaving the people in the Nile Delta, in North Sinai and in Upper Egypt to fend for themselves.

The interrelation between the emergence of crises and the functionality of states identified here leads us to two conclusions regarding the future of the Arab regimes. First of all, not even the monarchies are safe from mass protests and upheavals. The unrest in Bahrain in 2011 provided a glimpse of that. Should the Arab monarchies also become unable to satisfy at least their citizens' most basic needs and to moderate social conflicts, we will know where to expect the next Arab Spring. Secondly, the hope of having "stable dictatorships" proves to be a dangerous illusion. For many people in the Middle East, but also in Europe, the upheavals and catastrophes of the past years seem to leave only one hope – that strict autocratic rule may restore peace and stability. This is not only a false hope – it is a treacherous one, because the dictators and autocrats were precisely the ones who caused the uprisings and civil wars in the first place. The human rights situation in Egypt, for instance, is worse under president Sisi than it ever was when Mubarak held power. Reading the abbreviation ISIS backwards leaves you with the president's name "Sisi". This is just a play on words, of course, but it shows that authoritarianism and Islamism are two sides of the same coin.

Theocracy Does Not Fail

The rise of the so-called "Islamic State" (ISIS), first in Iraq and later in Syria, was also a direct consequence of government failings. Many experts relate the emergence of ISIS to the destruction of state structures in the aftermath of the US-led military intervention of 2003. However, a group of several hundred ISIS fighters succeeded in conquering the city of Mosul in June 2014 only because the clientelism of Iraq's leader Maliki favoring the Shiites had turned the Sunni population groups in the northern part of the country against him. In Syria, ISIS was also welcomed by many, because often the "Islamic State" did indeed fulfill those government functions that had been neglected by the previous rulers: health care, social security, a

corruption-free administration and a rigid legal system. Even those deploring the terrorist regime established by ISIS confirmed that its brutal law-and-order policy was to some extent efficient. While the West was speculating about how "Islamic" ISIS was, the local population primarily cared about how "governmental" ISIS has been and continues to be.

The "Islamic State" only became such a successful movement because the Assad state and the Maliki state (and, before that, the US-led interim government and the Hussein state) had failed. ISIS confronted the despotic and corrupt regimes in the region with a model that not only implied an eschatological expectation of salvation but also promised state welfare and administrative functionality. At the same time, this model denied the contemporary states the right to exist. The caliphate proclaimed by ISIS conveyed a simple but powerful message in a region where the phenomenon of state failure was endemic: A state intended by God cannot fail. Thus, religious fanaticism and the promise of well-functioning state structures mutually reinforced each other, contributing greatly to ISIS' appeal to supporters.

As far as the fight against ISIS and its potential successor organizations is concerned, this means that we have to counter not only their religious-ideological messages but also their worldly offers. The international coalition against ISIS was therefore right to fight the myth of the "Islamic State's" functional superiority from the very beginning by removing the organization's sources of funding and by destroying its infrastructure. ISIS is currently in retreat – not because its ideology lost some of its appeal but primarily because its "statehood" is failing.

The Way Out: Strengthening State Structures and Good Governance

The way out of this dreadful situation in the Middle East will be a long and rocky one. Supporting authoritarian regimes is not a means to negotiate this path. What is more promising is the strengthening of functional state structures. Of course, arranging a truce and establishing security and stability in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen is an absolute priority right now. But in the medium and long term, certain structures and institutions must be established there as well as in Egypt, Algeria and in other parts of the region: a well-functioning administration, a just social and economic system and efficient public infrastructure which are not governed by clientage and patronage but serve all citizens equally. This is the only way to counteract both authoritarian abuse of power and Islamist promises of salvation as well as to establish lasting structures and procedures based on the principles of democracy and the rule of law.

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