

DANCING ON THE HEADS OF SNAKES - RE-THINKING STATE AGENCY IN THE MENA REGION

In an interview to London's newspaper *Al-Hayat* in March 2009, former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Salih defined governing Yemen as: "[...] dancing on the heads of snakes" (Clark 2011).

This sentence was quoted by Prof. Gerges Fawaz in his lecture "*The International Relations of the Middle East: Continuity and Change*" during the 2nd edition of the NAMEPES Summer School at the University of Trento. During the lecture Prof. Fawaz questioned the existence of a real state agency by Arab states, arguing that dependence on foreign support and lack of a salient sovereignty do not create the right conditions for Middle Eastern states to have real agency.

This essay will be a critical review of his lecture, focusing on the role of state agency in the Middle East and North Africa and whether it is possible to re-think it focusing on different non-state actors.

What is agency?

By agency we mean the capacity one has to act (Sanchini, Pongiglione, and Sala 2019). When we talk about states, agency is strictly linked to sovereignty, meaning the ability the state has to independently manage their own internal affairs.

However, the definition does not help understanding the political situation of the Middle East. As explained by professor Fawaz, fragility is its main characteristic, making states sovereignty just a façade. If we would have to adopt a realist perspective, according to which strategic power (meaning the ability to mobilize a large army) is the main condition for state sovereignty, most of the countries in the MENA region would not be real states.

In fact, the majority depends on foreign powers – mainly US or Russia – that oversee their defence; so, although being rich in raw materials such as oil and gas, states lack an organized and effective army to exercise any kind of influence in the region.

Many of the states have been classified as "failed states": according to a 2020 report by Centre for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), sectarian and ethnic divisions weakened ever more the already fragile state institutions (Cordesman 2020), betraying the expectations raised during the "Arab Spring" in 2011.

An important question arises from this analysis: were MENA states exercising real sovereignty prior to 2011 events? Although state institutions might have seemed stronger and working, the answer should be in the negative.

What existed before was a soft power capacity that state – or better state leaders – had and exercised upon its citizens. Gramsci defines hegemony as a set of ideas able to capture people, an hegemony by persuasion and not coercion (de Orellana 2015) – what we may call soft power. The 2011 events challenged that, tearing Maya's veil under which leaders of the past century hid the absence of a real state.

Although it might be argued that secret police forces were common in Ghaddafi's Libya or Saddam's Iraq, they have not succeeded in collecting the heritage that these two strongmen left after they died. The lack of a real hegemony dates to the time of European colonialism in the region, which failed to create a real sovereign and legitimate power in charge of the country. More than institutions, people need ideas to believe in as argued by Professor Fawaz.

A decade ago, this hegemony was exercised by the United States which was heavily present in the region; in the last years the US has slowly retreated from the Middle East, leaving a vacuum of power that is yet to be fulfilled. Regional powers are trying to seize the momentum to exercise their agency; Turkey, Israel, and Iran are trying to influence other states' internal affairs to establish their ultimate hegemony (Fawcett 2017), but they are rather unsuccessful. Despite their efforts, each of them is waiting for a new international player to come, while most Arab Gulf states rely on US military

protection. The agency that major regional powers are trying to exercise is not sufficient to establish a new hegemony, because of the lack of strong institutions and ideas backing their manoeuvres. If both institutions and ideas are missing, why are then Middle Eastern states surviving the passing of time, crisis after crisis? The answer lies in our misconception of agency which is seen only with Western/Westphalian lenses. As argued by Zartman, states might be weak in a “Weberian” sense and sovereignty might be contested, but their continuity – intended as border preservation and regime survival – will last (Fawcett 2017). It is time to re-think of agency as an attribution which first and foremost pertains to society.

Re-thinking agency

Strong institutions are almost absent in the Middle East for different reasons, making impossible for states to exercise their agency. However, there is another agency which shook Middle Eastern regimes and that seems to be ready to shake them again: societal agency.

A primary example of society’s agency was the “Arab Spring” of 2011. Although the series of protests that erupted in many Middle Eastern and North African states did not end up in the long-awaited wave of democratic change, it showed that societies in the MENA region had a huge potential to shape their destiny.

The first protests erupted in Tunisia and were soon followed by many other protests in neighbouring countries of North Africa and in the Arab Gulf. There were different reasons behind each protest and the results very much differed from country to country, but more than that what was – and still is – the common key-factor was civil society agency. Although some external interference occurred (such as NATO and Russia’s interventions), much of the mobilization capacity came from the bottom as it is showed by the high fragmentation of authority following the fall of the regimes (Fawcett 2017).

Though it is difficult to argue that another wave such as the “Arab Spring” will soon come out, there are several examples of a new societal mobilization in the MENA region.

In Lebanon, independent and anti-establishment candidates won for the first time an important number of seats in the elections of May 2022 (Aljoud 2022). Although this result does not put an immediate end to the Lebanese political crisis, it signals an important change in Lebanese politics. Despite the low turnout – 49% of the population voted – Lebanese have showed their will to change and exit the narrow path of sectarian politics (Naddaff 2022).

In Iran, society agency has never been so strong since the 1979 Revolution; the government is criticized on different levels, from small villages to big cities, in an atmosphere that reminds of the 2009-2010 Green Wave. Though it is difficult to argue that a similar movement will regain momentum, Iranian society is showing a strong will for a change in their political system¹.

These two examples have little in common; Iran is a hybrid-regime which is in the last years has undergone a slow process of “autocratization”, while Lebanon has been subject of a long internal sectarian war. Nonetheless, agency – intended as a property of both the state and society – links the two countries. Both states showed a lack of agency: Lebanon in providing an answer to the society requests, while Iran in taking up the role of hegemon power in the region. While the two states are waiting for a new external power to arise and influence the region, as explained by professor Fawaz and professor Abdolmohammadi, their societies are exercising their agency, mobilizing, protesting, and providing a change in the electoral ballots (when they are allowed to).

It is time to re-think of agency as an attribute of society; because of the lack of legitimacy and sovereignty, exercising agency for states has become an almost impossible task.

This fragility in exercising a real agency comes from the very foundations of these states; as explained by professor Fawaz, their historical formation still influences Middle Eastern politics, making the states dependent on foreign support.

¹ <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/iran/2022/05/16/irans-leaders-under-pressure-as-protests-simmer/> and <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/05/20/iran-arrests-amid-economic-protests>

Conversely, their societies have the capacity to act and, especially, to re-act to abuses of power by their states. So, while leaders' agency can be questioned, societies have showed a great degree of agency since 2011, even though not continuously.

The real issue now is understanding how this agency can be put into practice to make it work in an environment which is highly fragmented.

This task is harsh and complicated, but working with a model developed by Wolfgang Stuppert it is possible to think – at least – of a way to canalize societal agency.

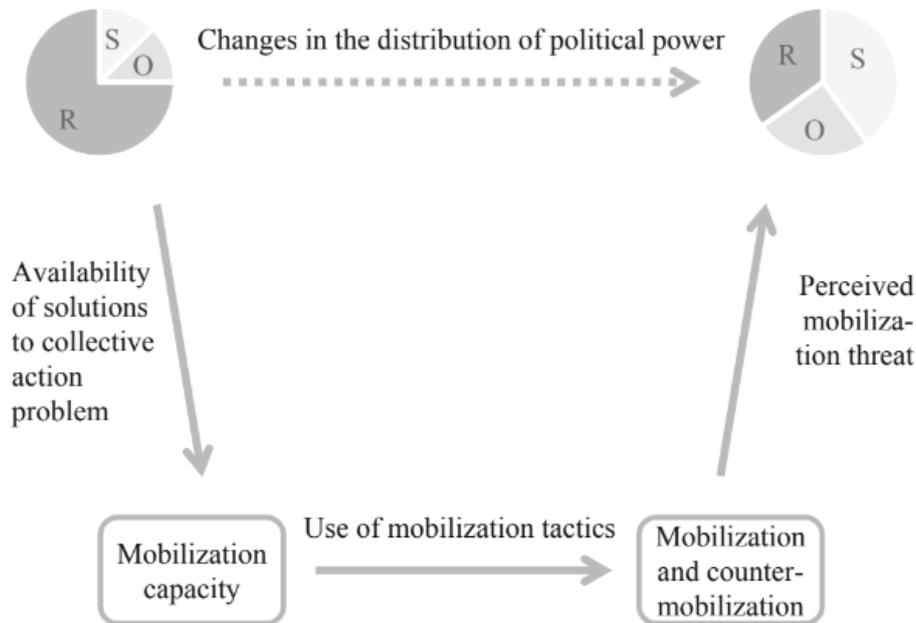


Fig. 4.2 Micro-theoretical model for the explanation of changes in political power. *Notes* The pie charts illustrate changing distributions of political power between ruling elites (“R”), oppositional political elites (“O”), and societal groups (“S”)

2

Stuppert’s model adds an important element that can be combined with agency: the “mobilization threat”. Middle Eastern societies have showed repeatedly an astonishing resilience and capacity to react against regimes: in the 2011 “Arab Spring”, the mobilization threat was the key element that made protestors succeed in many countries. But while this consciousness – and probably the belief of success – was lacking in that period, it is not now: those protests show to the population that an actual change is possible. The issue remains with the management of the immediate post-protests situation; the “mobilization threat” must transform into “constructive mobilization”, meaning the will – and the patience – to rebuild the institutions and face a period of transition.

If Middle Eastern societies should succeed in this, then not only we would assist to an example of state-building from below, but also possibly to the re-construction of state agency.

Conclusions – Turkey and Israel: the exceptions that prove the rule

Although most of the Arab countries struggle to exercise effective agency in the region, two major regional powers seem to have retained this capacity. Professor Fawaz argued that Turkey and Israel are two exceptions in the MENA region; however, their ability to exercise agency does not depend upon healthy institutions or functioning government. Instead, their agency is only apparent as they have major inherent flaws affecting their capacity to act.

² (Stuppert 2020)

Firstly, institutions are only apparently strong in both countries. Both in Israel and Turkey, institutions do not reflect their societies. In Turkey, President Erdogan managed to take control of all state institutions through a spoiling system; in Israel there is a long-lasting political crisis that does not allow for the creation of an effective government (McKernan 2022).

Despite these major inherent flaws, both countries showed a solid persistence in playing the role of hegemon in the region. However, both are falling short of this complex task.

Turkey is constantly pushing boundaries in both the Middle East and, recently, even in international organizations such as NATO. Its recent veto – then lifted – to the accession of Sweden and Finland to the Atlantic alliance shows a country that constantly tries to show muscles because it feels threatened. The Turkish lira considerably weakened in the last years and the country is facing a harsh economic crisis. Erdogan's spoil system risks to collapse and the only way not to show this weakness is by exercising pressure on stronger players (such as the European Union with migrants or NATO and its new members). Still, Turkey is still not able to exercise any relevant influence in the MENA region (although its actions in Libya must be closely followed).

Israel seems to be the designated heir of US hegemony in the Middle East. The Biden administration recently decided to support an anti-Iran coalition led by Israel in case of a new failure of the JCPOA. If this should happen, Israel would finally have all the instruments to exercise hegemony in the region (Fantappie and Nasr 2022). Though this might create a shift of the balance of power inside MENA, it shows once again that Middle Eastern countries' agency is always granted by some external major power.

Professor Fawaz's question on how much agency exists in the Middle East remains unanswered: the different examples of agency that exist in the region show how unpredictable the MENA region is. Future developments in Lebanon and Libya (where both regional and international powers are involved) might provide an answer to what kind of agency, whether by the society or the state, will be exercised in the future: will the governments resume their dance over the snakes, or will the "snakes" learn how to bite the dancers?

REFERENCES

- Aljoud, Sally Abou. 2022. 'Who Are the Independent Candidates Who Won Seats in Lebanon's Parliament?' *Middle East Eye*, 18 May 2022. <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/lebanon-parliament-independents-who-won-seats>.
- Clark, Victoria. 2011. *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Cordesman, Anthony H. 2020. 'The Greater Middle East: From the "Arab Spring" to the "Axis of Failed States"'. CSIS - Centre for Strategic & International Studies.
- Fantappie, Maria, and Vali Nasr. 2022. 'What America Should Do If the Iran Nuclear Deal Talks Fail'. *Foreign Affairs*, July, 7.
- Fawcett, Louise. 2017. 'States and Sovereignty in the Middle East: Myths and Realities'. *International Affairs* 93 (4): 789–807. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix122>.
- Human Rights Watch. 2022. 'Iran: Arrests Amid Economic Protests'. *Human Rights Watch* (blog). 20 May 2022. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/05/20/iran-arrests-amid-economic-protests>.
- Maher, Ahmed. 2022. 'Iran's Leaders under Pressure as Protests Simmer'. *The National*. 16 May 2022. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/iran/2022/05/16/irans-leaders-under-pressure-as-protests-simmer/>.
- McKernan, Bethan. 2022. 'Israel Braces for Fifth Election in Less than Four Years'. *The Guardian*, 29 June 2022, sec. World news. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/29/israel-braces-for-fifth-election-in-less-than-four-years>.
- Naddaff, A. J. 2022. 'Lebanon's Surprisingly Promising Election'. *Foreign Policy*, 18 May 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/05/18/lebanon-election-results-parliament-hezbollah-opposition-candidates-reform/>.
- Orellana, Juan Carlos de. 2015. 'Gramsci on Hegemony'. *Not Even Past*. 26 May 2015. <https://notevenpast.org/gramsci-on-hegemony/>.
- Sanchini, Virginia, Francesca Pongiglione, and Roberta Sala. 2019. 'On the Notion of Political Agency'. *Phenomenology and Mind* No 16 (September): 10-15 Pages. https://doi.org/10.13128/PHE_MI-26068.
- Strohecker, Karin. 2022. 'Turkey Caught in a Spiral of Lira Crises'. *Reuters*, 10 June 2022, sec. European Markets. <https://www.reuters.com/markets/europe/turkey-caught-spiral-lira-crises-2022-06-10/>.
- Stuppert, Wolfgang. 2020. *Political Mobilizations and Democratization in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Advances in African Economic, Social and Political Development. Cham: Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-22792-0>.