

VIOLENCE, AUTHORITARIANISM & TRANSFORMATION IN THE MODERN MIDDLE EAST

Pathways to development?

Unlocking the Middle East's development potential depends on resolving the region's deep-rooted contradictions. For instance, extreme wealth goes hand in hand with extreme poverty. Despite geopolitical rapprochement, lingering enmities and distrust remain. Dense connections between people combine with a lack of collaboration between countries and ineffective

regional organizations. Resilience and social cohesion are worn down by authoritarianism and violence. Such issues limit development and produce regional instability. Greater misery and growing externalities are the likely result. Smart initiatives start by understanding what is at stake. Research helps to bring such understanding about.

Problem Statement

Between 2011 and 2023, large-scale protests in Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, Israel, Turkey and Iran expressed the demands of millions of citizens for greater civic rights, better livelihoods and less corruption. Yet, little improvement has been made. Instead, ruling elites across the region strengthened their hold on power, neutralized protests at home and/or kept assertive foreign policies in place. In the best case, they instigated top-down reforms – for example in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

But the region faces mounting socio-economic problems – poverty, inequality, corruption, energy transitions away from hydrocarbons and climate change. At the

same time, its geopolitical balance remains precarious. Long-running conflicts like the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories and the Kurdish question, as well as the Syrian and Yemeni wars, can easily create new crises. Iran's place in the region's political order remains unresolved, the US keeps supporting Israel unconditionally and networks of violent extremism remain active. How do such factors interact to block or enable change necessary for greater national development, stability and security?



In-Depth

For a more academically stated research problem, see [here](#) (weblink to publication)

Research Focus

Clingendael's Middle East program is based on three observations. First, poverty, corruption and inequality have increased significantly across the region between 2011 and 2024. Second, authoritarianism remains the modus operandi for governance in all Middle Eastern states, although to different degrees. Third, violent conflict and geopolitical tensions keep recurring in a context of shifting alignments. Combined, these points raise the question what viable pathways to development can look like in different parts of the region. In particular:

- What role do protests and social movements play in changing the direction of national development?
- What are limitations and opportunities for national development and reform under authoritarian conditions?
- When can political violence and/or conflict be effective catalysts for (geo-)political change?

The program combines rigorous academic research with practical policy work; conceptual design with field work; and confidential advice with evidence-based public discussion. It runs from 2021 to 2026 and builds on previous research about the Syrian and Iraqi civil wars.

Key Prior Research Results

[Coercive organizations, war and state development in the Levant](#) (webpage)

[Armed Organizations and Political Elites in Civil Wars: Pathways to Power in Syria and Iraq](#) (book)

For more information and publications visit: clingendael.org/topic/middle-east



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Main Areas of Research and Initial Findings

1

Analyzing protests in Iran, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon

Protests in governance systems with high levels of sectarianism, authoritarianism, tribalism and/or clientelism are unlikely to bring radical political change about

This leaves migration, civic disengagement, deepening substate loyalties, political violence, rebellion and extremist violence as main alternative methods to voice grievances.

2

Researching modernization efforts in the Gulf countries

Preconditions for transformation include centralization of executive authority, full control over security forces and deep financial resources at a time of energy transition

Modernization under authoritarian conditions is vulnerable to having limited learning capabilities, personalization and a need to maintain elite networks supporting the regime

3

Tracking Iran's transition after the 2022/2023 protests

The 2022/2023 protests showed massive popular discontent with Iran's regime across classes and geographies. It is unclear whether these events will make Iran only more authoritarian, or also trigger gradual reform

For now, Iran's ruling elites seek to entrench their power and maintain an assertive foreign policy that is grounded in domestic repression

4

Analyzing regional conflicts and tensions as they emerge

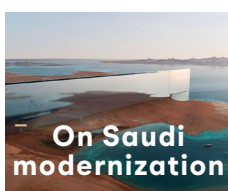
Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories has started to interact with the Israeli/US - Iranian confrontation. Together with accelerating Israeli annexation, this will produce higher levels of violence in both the occupied Palestinian territories and the region.

Regional stability requires an end to occupation and reaching an accommodation with Iran

How We Work

As a team, we are equally comfortable setting up a longer-term research project as we are taking on consultancy style work in a not-for-profit fashion. In all cases, we critically engage with the knowledge need at hand and propose a mix of frames and methods that meets immediate needs, but also explores underlying assumptions and conditions. Our analytical starting point is always rooted in the realities of the Middle East as much as possible.

We can deliver a wide suite of products, depending on what meets client requirements, including confidential briefings, memo's, closed-door events, op-eds, essays, policy briefs, research reports, academic articles, scenario planning, training sessions and conferences.



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