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The Communitarian Arab State

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Contemporary Arab politics have been overwhelmed by communitarian divisions that are polarized along sectarian, ethnic, and tribal lines. The latest rise of violent communitarian conflicts in the Middle East, such as those in Syria between Sunni and Alawi communities, raises the question of whether nation–states can remain viable in their current structures or if major changes are required. The response to this question is directly tied to post–Arab Spring politics in which political reforms inspired by liberal views appear to have failed to produce progressive changes. The lack of state legitimacy and appropriate power sharing in governance are key causes of this democratic failure.

The recent proliferation of com-munitarian politics across the Middle East suggests that public mobilization and partisan interactions with the state are formulated along identity–group lines. Dominant identity groups have formed based on religion, such as Sunnis, Shias, and Christians; ethnicity, such as Arabs, Kurds, and Persians; tribe, such as the Houthi and Ahmar in Yemen; and region, such as the coastal and rural populations in Tunisia.

The inability of post–independence nation–states to accommodate com-munitarian diversity in governance has only deepened national legitimacy crises and communitarian conflicts in the region, thereby diverting reform efforts and democratic transitions. Liberal attempts to democratize through state reforms have to some extent been superseded by domestic calls for nation building and reconstruction in the post–Arab Spring world. This reordering

of national priorities has increasingly emphasized communal inclusion and consensus building to legitimize the state. Hence, the rethinking of nationhood has heightened issues of national integration, cohesion, and accommodations such as constitutional revisions, electoral systems, and power sharing.

Previously, traditional liberal thought suggested that global integration and economic development determine national democratization. The Arab Spring, however, deconstructed these traditional assumptions about national models and their inevitable political transformations. The accelerating processes of globalization have intensified the interdependency of nations and communal groups. These processes have simultaneously deepened rifts between communities. For example, Shiite relationships across nation–states boosted their relative strength against Sunni communities in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, allowing them to demand greater shares of state power throughout the region. Thus, the proliferation of transnational communitarian movements across the Middle East and North Africa, such as Sunni Salafist groups, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Velayat Al Faqih's Shiite Faylaq al Qods, has prompted new requirements for state legitimacy and change that are founded on the two seemingly conflicting tendencies of global integration and local communal accommodations. This brief reviews rising transnational communitarianism in the Middle East, describes multicommunal constituency states, and suggests communitarian plurality as a possible solution to ongoing political conflicts in Arab states.

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THE NATION-STATE AMID RISING TRANSNATIONAL COMMUNITARIANISM

In the post-Arab Spring period, almost all pan-Arab nationalist republics and mixed communitarian states have been experiencing increased political conflict fueled by communitarian demands and aspirations. Iraq paved the way in the early 1990s, when Kurdish and Shiite discontent with the Ba'ath regime led to a deep national legitimacy crisis that was followed by international interventions and violent confrontations. Libya, Sudan, Yemen, Lebanon, Bahrain, and Syria have experienced similar fates with societal fragmentation and divergence along sectarian, tribal, and regional lines since 2010.

For example, Syria's ethno-sectarian society experienced unprecedented violent inter- and intra-community conflict over the fate and nature of political power. Sunni, Alawite, Christian, Druze, Kurdish, Turkmen, and Assyrian groups now dispute not only the national order but also Syria's Arab, Islamic, secular, and federal characters. These interwoven conflicts also reflect the proximity of various international actors to the Syrian conflict such as Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Europe, and the U.S. Thus, the archaic practice of nationalization that sought to suppress communal identities in favor of building a unified national identity appears to have come to an end.

In an increasingly globalized world, geography is no longer a sufficient factor in determining identity. National borders as isolating mechanisms have lost their relevance because communitarian groups are discovering transnational cultural bonds that transcend geographic space. Sectarian and ethnic resurgences among Middle Eastern groups with claims to former territories are becoming increasingly important among groups such as Sunnis, Shiites, Christians, Kurds, Turkmens, Houthis, and Amazighs, who are discovering the advantages of transnational associations (Salamey 2017). For example, Iran's support of the Shiites in Iraq and Saudi Arabia's support for the anti-Houthi Sunni government in Yemen demonstrate this growing transnational communitarianism.

The contemporary political reality reveals that the national-social pacts that have governed multicommunitarian societies throughout the post-World War II Arab countries are increasingly challenged. Reformulations of these pacts seem to require fundamental reconstructions of state foundations. This has become essential as newly empowered communitarian groups within national territories seek to rebalance their powers in state structures, such as the drive by Shiite communities to reconstruct the state in Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and Bahrain.

One challenge in reconstructing the political order comes in the form of growing interdependence among states. This political interconnectedness can complicate local affairs because local communities can strengthen their domestic bargaining power by relying on transnational alliances and external backing from abroad. Post-Arab Spring politics appear to feature such mutually beneficial interests between international communities as they formulate new regional and local power structures (Salamey and Rizk 2018). For example, Turkey's Islamist Justice and Development (AKP) ruling party has played a pivotal role in supporting Islamist Sunni groups throughout the Arab states in an effort to create a new and favorable regional order. Local allies, such as the Ennahdha Party in Tunisia and the Free Syrian Army in Syria, have also utilized Turkish support to strengthen their own bargaining power against local rivals.

Still more challenging to communitarian politics is the proliferation of non-state transnational militant actors such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS, as well as the large number of foreign fighters in their ranks. While using military force to defeat these groups may be difficult, including them in nonmilitaristic political negotiations may prove impossible. However, communitarian power-sharing agreements appear to be the most viable alternative to undermine the appeal of these extremist groups. The power accommodation of communitarian

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groups is one of the most critical factors in resisting radicalization and extremism. When communities are included in policymaking and the distribution of state power, the attractiveness of radicalization can be reduced.

It is true that power sharing may consolidate identity politics and deepen communitarian differences, as has been the case in consociational states like Lebanon, Iraq, and Belgium. Power sharing may also result in a fragmented polity with a weak government and eventually lead to extremist politics. However, attaining peace in complex contexts such as Syria may not come easily. Devising short-term and transitional conflict mitigation policies that are embedded in power-sharing strategies is extremely urgent because the current conflicts are principally driven by disputes over political power. Addressing these issues would provide important incentives for negotiating peaceful resolutions. Eventual negotiations between groups in a conflict-free environment may favor greater integration and less fragmentation. For multisectarian states such as Syria and Yemen, removing religious requirements for public positions, for instance, and establishing mixed constituency electoral districts and proportional representation may prove essential for long-lasting peace.

Thus, to reach the long-term goals of inclusionary states that accommodate pluralistic governance, Arab states must engage in genuine reforms that combine communitarian coexistence with shared governance. Fundamental policy reforms that would strengthen governmental response to transnational and radical communitarian networks in the region are among the priorities. Rising transnational movements are a primary challenge to forming an inclusive, multicommunitarian, and accommodating state. While such a state may not live up to the aspirations of equal citizenry regardless of communitarian affiliations, it can provide a realistic framework for managing and de-escalating protracted ethnic and sectarian conflicts.

TOWARD A MULTICOMMUNAL CONSTITUENCY STATE: COMMUNITOCRACY

A state that expresses power in terms of communitarian interests is called a communitocracy. Communitocracies can be unitary, when a single community controls state power; secular, when religion is separated from public affairs; federal, when communities autonomously divide power between geographic territories; confederal, when a weak union brings together separate independent communities for a particular set of political and economic associations; or consociational, when communities share a single state political power irrespective of geographic allocations of groups. A communitocracy differs from a democracy in at least two ways. First, a communitocracy provides for a pluralistic rather than a majoritarian form of democratic governance. Second, communitocracies allow for the "expression of communal interests in a state's policy outlooks" rather than strictly expressing only the interests of an individual constituency (Salamey 2017). These benefits are best manifested in power arrangements that satisfy different communal groups mobilized around religious, regional, ethnic, or linguistic identities. For instance, as public offices and parliamentary seats are allocated along communitarian lines, politicians and policy leaders can advocate for communitarian-favorable policies and subsequently be rewarded by their constituencies accordingly.

Consociationalism, federalism, confederalism, and unions are forms of communitocracies with democratic mechanisms embedded in them (often referred to as indirect democracies). Communitocracies have demonstrated exceptional capacities to manage communal differences around the world. For instance, India's communitarian state structure has ensured that its multi-ethnic and regional communities share power in parliament, with seats allocated to different provinces that are largely based on ethnic and linguistic communities.

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A range of power-sharing models is available for countries with multicommunitarian constituencies. Some communitocracies are centered on a multicommunal secular state, such as Israel, Belgium, and Switzerland. These arrangements require consensus among different communitarian groups that are geographically separated by regions or provinces. The communitocracies produce decentralized federal arrangements that preserve the diversity within a single multicommunal political order. They also maintain the separation of state and religion while preserving the cultural and administrative autonomy of local communities (Salamey 2017).

When communities are geographically mixed with persisting cultural, religious, or ethnic distinctions, consociational power-sharing arrangements provide an alternative option to the monolithic national order, as in Lebanon and Malaysia. The key feature of a consociational system is the preservation of communal diversity through a prearranged distribution of state power. Consociationalism distributes power among identity groups rather than geographically separate regions, thereby preserving the major features of federalism.

Consociational options are also attractive to societies with substantial variation in the sizes of ethno-cultural groups. For instance, Shiite, Alawi, Druze, Turkmen, and Amazigh communities in Arab states are small minorities. For these communities, the demographic composition of local populations has exaggerated feelings of deprivation and fear of domination by larger groups (Boie and Rae 2015). The reduced presence of minority groups such as Christians in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen has increased these fears. Integrative forms of communitarianism offer a means to diffuse these kinds of demographically driven tensions by assuring representative quotas in the distribution of state power. Thus, the major advantage of consociationalism lies in its ability to mitigate communal conflicts that are territorially, demographically, and internationally instigated. It therefore assures the preservation of communities

irrespective of spatial distribution, size, or transnational association (Salamey 2017).

Furthermore, the fact that most Arab states were established within relatively small and highly contested geographic areas with communitarian demographics that transcend national borders is an additional reason why a consociational power-sharing arrangement may prove to be a better alternative to strict nationalism. Lebanon and Iraq are the first countries in the region to have utilized consociational and federal arrangements. Despite some of the shortcomings of these arrangements, rising tensions along communitarian lines suggest such arrangements would be feasible governing alternatives elsewhere in the region, such as in Yemen, Sudan, Libya, Egypt, Bahrain, and Somalia.

Consociationalism can also be instrumental in resolving the conflict in Syria. Sectarian and ethnic divisions, as well as foreign influences, in the country require a delicate distribution of political offices among Alawis, Sunnis, Christians, and Kurds. One aspect of consociationalism that might be particularly fitting for Syria is the establishment of bicameralism, in which communitarian interests are expressed in the upper house of parliament while national representations are preserved in the lower house. Such a distribution not only ensures communitarian power sharing but also guarantees sectarian and regional autonomy.

Consociationalism might also be beneficial in Yemen. A combination of tribal and sectarian communitarian power sharing through a balanced arrangement is required for an acceptable political agreement by rival groups. A distribution of Houthi, Zaydi, and Sunni power that accommodates both northern and southern tribes provides a starting point for any political power-sharing arrangement. Such a distribution would allocate public seats along communitarian lines, particularly for the highest positions. A communitarian electoral system would also provide proportional representation to accommodate different groups. This would allow communitarian power sharing while ensuring intracommunitarian competition and electoral alliances, as in the case of Lebanon.

The Arab world needs to reverse its perception of communitarian plurality as a source of weakness and division. While most countries in the world utilize formal and informal power-sharing arrangements, the Arab region cannot remain reluctant to consider such governing options. Thus, a quest for new national arrangements in the Arab region has emerged during the post–Arab Spring period. Regional stabilization is contingent upon building consensus among different communal groups. This can only be attained through a power-sharing arrangement that preserves the fundamental aspirations of different groups. Communitocracy may be a beneficial governing option for the region that would maintain communal plurality in a time of increasing global integration.

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