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The Social Underpinnings of the Current Unrest in North Africa and the Middle East

A Policy Update Paper

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Given the recent and ongoing political turmoil in Tunisia, Lebanon, Egypt and Jordan, with a serious possibility of further contagion to neighbouring countries and perhaps right across the “arc of instability,” the so-called Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is an interesting group of countries to focus our attention on. According to World Bank data, it is made up of 21 countries and is home to around 400 million inhabitants, with a per capita income of more than PPP \$9,000 (2009 data). More importantly, it is economically diverse, with oil-rich countries such as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and resource-scarce countries such as Egypt and Yemen, thus resulting in wide variations in per capita incomes across the region. Averages for the region need to be contextualized. In Egypt, for example, it is estimated that anywhere between 20-30 percent of the population lives below the poverty line; unemployment is close to 10 percent and more than 80 percent of the unemployed are in the 15-29 age group.

Not all of these countries are affected by relatively large-scale conflicts, but most, if not all, are becoming politically or economically unstable for different reasons. Their social indicators, such as life expectancy or primary school completion rates, are not dire when compared, for example, to some of the countries in the sub-Saharan African region and yet political protests appear to be on the rise after decades of non-democratic rule. We tie those protests primarily to issues related to *poor legitimacy that has been exacerbated by lack of economic opportunities*, rather than pure economic and political problems. Countries such as Saudi Arabia and Tunisia, much like Tolstoy’s unhappy family, are to some extent fragile in their own unique way. Yet both perform disappointingly in our basket of legitimacy standards, which includes about 30 different measures including social, economic and political gender equity, political representation, human rights, freedom of the press and rule of law among others (for details on the basket of indicators see: http://www.carleton.ca/cifp/ifs_indicator_descriptions.htm).

Beyond their reliance on oil as a source of revenue, many MENA countries receive large amounts of aid per capita as well as remittances, making them very vulnerable to external shocks. Although none of the countries in this region are what we would call extremely fragile or yet failed as a group based on the CIFP methodology (www.carleton.ca/cifp), once we focus on specific indicators, weaknesses are much more clearly visible. For example, our data on equity shows that there are limited opportunities for women and minorities in most of these societies, as evidenced by their low labour force participation rates, or high unemployment rates in the case of women, or weak human rights in the case of minorities. A smaller sub-group, the Mediterranean African Countries (consisting of Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia), are also considered separately as they are strategically different, being separated from Europe by the Mediterranean Sea, and have become a big platform for illegal migrants to the European continent, as well as being affected by Islamic extremism and demographic shifts that are undermining their political stability.

In order to assess the region’s overall fragility, we consider our CIFP fragility index as well as two other popular indices in the literature, namely the Failed States Index from the Fund for Peace (<http://www.fundforpeace.org>) and the Marshall-Goldstone State Fragility Index (for purposes of comparison with ours). Each of these indices has its own limitations in that it has its own conceptualization of fragility and may be biased towards particular aspects of stateness, such as for example, the existence of conflicts. The CIFP analysis of state fragility begins with the notion that states need to exhibit three crucial properties for them to function effectively, namely authority, legitimacy and capacity (ALC). This ALC assessment can then enable policymakers to decide where and how to engage, a decision that can be further supported by taking a look at the different indicator clusters, including the cross-cutting theme of gender.

The Failed States Index from the Fund for Peace ranks countries based on ratings for 12 indicators (4 social, 2 economic and 6 political), where rating is done on a scale of zero to

ten, with zero being lowest intensity and ten being highest intensity. The total vulnerability of a country is the sum of all the scores and a higher aggregate score means that the country is more vulnerable. In the case of the Marshall-Goldstone Index (constructed in collaboration with USAID), country performance is ranked in terms of effectiveness and legitimacy across four dimensions of state function (economic development, governance, security and social development). Effectiveness and legitimacy scores are generated in each of these four dimensions from about sixteen underlying data sources and the eight resulting scores are added together to yield an overall fragility score for more than 160 (developed and developing) countries. Each score ranges from zero (no fragility) to three (high fragility), so that the overall fragility index ranges from zero to twenty-four. In the present case, we only have access to this index as of 2007 and as such will be comparing it to ours and the Failed States Index (both for 2006).

Table 1 below shows how our CIFP fragility index compares to the other two, for the sample of MENA countries, for the countries in the Mediterranean African region and for larger samples consisting of all countries in our dataset and all countries excluding OECD ones. Compared to all countries in our sample, MENA countries are more fragile. On average, these countries perform at, or around, the median of the CIFP fragility index and three of them (West Bank and Gaza, Yemen and Iraq) show up in the top 40 fragile states (see Table 2 below). When the Fund for Peace Index is used to rank countries, it is interesting to note that, Egypt and Syria show up in the top 40 fragile countries as “warning” countries, together with Yemen and Iraq (there is no data for the West Bank and Gaza). When ranked using the Marshall-Goldstone fragility index, Algeria shows up in the top 40 fragile countries together with Iraq and Yemen. For the others, listed in this paragraph, all one can say is that these are countries that should be monitored closely. These different indices are highly correlated (in excess of 0.7 in all cases) and yet produce different rankings, reflecting both their similarities in terms of what they are trying to achieve and their differences in what they are trying to highlight.

TABLE 1 – Fragility Indices and Correlations

Country Groups	CIFP Fragility Index	Failed States Index (Fund For Peace)	Marshall-Goldstone State Fragility Index
Average MENA (21 countries)	5.55	78.31	8.95
Average MEDAFR (5 countries)	5.46	75.54	9.80
Average ALL excl. OECD	5.87	79.56	10.56
Average ALL	5.45	70.79	8.91
Correlation of Fragility Indices: MENA (21 countries)			
CIFP Fragility Index	1.00		
Failed States Index (Fund for Peace)	0.71	1.00	
Marshall-Goldstone State Fragility Index	0.85	0.81	1.00
Correlation of Fragility Indices: All countries			
CIFP Fragility Index	1.00		
Failed States Index (Fund for Peace)	0.89	1.00	
Marshall-Goldstone State Fragility Index	0.92	0.84	1.00

However, continuing with the CIFP fragility index and its associated methodology, the next table shows the ALC scores and indicator clusters for the MENA countries, as well as how they compare with other country groups. Countries in the Mediterranean African region are highlighted.

TABLE 2 – Middle East and North African Countries

Country	Fragility Index	ALC Scores			Cross-cutting Theme	Indicator Clusters					
		A	L	C		Gender	Governance	Economics	Security and Crime	Human Development	Demography
Algeria	5.88	6.25	6.90	5.05	6.41	6.98	6.00	7.43	4.97	3.63	5.00
Bahrain	4.96	4.13	7.33	4.48	5.80	7.42	3.85	4.44	3.75	5.67	9.00
Djibouti	6.19	4.80	6.98	7.06	8.40	6.81	6.61	4.45	7.27	5.20	6.67
Egypt	5.78	5.34	7.32	5.34	7.08	7.31	5.62	6.55	4.79	4.83	5.67
Iran	6.25	7.00	6.96	5.38	6.77	7.63	5.99	8.51	5.23	5.35	5.20
Iraq	6.94	7.52	7.50	6.15	6.42	7.60	7.80	9.38	5.53	6.30	4.33
Israel	4.71	6.39	4.52	3.49	4.51	3.99	4.31	7.49	2.79	5.03	6.00
Jordan	5.21	4.70	6.79	4.89	7.21	6.50	5.40	4.95	4.13	5.00	6.67
Kuwait	5.31	5.23	6.86	4.76	6.16	7.52	5.04	4.63	4.21	5.70	6.33
Lebanon	5.74	6.35	7.29	4.62	6.90	7.78	5.58	7.34	3.61	5.15	7.07
Libya	5.30	4.80	7.15	4.86	5.40	7.07	6.46	4.70	4.51	4.40	4.73
Malta	3.33	2.96	3.58	3.49	4.56	3.46	4.87	1.47	2.26	3.00	9.00
Morocco	5.72	4.94	7.17	5.64	7.93	6.62	6.08	4.93	5.91	4.65	5.00
Oman	5.31	4.47	6.48	5.41	7.80	5.79	4.95	3.60	5.57	6.31	6.67
Qatar	4.55	3.92	6.14	4.26	3.35	5.96	4.92	3.64	3.04	4.45	9.00
Saudi Arabia	5.59	5.79	7.47	4.67	7.92	8.03	4.72	6.88	4.71	4.73	6.00
Syria	5.90	5.21	6.97	5.95	6.40	6.13	6.23	6.47	5.48	5.53	4.67
Tunisia	4.61	3.72	6.11	4.60	5.38	5.50	5.11	3.47	4.82	3.28	5.00
United Arab Emirates	4.61	3.81	6.63	4.17	5.17	6.65	3.48	3.88	3.81	5.18	6.67
West Bank and Gaza	7.41	6.69	10.33	7.50	8.30	6.85	9.08	8.16	4.78	7.00	9.00
Yemen	7.27	6.59	8.32	7.31	8.93	8.00	6.56	7.44	7.20	7.63	8.33
Average MENA	5.55	5.27	6.90	5.19	6.51	6.65	5.65	5.70	4.68	5.14	6.48
Average MEDAFR	5.46	5.01	6.93	5.10	6.44	6.70	5.85	5.42	5.00	4.16	5.08
Average ALL	5.45	5.10	5.87	5.51	5.91	5.90	5.80	4.87	5.30	5.29	4.94
Average ALL (EXCL OECD)	5.87	5.37	6.43	5.99	6.45	6.37	6.19	5.22	5.84	5.69	5.15
	5.88	6.25	6.90	5.05	6.41	6.98	6.00	7.43	4.97	3.63	5.00

For each state, the above table shows the net fragility score, ALC scores, cluster scores and scores for gender (as a cross-cutting theme). We have also included averages for different country groups at the bottom of the table, as discussed above, and for purposes of

comparison. It is important to note that on the whole MENA countries have very deep problems of legitimacy (above average) and, to a certain extent, authority when compared to all the countries in our sample. Capacity is a problem for some countries such as Iraq and Egypt, but does not appear to be too important overall, relative to legitimacy and authority.

When compared to the sample of countries excluding OECD countries, legitimacy remains a significant determinant of instability for the entire region and an obvious area of concern. Looking further, an examination of the indicator clusters shows us that gender, governance, security and crime, the environment and demography are issue areas that deserve more attention, compared to those of economics and human development, when one compares average scores for MENA to the overall sample and the overall sample excluding OECD countries.¹ All of these observations apply equally to the group of Mediterranean African countries. There is also (sometimes substantial) variation across ALC and indicator clusters when one looks at cross- or bilateral-country comparisons, providing helpful entry points for policymakers. For example, several of the countries in the MENA do quite poorly on governance, or when it comes to security and crime and yet have relatively good human development records.

Although the data used above precedes the current political turmoil it does provide some interesting insights regarding what was happening and what is now very obvious – that the primary source of instability in these countries is the lack of political legitimacy between the rulers and the ruled. Several analysts have pointed to unemployment, low wages and rising food prices as triggers of the current unrest in Egypt; yet a decade of strong economic growth did not yield improvements in the quality of life and incomes of citizens. In the case of Tunisia, similarly, social networks, demographics, unemployment and rising prices have been identified as triggers of the current upheaval.

Our analysis, which takes a longer term view, sees legitimacy, followed by authority as important structural factors contributing to fragility in MENA countries, which together with more recent economic (capacity-related) events, have led to the current political crises. It would be far too simplistic, in our view, to think of the upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt as being only about economics. Rather, it is the longstanding frustration with the types of political regimes in place, human rights violations, lack of good governance and corruption that have led to the current situation. The second observation that we draw from our analysis is that no country in the region is immune, diffusion will take place – it is only a matter of time. Most of the countries in the MENA region are not on the list of the most fragile countries in the world and yet, as we have seen in the past month, there has been a rapid deterioration in the political situation right across the so called “arc of instability” in Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan with Yemen, Somalia and the Palestinian Authority as ongoing areas of concern. From a Canadian perspective, we must now realize that fragility is multifaceted – it is not just about poor economic performance or large scale violent upheaval – and that we need to focus our attention on specific clusters of performance and subsets of indicators for effective policy response. Monitoring is essential; we can no longer focus our attention on the conflict-affected or the so called basket cases of the world. It also tells us that despite our wishes to believe otherwise, the MENA is now entering a new era of instability with an indeterminate outcome. We should not assume these internal challenges to authority are all going to be safe and stable transitions towards democracy; martial law, fundamentalism and even extreme radicalism are likely for some, just as failure and collapse are likely for others.

¹ With the more recent data that we have collected, but not yet analyzed, we anticipate the legitimacy, authority and capacity issues highlighted here would be of even greater significance. For a full and detailed presentation of the methodology including definitions and concepts see: www.carleton.ca/cifp

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