



POLITICAL ORDER AND GOVERNANCE IN THE ARAB EAST: REGIONAL DYNAMICS AND THE ROLE OF SAUDI ARABIA

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Abstract

This article examines political order and governance in the Arab East by linking historical legacies with contemporary regional dynamics. It argues that the formation of political systems in the region resulted in governance configurations characterized by the dominance of executive authority and the central role of ruling elites, while mechanisms of political representation have often remained limited. The article highlights the enduring impact of historical patterns of state formation on contemporary political order and pays particular attention to Saudi Arabia as a key regional actor whose governance practices and reform trajectory reflect broader regional trends of political stability and institutional continuity.

Keywords: Arab East, political order, governance, state formation, regime stability, Gulf monarchies, Saudi Arabia, regional dynamics.

Introduction

Political order in the Arab East has been shaped by a combination of historical ruptures, external interventions, and regionspecific trajectories of state formation. Contemporary governance structures in the region cannot be adequately understood without reference to the interaction between inherited institutional frameworks and evolving political practices (Zvyagelskaya, 2019). Rather than converging toward uniform political models, Arab states have developed distinctive configurations of authority that prioritize stability, executive dominance, and elite cohesion.



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This article explores the foundations of political order and governance in the Arab East, emphasizing the longterm effects of historical state formation and the role of regional dynamics in shaping contemporary political systems. Particular attention is paid to Saudi Arabia as a key regional actor whose governance model and reform agenda illuminate broader patterns of political stability and institutional continuity.

The formation of political systems in Arab countries took place under the combined influence of colonial legacies and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, which predetermined the fragmented nature of institutional development and a limited experience of national statebuilding (Pechatnov & Streltsov, 2019). In this respect, the Arab region occupies a distinctive position, as no other part of the world experienced such a wide variety of colonial and semicolonial forms of external governance.

This historical background is also reflected in broader sociospatial features of the Arab world—its demographic patterns, settlement structures, and uneven development—which have shaped the practical capacity of states to consolidate institutions and manage political cohesion. As Sapronova emphasizes, political trajectories in the Arab world cannot be separated from the region’s social geography and the historically formed configuration of society, economy, and territorial organization, which continue to influence governance choices and statebuilding outcomes (Sapronova, 2013, pp. 23–29).

In this regard, the Arab region occupies a special place, since no other region of the world has experienced such a variety of forms and mechanisms of colonial and semi-colonial influence. Northern Libya and Algeria were administered as direct colonies. Tunisia, Morocco, Bahrain, and Kuwait functioned as protectorates. Sudan was governed as a condominium, representing a special form of joint AngloEgyptian administration. Syria, Lebanon, Transjordan, and Palestine were placed under League of Nations mandates. Egypt and Iraq were linked to Great Britain through militarypolitical alliance treaties. Only Saudi Arabia and Yemen retained formal independence and did not fall under direct colonial control.

This mosaic of external governance arrangements exerted a longterm influence on the processes of state formation and institutional development in Arab



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countries. As a result, most states in the region developed institutional configurations in which executive authority and ruling elites occupy a dominant position, while mechanisms of political representation and participation remained relatively underdeveloped (Kosach, 2013).

Governance structures in the Arab East have largely evolved as mechanisms for managing social fragmentation, identity diversity, and external pressures. Political legitimacy has often been derived not primarily from institutionalized representation, but from the state's capacity to maintain social order, redistribute resources, and mediate social cleavages (Kosach, 2013).

At the same time, historically rooted understandings of political authority continue to shape governance practices. As Kissinger notes, the Middle East developed within normative frameworks that differed substantially from the Westphalian model of sovereign nationstates, a legacy that continues to influence perceptions of statehood, borders, and legitimacy across the region (Kissinger, 2014, pp. 128–132).

The events of 2010–2011, commonly referred to as the Arab Spring, represented a critical challenge to existing political orders across the region. Protest mobilization was driven by the accumulation of socioeconomic pressures, including unemployment, corruption, limited social mobility, and restricted channels of political participation (Grinin, Isaev, & Korotaev, 2016, pp. 24–26). However, the outcomes of these events varied significantly. In some states, protests resulted in leadership change; in others, they led to the consolidation of existing regimes. In Libya, Yemen, and Syria, political upheaval contributed to the collapse of state institutions and prolonged conflict. Rather than producing a uniform trajectory of political transformation, the Arab Spring revealed the differentiated capacity of political systems to absorb shocks and maintain order (Grinin et al., 2016, pp. 58–66).

Within the broader Arab East, the Gulf monarchies constitute a distinct regional subsystem characterized by shared governance features and strategic behavior. As noted by Pechatnov and Streltsov, the Persian Gulf has evolved into a relatively autonomous regional space, where the concentration of energy resources, strategic maritime routes, and external security arrangements has



transformed Gulf monarchies into stabilizing actors within the Middle Eastern order (Pechatnov & Streltsov, 2019).

Oil and gas revenues enabled the establishment of rentbased social contracts that exchange political loyalty for material welfare, public employment, and social protection. Regime stability has been reinforced by dynastic governance arrangements, elite coordination, and carefully regulated forms of political inclusion (Pechatnov & Streltsov, 2019).

Saudi Arabia occupies a central position in the political order of the Arab East. For many Arab states, the hydrocarbonproducing monarchies—above all Saudi Arabia—continue to function as key financial donors and sources of macroeconomic stabilization, reinforcing their political influence across the region (Pechatnov & Streltsov, 2019).

The reform agenda articulated in Vision 2030 represents an effort to recalibrate Saudi governance in response to changing economic and social conditions. As Dudarev emphasizes, these reforms do not signify a retreat from centralized decisionmaking; rather, they reaffirm the state’s leading role in strategic planning and coordination of socioeconomic transformation (Dudarev, 2021, pp. 28–33).

To sum up, political order and governance in the Arab East are deeply rooted in historical patterns of state formation and shaped by regionspecific institutional trajectories. The diversity of colonial and semicolonial experiences produced fragmented state structures in which executive authority and ruling elites assumed a central role, while mechanisms of political representation developed unevenly. The experience of the Gulf monarchies, and Saudi Arabia in particular, demonstrates that governance reform and political stability are not mutually exclusive. Instead, political order in the Arab East continues to evolve through contextspecific configurations that integrate historical legacies with contemporary regional dynamics.

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