The Arab Transformations
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Sinkholes of Insecurity:

Structural Causes of Weaknesses in Six Arab Countries

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Summary:

- MENA countries fail to deliver on key issues from **corruption** to **jobs** and **public services**, reducing social, economic and political cohesion.

- While regimes are mostly able to **coerce dissent**…

- …but these failures erode trust in institutions, rendering MENA states **'insecurity sinkholes'**: weak in ways which often become apparent well after long-term damage has been done.

- The Arab Uprisings demonstrated a benign form of this weakness.

- Recommendations: focus on socio-economic cohesion as a security issue; draw on European experience with radicalisation in 1960s-70s to counter extremism.

Keywords:

Middle East, public opinion, survey data, security, authoritarianism, stability, radicalization, mobilization, social justice, cohesion, resilience

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SEVENTH FRAMEWORK PROGRAMME

1. Introduction

The Arab Uprisings changed little in the nature of Arab domestic politics, but did highlight ongoing fault lines within the region. The new understanding of the causes of the Uprisings which Arab Transformations Survey data affords leads to a re-evaluation of our how we understand regional security and stability, and how best to support these. The data suggests regional autocracies are neither strong nor stable, but fierce and brittle, suffering from a **legitimacy deficit**, and facing simmering popular disaffection. The principal cause of political mobilisation is regional governments' failure to fulfil citizens' demands for **economic and political inclusion**, particularly in relation to corruption, civil-political rights and socio-economic rights and conditions. While local governments are often able to forcefully repress dissent, the tension between eroding legitimacy, corruption and coercion makes these systems **security sinkholes** – apparently stable, deeply precarious, but displaying few outward signs of such weakness until it is too late. Such a predicament directly **contributes to increasing regional instability and insecurity**. Until local regimes and international actors address regional regimes' legitimacy deficit it is unlikely that these countries – and the Euro-Mediterranean region overall – will move away from the unstable impasse in which they are again stuck after failing to grasp the opportunities offered by the Uprisings.

2. Economic and Political Challenges

Public opinion data on the causes of the Arab Uprisings clearly shows that corruption and economic inequality were the main drivers of protest in 2010-2011. Of the issues which motivated people to protest, corruption was nearly always the single most frequently-mentioned. Corruption deserves its own, 'standalone' category not just because of the magnitude of its frequency as a cause of protest, but also because it lies at the heart of the system of political and economic marginalisation which has polarised the distribution of wealth, undermined social mobility, and reinforced political repression (Teti et al. 2017).

Figure 2.1: Causes of the Arab Uprisings: Percentage of supporters nominating as one of two main reasons for Supporting the Uprisings
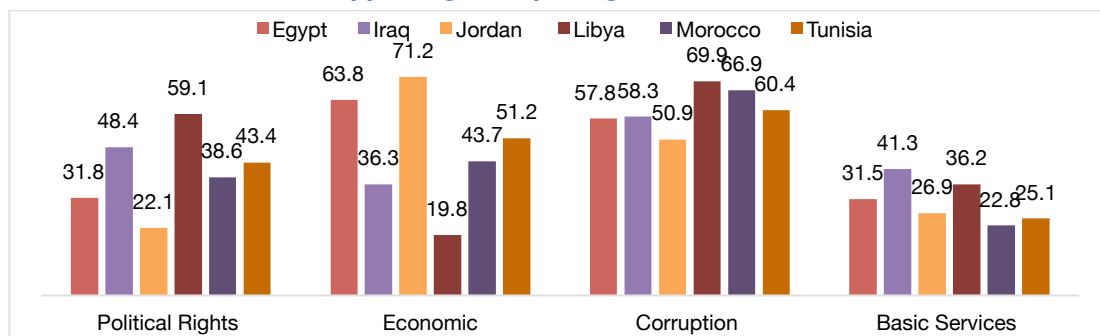
Such concern with both socio-economic inequality – particularly touchstone issues like unemployment and corruption – and political disempowerment is far from an isolated result. There is an abundance of survey data suggesting that matters related to socio-economic issues and rights (e.g. basic services, jobs) as well as corruption are focal points both for concern and for mobilisation amongst people across surveyed MENA countries (Teti et al. 2017; Teti & Abbott 2016). While people also perceive orthodox indicators of security as also having deteriorated (see Section 3 below) they clearly see issues like corruption and unemployment as the primary challenges their countries face.

The primacy of corruption is a significant finding, and suggests people view corruption as a major challenge that is both political as well as economic. In all countries save Libya the economic situation *and* corruption are perceived as the top two challenges.

Figure 2.2: Issues Nominated as One of Two Major Challenges Facing the Country in 2014, %
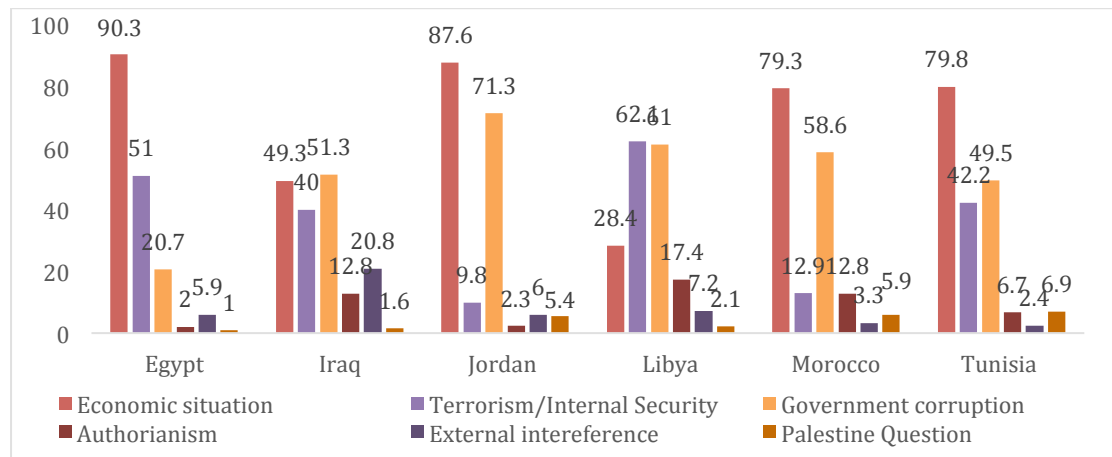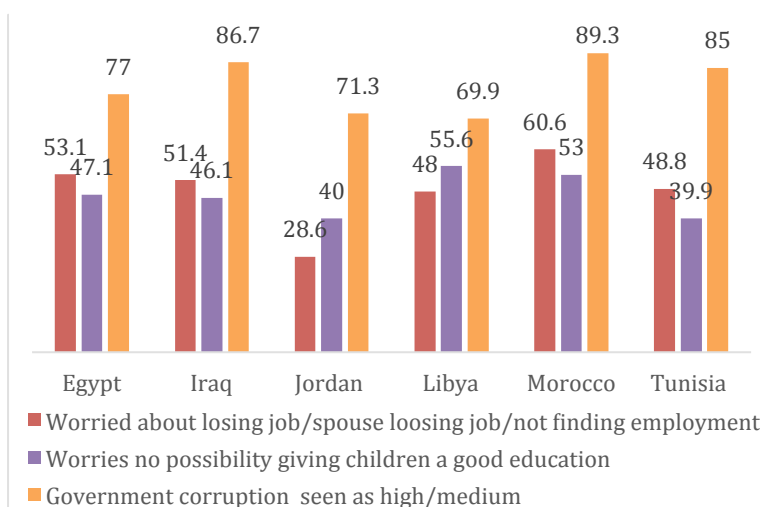

Questions about specific issues confirm popular dissatisfaction: asked about their satisfaction with the way the economy was developing, **two thirds of respondents or more are dissatisfied,** with a peak of nearly nine out of ten respondents in Tunisia. The only exception was Egypt, where four in ten were dissatisfied.

Figure 2.3: 'Satisfied' or 'Quite Satisfied' with how Economy is Developing
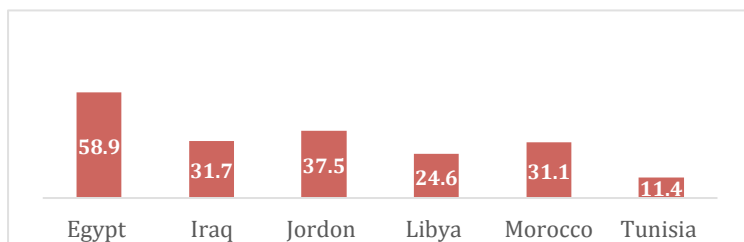

Egypt and to a lesser extent Jordan display a marked difference between the way people answer questions about government performance in general, and their satisfaction with its performance in specific areas. Asked to rate government performance and economic performance, respondents tended to be relatively optimistic. However, asked about specific services, respondents were clearly dissatisfied with how governments were dealing with challenges such as job creation, education, and corruption.

Figure 2.4: Jobs, Education, and Government Corruption

In addition, people have little confidence their governments are taking credible steps to deal with these issues. The gap between perception of corruption and perception of significant government action is a cause for concern. The greatest differential between these scores is found in Iraq and in Tunisia at about 50% of respondents, where even in Egypt that differential is over 30%. Nowhere except

Egypt did the proportion of those believing governments were making concerted efforts rise above one in five.

Figure 2.5: Perception of Corruption as Serious Problem vs. Perception of Concerted Government Action
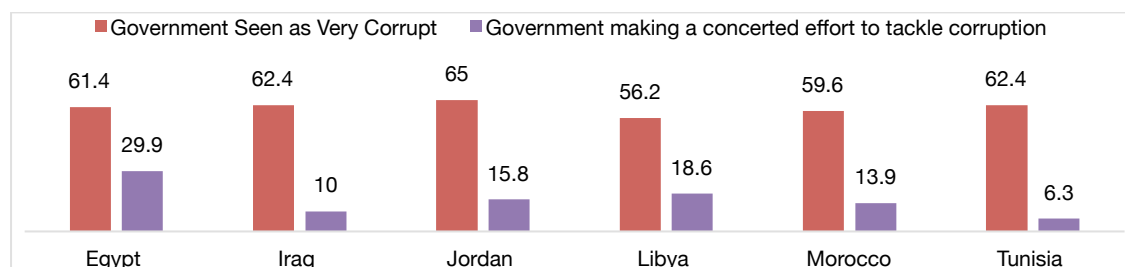
Across the countries only a minority of citizens are satisfied with government action on economic issues such as employment or controlling inflation, including on 'narrowing economic inequalities'. All this suggests that in the eyes of their citizens, regional governments are still failing on the crucial dimension of economic inclusion.

Figure 2.6: Government Service Delivery Judged at Least Good in 2014, %
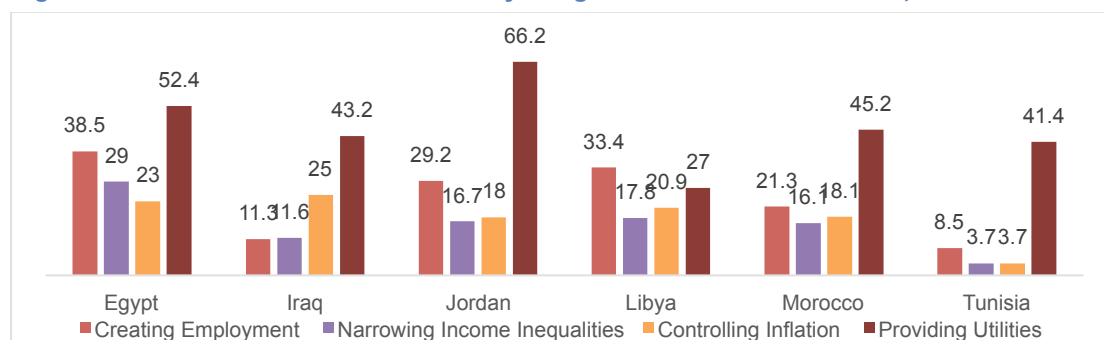
3. The Erosion of Consensus: Hollowing Out the Foundations of Security

The hollowing out of socio-economic inclusion is associated with an erosion of consensus supporting existing regimes. With the exception of the armed forces in Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia, no single institution in any of the countries is viewed as trustworthy by a noticeable majority of respondents. Only in Jordan were both the army and the police trusted by more than two thirds of the population (see Fig. 3.1). Governments were trusted by no more than roughly a quarter of respondents – save in Egypt. Trust in parliaments remained under one in four with the exception of Jordan (nearly 30%). The Judiciary sector enjoyed relatively higher levels of trust at a third or more of respondents (save Iraq's 10.8%). Overall, Tunisia and especially Iraq emerge as countries in which public institutions enjoy very little trust, with the exception of their respective armed forces (57% in Iraq, 83% in Tunisia). This lack of institutional trust reinforces the hypothesis of authoritarian regimes which – while fierce in the application of force to repress dissent – cannot claim credible legitimacy in the use of those coercive tools. However stable regional autocracies might appear, they are not resilient, not does such stability as they do display stem from popular consensus.

Figure 3.1: Trust in State Institutions
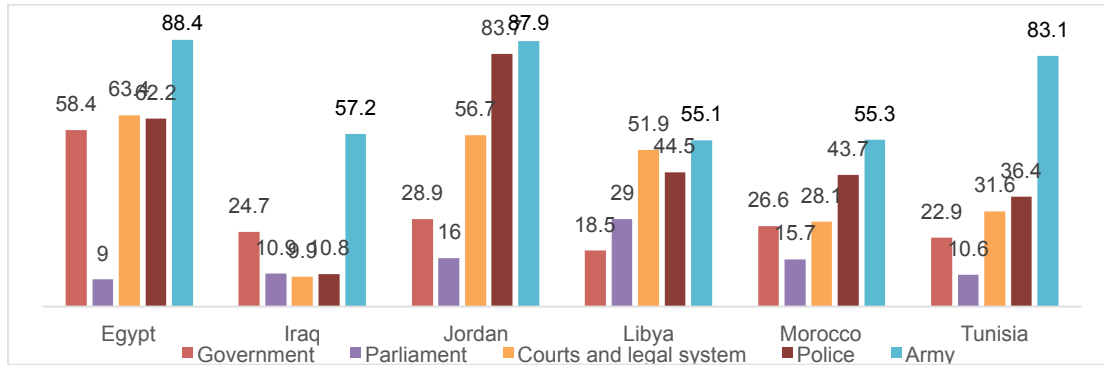
Source: Arab Transformations Survey, 2014. Questions on Trust in Army for Egypt and Tunisia are taken from Arab Barometer III, 2013.

It has already been noted above that there is significant dissatisfaction in governments' performances across sectors and countries, and that even where responses to general questions about satisfaction with government are relatively higher, evidence of such satisfaction evaporates once concrete issues are examined (e.g. Egypt). In addition, compared to 2009, in 2014 respondents perceive insecurity increasing at household, neighbourhood and particularly country levels, with the exception of Morocco.

As serious as these issues are in themselves, what makes them relevant to the stability and security of political systems is evidence that they are also **causes of political mobilisation**. It is in fact precisely these issues which motivated mass demonstrations – orders of magnitude larger than anything the region had seen in decades – across the Middle East in 2010-11. As Arab Transformations Survey data shows, while the Uprisings themselves have mostly not produced the profound changes supporters had hoped for, the issues which drove them to protest have not been resolved or even significantly addressed. Indeed, the securitisation of issues like corruption have for a long time been vehicles for the radicalisation of smaller sectors of society. This suggests MENA governments are still vulnerable both to mass discontent translating into mass mobilisation, and to **less visible and less benign forms of radicalisation**.

4. Conclusions

The erosion of socio-economic fabric and trust in state institutions impacts security by facilitating mass mobilisation against incumbent governments. This mobilisation, epitomised in a benign form in the 2011 Uprisings, indicates the need to re-assess both the stability and security of current MENA regimes and the grounds upon which such assessments are made. Citizens are frustrated in their demand for economic as well as political inclusion and are dissatisfied with government delivery in major policy areas. Corruption epitomises the seriousness of challenges policymakers face, the lack of public trust in their rhetoric, and the way populations can be mobilised by such issues. However apparently effective regional regimes' **coercive capacity** to repress or dissuade citizens from protesting is, they are at best tolerated by their populations, but cannot rely on a social consensus that would ensure long term stability. Instead, evidence suggests regional regimes are **fierce but brittle**: their precariousness makes them **security sinkholes** – apparently stable until the erosion of their foundations becomes so severe that they collapse into unrest or civil war. This fundamental precariousness is what the Arab Uprisings revealed in spectacular fashion. While it may be tempting to see these trends as not directly relevant to security matters conventionally understood, survey data confirms these long-term structural weaknesses create the context for political mobilisation – including increasing the risks of radicalisation and extremism.

5. Recommendations

The EU lacks the resources to make a significant impact alone and should work in strategic partnership with its Member States and allies. However, it can play an important role as a normative power. European governments can also contribute lessons learned dealing with their own crises of legitimacy in the 1960s-70s. European radicalisation was addressed with security and legal measures dealing with both proximate threats and economic measures addressing structural causes of the loss of social, economic and political cohesion.

1. <u>General</u>: Durable increases in security and political stability can be achieved only by delivering on public demand for greater economic and political inclusion.
2. <u>Approaches to Security and Security Sector Reform</u>: Data on the lack of trust in institutions emphasises importance of SSR, particularly internal security forces. Unless abuse of power is tackled seriously, it will remain a serious drain on regime legitimacy and thus stability and security. Such reforms are a crucial component in any strategy aiming to establish a **virtuous cycle of development and security**.
   a. While carefully avoiding strengthening autocrats, targeted technical assistance can improve security by eliminating power struggles between civilian governments and armed forces, building trust and improving efficiency as well as reforming technical aspects of civil-military relations.
3. <u>Effective Anti-Corruption Action</u>: Corruption is the single greatest source of grievance, and the greatest driver of the Uprisings. Effective action will bring more-than-proportional benefits increasing social cohesion, reducing conflict, migration, and increasing security and stability. High-level corruption in both government and business, must be distinguished from petty corruption, the economy of favours more immediately linked to concerns about employment. The former has real economic and political consequences, while the latter impacts upon access to employment and services. Both should be tackled – and *seen* to be tackled. In addition slowing **capital flight**, and enforcing international standards on **companies paying tax** on profits where they were earned, would provide significant funds for all countries in this study, especially Egypt and Iraq. These sums would **far exceed receipts from Development Assistance**.
   a. Supporting locally-driven, effective anti-corruption action also offers the EU an opportunity to improve its image in the region, and increase the reliability and quality of joint security issues and security sector reform.
4. <u>The Role of Trade</u>: Escalating bilateral trade agreements to benefit MENA countries – and specifically paying attention to a more equitable and inclusive distribution of benefits – would create prompt and positive impact.
5. <u>The Role of the EU</u>: Adopt strategies for security and stabilization integrating short-term conventional security approaches with long-term stabilization and cohesion measures.
   a. The importance of inequality in mobilising MENA citizens suggests the EU should review trade agreements to ensure more equitable economic outcomes *within* MENA countries, as well as with European partners;
   b. MENA citizens have a rounded understanding of democracy, as such, the EU should balance its emphasis across civil-political and socio-economic rights in its strategies for both democracy promotion;

6. References

Teti, A. & Abbott, P., 2016. *What do "the People" Want? The Demand for Democracy in Six Middle Eastern States*, Aberdeen.

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The Arab Transformations Project is an international research project operating within the European Commission's FP7 framework. The project looks comparatively at attitudes and behaviours in the context of the social, political and economic transformations taking place across Middle East and North Africa since February 2011. The countries covered are Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq. Ethical approval for the Project was given through the Ethical Review Procedures of the University of Aberdeen. Further details of the project can be found on the project web site at www.arabtrans.eu.

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