

Developmental Perspectives on the Root Causes of the Middle East's Challenges: The Question of Institutional and Social Adaptability

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The Middle East and North Africa is considered a region highly prone to instability and conflict, and where religiosity and sectarianism assumes prominence. It is commonly thought that the source of the MENA countries' troubles is primarily political in nature and hence they require mainly political responses. The region's historical legacies and geopolitics entailing foreign interventions would only reinforce such perception but 'hard politics' clearly has limitations in resolving such challenges. Instead, 'development' assumes much more pertinence than meets the eye; the multidisciplinary developmental approach opens a whole new window of opportunity for understanding the nature and root causes of the MENA's challenges and its way forward, by unraveling the complexities of the region. At the heart of the matter is the question of adapting to the changes of the times, of making the necessary institutional, social-behavioral changes to deal with the reality. The countries' major challenges are inherently due to their lack of development in the key areas: 'within-state development', 'participatory development', state capacity, and secularization..

Keywords: institutional and social adaptability, within-state development, participatory development, having culture and doing culture, state capacity, secularization

INTRODUCTION

It seems that the international community, as well as the natives of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), has not paid serious attention to the question of development for overcoming the problems that have plagued this region for long. Come to think of it, the general public, intellectuals, government officials and political leaders around the world are all too often consumed in the 'current affairs' and dramatic events that mostly pertain to political-security domain. War and peace have traditionally served as key markers of world history, and the Middle East has been a major theatre of international power politics. Besides Arab-Israeli conflict, the region had witnessed numerous civil and regional wars within the Islamic nations. And the rise of radical forces and terrorists groups, proxy wars, plus the popular uprising, the Arab Spring, that took the countries' leader by surprise, add to the perceived instability and insecurity of the region. The dominance of Islamic religiosity and sectarianism are also important features of the region that affects the general perception of the MENA.

This gives the impression that the major challenges of the MENA region are essentially political in nature, and hence require political or politico-military responses. Of course, politics and political measures cannot be underestimated but the problem is that political-oriented actions tend to be short-term, whimsical or reactionary, and normally cannot yield credible and lasting outcomes by themselves. Rather, political excesses can only fuel vicious cycle in which everything is increasingly entrenched in politics. Also, the

idea of 'Middle Eastern exceptionalism' is exaggerated and may well be fallacious; it reflects overly simplistic reading of the facts on the ground.

What is deemed lacking in the MENA is the developmental perspective and endeavors. Not enough recognition has been given to what falls outside of the realm of political interest but which nonetheless counts greatly for the welfare of nations, like the everyday activities and performances of public servants and the people in general. In the Middle East, full-fledged democratic elections and political breakthroughs are rarity but even if such political progress were to be made, it would pale in significance when compared to the task of achieving an all-round transformational change that would fundamentally uplift a nation to a higher of status. To attain genuine progress in the political domain, it is not enough to realize change in power structure (like shift of power and sharing of power), but enhancement of governance like improvement in administrative quality and capacity would also be necessary.

The nature of the challenges facing the MENA nations requires much more than political tactfulness or wise political decisions on the part of their leaders; what is critical are the follow-up endeavors of the government, which in turn, facilitates broad and active participation of the people. It all comes down to whether and how a nation can embark on the heavy-duty work to bring about fundamental and far-reaching change in every front, including social, political, and economic, in the most expeditious way as possible. Here, speed is of essence because even with all the good intentions and well thought out plans, failure to carry out the given tasks on time may not only offset any progress made up to that point, but also can create new problems.

When we start to see MENA differently through the multidisciplinary lens of development, things appear plainer and more understandable, helping demystify the region. This is the advantage of developmental approach; the problems that appeared to be all too complex and contentious suddenly become conceivable to be discussed and engaged with much more openness and comfort. We can overcome narrow and biased thinking, even stubbornness, and find common grounds and understanding more easily if we broaden the dimensions of deliberation, to see the big picture of where we stand in relations to others.

From the vantage point of political economy of development, this paper researches the root causes of the challenges facing MENA countries today. The study finds that it is essentially the lack of adapting to the changes of the times that has brought about much of the troubles for the Middle Eastern and North African countries; particularly, among other things, it is the failure to undertake the following key tasks: (i) 'within state' development; (ii) participatory development; (iii) building capacity of state; and (iv) religious reform and secularization. In most cases, fulfilling these tasks demand nurturing and strengthening the 'initial conditions' for development which include both human and non-human (physical) factors. While the countries in the MENA region are diverse and they show a wide variance in the level of development, as well as other traits, it is also true that the countries are closely interlinked and engaged with one another to share many concerns and challenges that cross cuts national borders.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF INSTITUTIONAL AND SOCIAL ADAPTABILITY TO CHANGE

The Question of Challenge and Response

Naturally, at the outset, we need to take a broad historical overview when contemplating why a region in question, the Middle East and North Africa, would be prone to instability and conflicts to the extent that doubts are cast as to whether the countries in the region are not profoundly entrenched in a rather insecure and fluid state. To this end, instead of being so immersed in the historical facts and events that entails the risk of missing the big picture, focusing on the significance of the region's institutional and social-cultural arrangements and how they have progressed or stagnated over time can provide highly useful insights for our purpose. It is because institutional and social-cultural settings of society are important factors influencing people's perceptions and actions, and which is shaped by the latter in return.

Without needing to recall Arnold Toynbee, if we have learned any lessons from history, it is that the fate of societies or civilizations is variable, that is, they rise and fall. Ibn Khaldun, Tunis-born scholar, regarded as one of the greatest social scientists of the Middle Ages, is well known for his theory on the rise and fall of nations. Khaldun describes how nomadic, barbarian tribes move in to occupy sedentary, civilized

culture by force, and over time they learn to govern and create a new civilization that combines the attributes of both the nomadic and the civilized; with the growth of wealth and power, the citizenry start to show weakness, and the luxury they enjoy attracts the attention of lurking barbarians on their borders; likewise, the cycle of change in civilizations continues (Quintus Curtius, 2015).

An important takeaway from Khaldun's theory may be that nations are always subjected to challenges and they become vulnerable when staying in the comfort zone for too long. As Arnold Toynbee has pointed out, what determines the rise and fall of nations is how effectively nations respond and adapt to changes and challenges. In this context, it would be pertinent to explore the roots causes of the Middle Eastern challenges in terms of the region's adaptability and responses to various changes and challenges of the times. This would require the *longue durée* viewpoint.

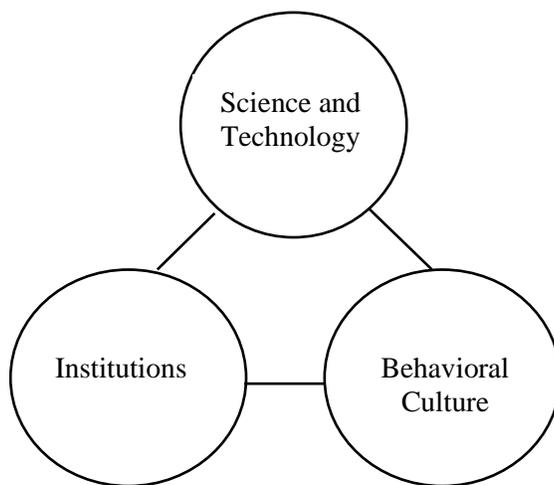
The Three Pillars of Long-Term Development of Nations

The progress of societies is crucial for the wellbeing of the inhabitants; and meaningful progress at any level of human community is achieved by overcoming adversities and coping with challenges, as well as seeking opportunities, over a long haul. Then, we should ask ourselves, as a nation, what enables us to respond to challenges and seek opportunities? What fundamentally shapes our capability in this respect? There would be all too many to think of, but it can be broadly broken down to the following three: (i) science and technology; (ii) institutions; and (iii) behavioral culture.

The figure 1 below is an illustration of the three basic pillars or supporters of long-term development which are complementary to one another. In the ideal state, all three can positively affect and reinforce one another to serve the long-term development of nation or peoples. These are essential foundations as well as tools that people rely on and utilize to conduct their everyday affairs.

First, science and technology includes a whole gamut of natural or material science, social science including philosophy, and technologies and skills of all types and levels. Today, science and technology tend to be rapidly diffused all over the world. Of course, developed countries mostly lead in inventing and upgrading science and technology but developing countries also reap huge benefits from their spread. Why is it that knowledge acquisition or education is universally sought more than ever today? It is because people want to become better and have better lives; they want to bring about positive change in themselves for themselves and others that they care about.

FIGURE 1
THREE PILLARS OF LONG-TERM DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONS



The question of who invents or owns scientific knowhow is far less important than how many people can have access to and utilize the technologies. What are important in this regard are the institutional contents and settings that may encourage or discourage the promotion and application of science and technology. In addition, people's attitude and perception towards science and technology, and how they respond and engage with these, also matter.

Secondly, institutions are also very wide-ranging in scope, encompassing political, legal, administrative, economic, social and cultural fields, and varied in types. Institutions refer to many things like patterns of behavior which become established over the course of time, large organizations that have established codes of behavior; it can also mean important social entities like the state, the church, the family, and the law, etc., that operate along given patterns of behavior. The significance of institutions on people's lives is all too evident. They can bound our activities, and can serve our needs as well; they are essential for bringing orderliness and predictability in the society and individuals' lives.

Lastly, behavioral culture is about people's traits or orientation in their mindset and actions; here, behavioral culture is considered from the development context. I have chosen the word 'behavioral culture' over 'culture' because the latter is a loose term that many scholars seem to use unscrupulously for convenience. While in intellectual circles the meaning of the word 'culture' is stretched to include people's behavioral traits or modes, in common usage, 'culture' refers to forms of cultural heritage that are handed down from the past.

While behavioral modes and cultural heritage (art and material culture) are all referred as 'cultures', they have very different implications. The latter, like arts, music, literature, and traditional customs should be cherished and preserved; they are endowed and valued because of their historicity and originality. On the other hand, behavioral culture, including habits and practices, can and should undergo necessary changes to keep up with times, or to be more rational and pragmatic. And the issue of making changes to behavioral culture or modes in a community or society needs to be legitimately tackled for the benefit of its members. Bunching such meaning as 'attitudes' and 'behaviors' into the term 'culture' to avoid being seen as politically incorrect is rather facetious and pejorative. Development is about changing for the better. If we believe people's attitude and behavior cannot be changed what hope is there for development in the first place?

Institutions do matter a great deal but its significance is often overblown by the Western scholars and particularly the international organizations as if institutions by themselves can do wonders, just like those who claim market mechanism will take care of everything for economy, and those who only preach democracy as if it is a magic formula that will right the wrongs in human society. Institution encompasses organizations, regulations, norms, and practices, and it is hard to define its meaning and generalize its characteristics. While some are duly accepted or internalized by the members of society, there are many others that are either too formal and complicated, or unfamiliar to the members, like those that have been introduced from outside.

There are inevitable gaps between institutions' designs, and what actually takes place, that is, the actions to implement them by the people concerned. People don't just conform to institutions; sometimes they break or bypass laws and regulations knowingly or unknowingly; they often deviate from the institutional lines and challenge the establishments. In this respect, what counts enormously but is not given due attention is the attitudes and behaviors of people. After all, institutions do not function automatically like machines but need to be worked on by humans to perform properly; they are only as good as the people who operate them. So, having 'good institutions' in appearance is a far cry from what actually needs to be done. Institutions should be refined and updated over time but ultimately, their success rests on how they are implemented by individuals, day in and day out.

Hence, the three pillars - science and technology, institutions, and behavior culture - must be worked on together to yield complementary and synergistic effect for the long-term development of nations. Many persistent and structural problems we see in the developing world, including the Middle East and North African countries, can be understood in the context of the incongruence or mismatch between these three pillars. Now, we will summarily sketch the historical developments in the Middle East to put the region in perspective of political economy of development.

HISTORICAL VICISSITUDES OF THE MIDDLE EAST

The Rise of the Early Arab World

The Middle East bears prominence as the cradle of human civilizations, namely the Mesopotamian and Egyptian. The era of Hellenism was the period of fusion of Western and Eastern cultures, engendering cosmopolitanism. The Middle East and the Western world, effectively connected by the Mediterranean sea, could be well considered as having formed one big regional community in the past. At the time when Europe was ruled by Christianity, the Roman emperor Justinian I, in AD 529, ordered the closure of the two academies established by Plato and Aristotle, citing that these institutes were teaching philosophy that had nothing to do with Christianity (Haruaki Deguchi, 2019). As a result, the Western scholars who lost their profession all of sudden moved to Jundi-Shapur University in the southern Sassanid Persia, today's Iran; this was because the Sassanids, which inherited the spirit of Mesopotamian world empire after the fall of the Akkadian empire, actively accommodated and protected higher learning.

The first 150 years of the Abbasid Empire, that began in 750 and were represented by such caliphs as al-Mansur (754–775), Harun al-Rashid (786–809), and al-Ma'mun (813–833), were the times of relative political stability, enormous economic prosperity, and increasing universalism within the central Islamic domains (William L. Cleveland and Martin Bunton, 2013). During this Islamic Golden Age, there was a major translation movement of Greek and Roman classics, reaching its culmination in the era of al-Mamun, the 7th caliph. The enthusiasm for academic activities, centered around the House of Wisdom (or the Grand Library of Baghdad) led to scholarship and knowledge production - the convergence of art, science, philosophy and technology – that realized the creative intellectual, cultural, and creative apex of Medieval Arabic civilization (Jim Al-Khalili, 2010). The academic activity flourished as the Abbasids learned the art of paper-making from the Tang craftsmen they captured in the Battle of Talas (751).

It is also well known that Prophet Muhammad laid great emphasis on learning and education, and many prophetic teachings encourage Muslims to acquire all kinds of knowledge from any corner of the world. For instance, quotes from the Hadith (a collection of traditions containing sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) include the following: “whoever takes a path upon which to obtain knowledge, Allah makes the path to paradise easy for him”; “a father gives his child nothing better than a good education”; “the ink of the scholar is more holy than the blood of the martyr”; “seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave” (Abdul Fattah Abu Ghuddah and Mahomed Mahomed, 2003).

While the Western world was in the Dark Ages spanning some 900 years from the fall of the Roman Empire to the Renaissance, in contrast, the Middle East experienced the flourishing of educational and scientific institutions previously unknown in the ancient world, which led to the promotion of various fields like agriculture, arts, medicine, etc., and the economic development in general. During the Islamic Golden Age, the geographical scope of trading networks greatly expanded beyond the Middle East and its vicinity, thanks to the activities of explorers and traders of the region. Not only did the Middle East inherit the Hellenistic legacies, it greatly benefited from the knowledge that they obtained from the much more educated neighbors in the East. All this helped established the Islamic Empire as the world's leading power throughout the 7th century to 13th century.

The Divergence in the Development Path of the Middle East and Europe After the Middle Ages

In Europe, the church became dominant following the fall of the Roman Empire. Christianity, specifically Catholicism, was the only religion recognized and it dominated the lives of the ruling class and those who were ruled alike. The claim that the Catholic church held back scientific advancement maybe an overstatement and it would be fair to say that both Christian and Islamic scholars practiced science to serve theology, to understand the universe in a way that made sense to their religious beliefs (James Hannam, 2012). However, in Europe, at least in the beginning of the Middle Ages, there had been very little advancement in the scientific world, and it was only toward the middle and end of the Middle Ages that a great deal more research went into science (Simon Newman, 2012).

There is no denying that during this period of the Islamic Golden Age, the Arab-Islamic empire was reaching its heights of academic and scientific advancements. “The scholars of the Golden Age of the Arab-

Islamic Empire achieved a level of interdisciplinary, intercultural and interfaith cohesion in pursuit of scholarship and knowledge that is regrettably not realised in the Arab region today” (Suzi Elhafez, 2017). The Arabic thoughts and science and those which are Greek that the Arabs were able to preserve and develop helped Europe realize the Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution.

But towards the end of the Middle Ages, the tide would start to turn in a big way. The Abbasid Empire collapsed in 1258 with the Mongolian occupation of its capital Baghdad, but the Abbasid Caliphate is known to have undergone a slow and long decline before coming to this point; among other things, securing steady revenues to maintain a massive multiethnic empire became increasingly difficult due to its diminished authority, leading to local rebellions that established their own dynasties (The Saylor Foundation, 2012).

Then, the Ottoman Empire emerged in 1280, embracing Islam, and expanded its rule over the Middle East and North Africa, and parts of Europe. The Ottoman reached the peak of its glory during the reign of Suleiman “the Magnificent”, and its success was due to competent leaders, efficient political and administrative systems, and the practice of recruiting talents on merits (Hee-Seog Kwon, 2010). In the European Christian world, the Ottoman Empire became the object of fear and hatred after it captured Constantinople in 1453. Although the Ottoman Empire technically lasted until 1922, its decline is said to have started as early as 1571 when it was defeated in the Battle of Lepanto by the Holy League. Further, it was defeated by the united European forces in Vienna in 1683, and lost all three battles with Russia in the 18th century, to become the “sick man of Europe.”

The reasons for the Ottoman Empire’s decline are both internal and external: internally, it was due to successive reign of incompetent sultans; backward military technology; tensions between the leadership and the Janissaries (elite military unit); external reasons include decline of Ottoman transit trade owing to geographical discovery by Europeans, and rise of science and technology in the Europe. All this made managing the vast territory ever difficult (Hee-Seog Kwon, 2010).

If the Islamic world enjoyed superiority in knowledge over the Western world for up to nine hundred years, the latter was able to reverse this lopsidedness to prevail over the former with the religious reform, the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment, as it advanced into the modern era. If we take the modern ages to have begun from the late 15th century, then, it could be said that the West’s superiority over the Middle East has continued for about 500 years. There is about 600 years’ difference between the birth of Christianity and that of Islam; Christianity secularized a long time ago and perhaps Islamism will also take the path of secularism in the future as did Christianity (Haruaki Deguchi, 2019).

THE ROOT CAUSES OF THE CHALLENGES FACING THE MIDDLE EAST TODAY

Overview

This section looks into the main root causes of the persistent problems that beset the countries in the Middle East and North Africa today through the lens of development, which has the advantage of being multidisciplinary. The nature of the region’s problems that we have generalized as a matter pertaining to ‘challenges and response’ or ‘adaptability to changes’ from historical, sociological viewpoint can be seen as the issue of lack of development from the developmental standpoint.

The twentieth century provided a historic turning point for the developing countries. Most of the non-Western nations that were colonized became independent. And for the vast majority of nations in the region that were previously subjugated under the Ottoman Empire, statehood or nation-statehood was a new reality and uncharted territory they were entering into. Added to the historical legacies of empires, and more recent Western occupation or colonialism, what is deemed most consequential for the lives of the Middle Easterners today is probably the nation-statehood. The root causes of the Middle East’s challenges identified in this study are the following issues or the lack of development in the following key areas which are all related to nation-statehood: ‘within-state development,’ ‘participatory development,’ ‘government capacity’, and religious reform and secularization.

The Lack of ‘Within-State’ Development

By ‘within-state’ development, I mean development that is oriented towards consolidating the notion and substance of state, or more accurately, nation-state. Here, ‘within’ refers to ‘keeping with’ or being true to the cause of nation-statehood, not allowing, for instance, tribalism or transnational cause or ideology to take precedence over the state and come in direct conflict with and undermine the state. ‘Within-state’ development consists of the duo goal of state-building and nation-building. Establishment of sovereign state means that the state assumes a major significance, and the most potent authority, as a ‘unit’ of human community within the given territorial boundary. It means national leaders and citizens must think and act in terms of common goals, interests, and obligations as entities of ‘state community’ or nation-state. No doubt, individual rights and freedom must be assured, but this is all part of the tasks pertaining to governance and harmonization between public and personal interests, or social contract. In the developing world, ‘maladjustments’ to the reality of nation-statehood can hold back long-term progress of nations while stirring political unrest, chaos, and conflicts.

We may think that state-building and nation-building are outdated subjects, and the ‘failed states’ or ‘fragile states’ are exceptional cases. But in actuality, there could be much more dysfunctional states than functional ones, depending on how we define the word ‘functional.’ And what appeared to be a model, well-functioning state can degenerate rather quickly into dysfunctional one. Today, unexpected global crises can seriously hit any country if they have inherent weaknesses in the state capability.

State-building, which is about establishing state institutions, can appear to be a simpler task than nation-building that requires a long-term process and efforts for formulating national identity and bringing people together. Common wisdom would be that a practical thing to do is to first work on state-building, and follow up with nation-building, exercising political authority and skills. But in the fragile context, state-building is not good enough because “a viable state needs a national identity as a framework that holds people and communities together despite the religious, cultural and regional differences” (Rene Grotenhuis, 2016).

In such instance where the sense of nation is all too weak, and people show loyalty to their identity group such as clan or tribe, rather than to the state, in the absence of government authority and reliability, the goal of having well-functioning nation state will be most difficult to attain. To bind people together to build a thriving community, it takes more than well-organized and just state; what is needed is to have a deeper, emotional relationship than formal or nominal ties, that is, love for nation (Martha Nussbaum, 2013). Under the current circumstances the MENA region finds itself in, it would be difficult to judge whether political efforts to strengthen the sense of nation and solidarity among the people should be given priority, or if it is more worthwhile to focus on enhancing the administrative capacity to better serve the people. Surely, there will be a wide variance in the degree of development of state institutions and national identity/unity across the states in the region, hence it should be judged case by case.

The region of the Middle East and North Africa boasts a very long history of rich cultural heritage and advancements in many areas. In contrast to this, the MENA countries’ history of sovereign statehood is very short. And only a handful of countries – Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco – all non-Arabian Peninsula countries, have any experience of whatever form of pre-colonial statehood (Robert Springborg, 2020). For almost all the nations in the Middle East and North Africa, the formation of independent state was realized only after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The territories of these countries in the MENA region remained as ‘stateless’ or mere portions of empires or chiefdoms throughout long breath of their history up until the twentieth century; and save for imperial power centers, a vast majority of people lived in traditional or tribal society (Jong-Dae Park, 2022).

It is widely held that tribes and tribalism continue to play an important role in the Middle East. The culture of nomadic tribalism, having deep historical roots in the Middle East and North Africa, has persisted in the absence of governance or norms at a higher level of society that bind peoples’ actions (Philip Carl Salzman, 2017). Indeed, with Islam, a higher form of loyalty emerged but it might be the case that, as it turned out, Arabs “have succeeded in adapting Islam to serve the tribe, the family, and the clan” (Mamoun Fady, 2011) instead of adapting the tribe to serve the Islam. People can show different levels of loyalty to their state, tribe, ethnic group, religion, leaders, etc., but when a large segment of people show greater

loyalty to their identity lines rather than to the state, then the task of building nation-state would become so much difficult.

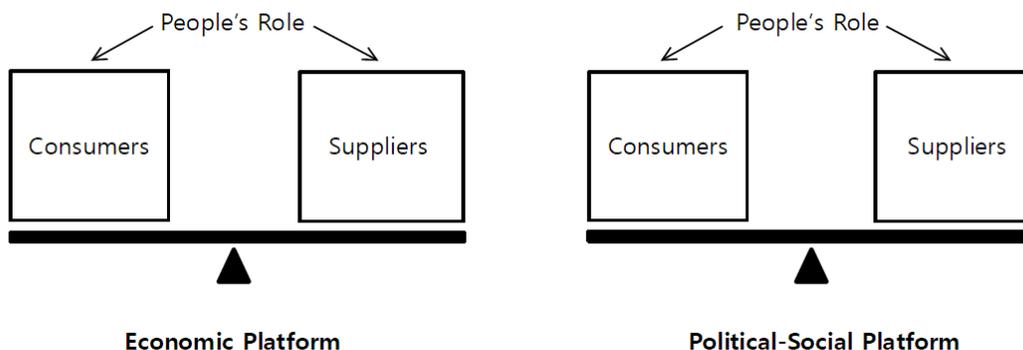
Regarding culture and conflict in the Middle East, Philip Carl Salzman (2008), an anthropologist specializing in social change in the middle East, claimed that the Middle East is characterized by social arrangements to guarantee security in the form of “balanced opposition”, a system of decentralized ‘self-help’ and ‘collective responsibility’; here, emphasis is laid on the loyalty along one’s identity lines: “my lineage, my tribe, Muslims against infidels.” The practice of such decentralized, fragmented mode of taking security measures is deemed to bear no small consequences on the political security situation in the MENA, and this may explain the frequent occurrence of conflicts and unrest in this region.

The Challenges of Participatory Development

Besides ‘within-state’ building, another crucial area or task for realizing national development is ‘participatory development.’ Participatory development refers to a mode of activity in which “a large segment of the population, the majority of the people, directly and actively participating in the process of development, in economic, social, and political realms, in the ‘balanced’ manner, as both ‘consumers’ and ‘suppliers’” (Jong-Dae Park, 2022). The idea of ‘participatory development’, as depicted in the figure 2 below, should be easy to understand as its logic is straight forward. But in practice, we hardly hear such an idea being discussed. Why is this so? Is it because this is considered a matter of course, or because people either think it is not that important or have forgotten about it?

Western nations followed such approach to achieve economic and political-social development over a long stretch of time of many hundreds of years. However, due to the change of times, such as technological diffusion and widespread democratization, there is no barring developing nations today from embarking on such development scheme and reaping results expeditiously. Korea is a good example of ‘compressed’ economic and political development. Difficult as it may seem, it is not impossible.

**FIGURE 2
PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT**



Source: Jong-Dae Park (2022)

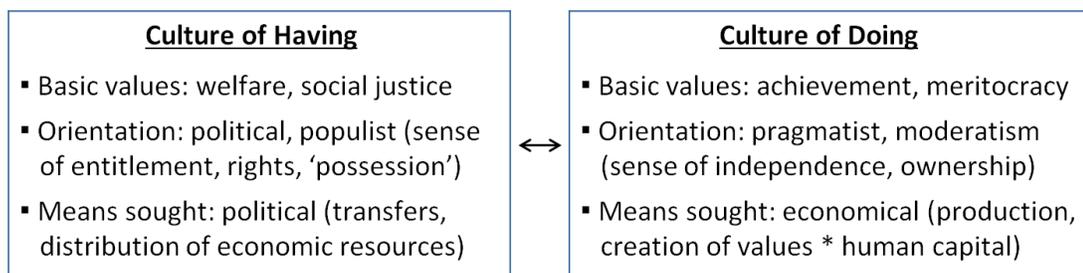
Figure 2 shows that people should engage actively in economic and political-social domains, playing the role of both consumers and suppliers. This can be viewed as ‘multi-tasking development’ which, when realized, can bring about much sought after ‘concurrent’ economic and political-social transformation of nation. Idealistic may it seem, the reason why I should even bother to lay out the points that should be all too obvious is that in reality, it is rarely happening. Ever since the mid-point of 20th century, the world has become increasingly political, politicized, and progressive, while populism has been on the rise. The evolution and deepening of welfare state regime, increasingly universalism spearheaded by the global organizations like the United Nations and OECD, the impact of 2008 global financial crisis, the COVID pandemic, and the Ukrainian crisis, together with climate warming all have contributed to this.

The outcome of such trend is that government spending and wealth redistribution have become all important, and the people in the developing and developed world alike are believed to have acquired a growing sense of entitlement. It appears that people in general and businesses alike are increasingly turning to the state to get some sort of relief or assistance, and the political environment puts pressures on the politicians and government leaders to be responsive. As a result, the general public are regarded or treated mostly as consumers or ‘takers’ rather than suppliers, providers, or ‘doers’ by the government, the civil society, and international organizations.

Under such conditions, citizens might lose the sense of obligation to act, on their part, as creators of values in the economic domain as well as political. When everybody is equally and actively taking part in the economic and political-social sphere not only to enjoy economic and political-social values but also to contribute to creation of these values for others to consume, then the nation will be placed on the healthy path towards stable and balanced development. Scandinavian model, which does not allow free-riding, and demands everyone to do his or her share, is an exemplary case of participatory development.

The trend of politicizing just about everything has spread all over, and this phenomenon of ‘glopoliticization’ produced a world of two different cultures: ‘having culture’ and ‘doing culture’ (Jong-Dae Park, 2021). The dynamism of ‘having culture versus doing culture’ is perhaps the most salient feature that crosscuts the whole social science spectrum and depicts our reality today. The characteristics of these two cultures are explained and contrasted as shown below in figure 3. ‘Having culture’ has more of post-modernist attributes while ‘doing culture’ is more modernist. The societies in MENA region in general show a rather strong tendency of having culture, and the leaders are populists in their own way. Both cultures, and also hybrid forms of these, can exist together within any unit of human community.

FIGURE 3
HAVING CULTURE VERSUS DOING CULTURE



Source: modified version of Jong-Dae Park (2021)

For any society and community, maintaining an appropriate balance between ‘having culture’ and ‘doing culture’ would be desirable to ensure stable and sustained development. Highlighting the dynamism of having vs. doing culture helps us better understand the logic behind the participatory development. The fact of the matter is that especially in low income countries where economic growth is most needed, the level of people’s participation in economic activities is disappointingly low. People’s perception and attitude would matter greatly especially in the adverse conditions of the poor nations. Achieving economic development and democracy at the same time is a gargantuan task but the lack of desires and ambition, not material resources, can be the greatest enemy of development. The negative effects of foreign aids, like the dependency syndrome, among others, are at works.

Historically, in the West, economic development and democratization were done in ‘sequence’; industrialization and economic growth preceded democracy, and full-fledge democratization occurred long after the industrial boom. Given the situation, developing world cannot wait that long and there is no point in procrastinating efforts to better themselves. In development, speed is of essence. The reason why various economic social development plans carried out around the world yield little substantive results is because they are generally not done expeditiously and in close conjunction with other related tasks.

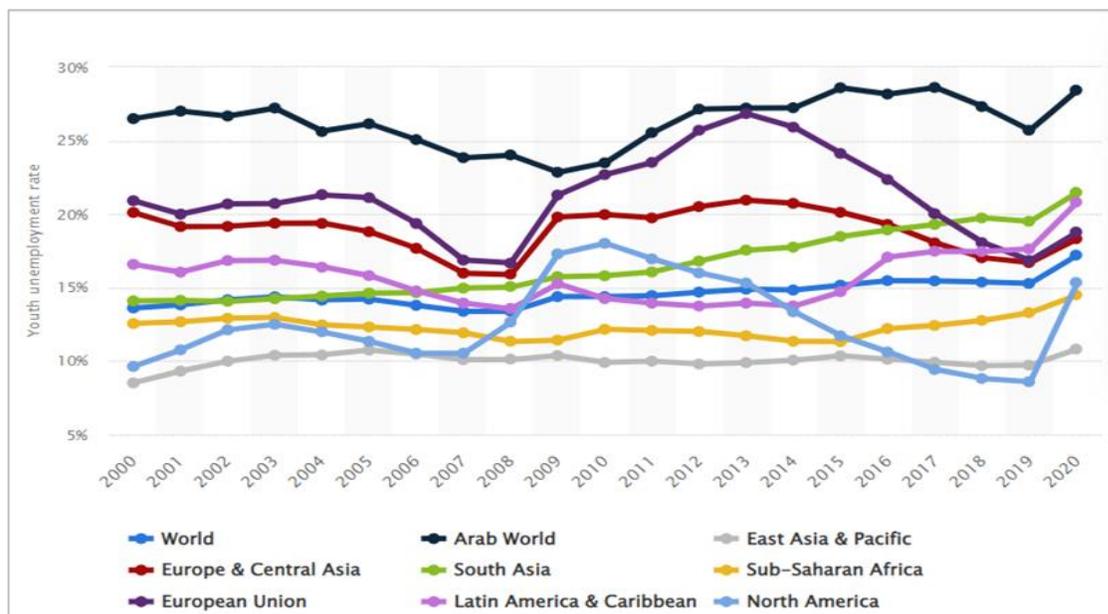
Although MENA includes oil-rich countries, and the region fared relatively well compared to some other developing regions in cross regional comparison in a number of development indicators, it is marked by economic underperformance: lowest economic growth rates among developing regions; highest unemployment rate, highest income inequality; low industrialization levels; falling economic productivity; limited opportunities for socioeconomic advancement, among others (Melani Cammett, 2017). MENA countries show, however, diversity in the level of resource endowment and economic development.

Countries relying on oil or other forms of windfall profits as a major portion of their national revenues, like the oil-rich countries in the Persian Gulf, are referred to as “rentier states. The revenue generated by oil is considered as ‘rents’ which are “the income derived from the gift of nature” (Alfred Marshall, 1920). Jordan receives large amounts of foreign aids while Egypt collects billions of dollars from Suez Canal transit fees annually, and these are also considered as rents. From the standpoint of development, with respect to governance and democracy, rentier states have certain unwholesome features. Rentier states’ efforts are focused on distributing wealth to people to win compliance and political support, to preempt social demands for greater accountability of the state, instead of working to nurture conditions for productive wealth generation in their societies (Hazem Beblawi, 1990).

Also, people’s participation in economic activities very much lags in terms of number of active workforces, and intensity and quality of the work, in light of their national incomes’ levels. Most of all, the unemployment rate of the youth is highest in the world (figure 4). Also, women’s labor force participation rate in the MENA is the lowest among all regions (figure 5) and has not much improved over the last four decades; according to a study by Council on Foreign Relations (2017), the countries in this region are not expected to reach the current global average of women’s labor participation for more than 100 years.

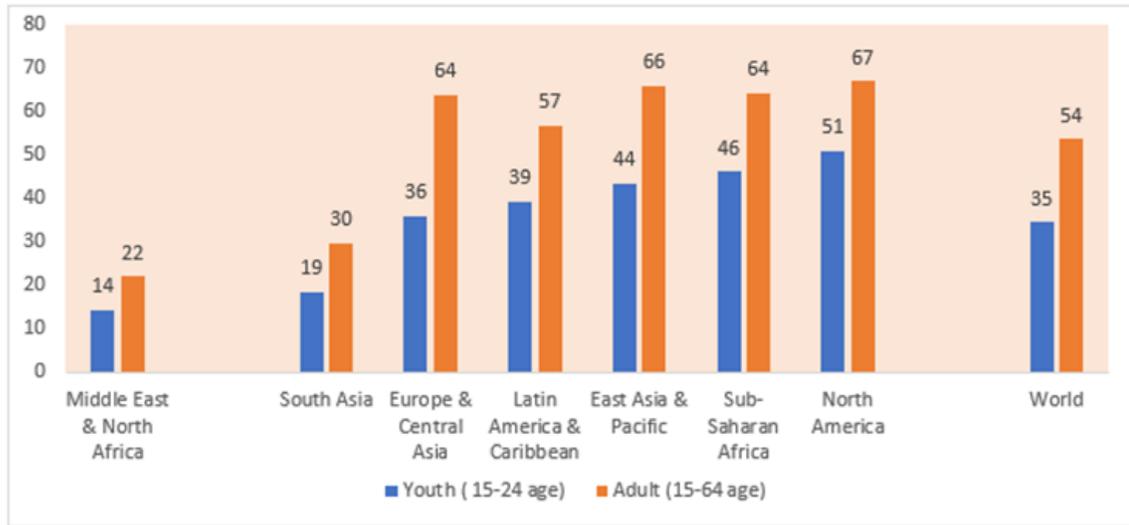
One of the most persistent obstacles to participatory development in the MENA countries is that their economic policies of countries have not and still do not encourage private sector employment. It may be because the power holders would want to maintain the social contract in the way that serves them, by making use of a large, overpaid and under productive public sector that mostly provides formal jobs in the MENA (Joseph Pelzman, 2019). The logic of rentier state would prioritize offering of public sector jobs to its citizens, hence we see the tendency of bloated public sector compared to private sector in the countries (Figure 6).

FIGURE 4
YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT RATE IN SELECTED WORLD REGIONS IN 2000 TO 2020



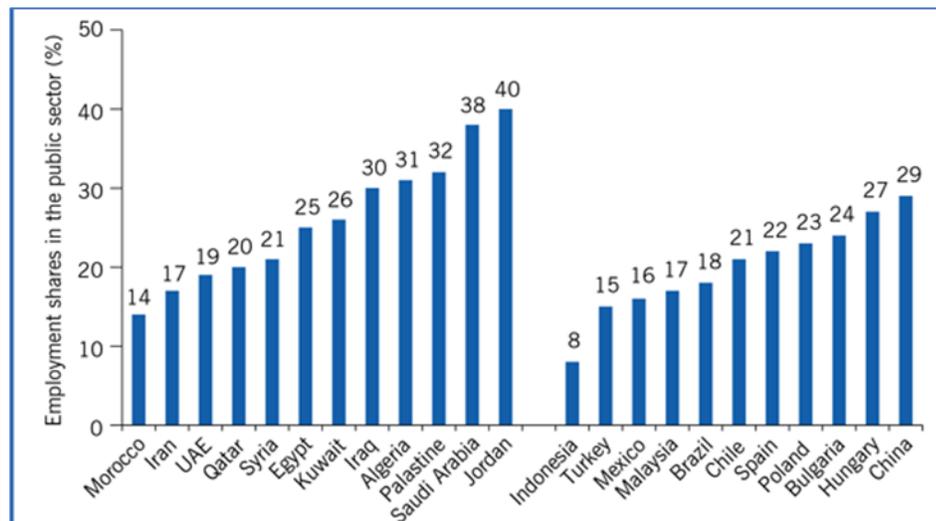
Source: Statistica.com (June 2020)

FIGURE 5
FEMALE LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATE (2018)



Source: World Development Indicators (based on ILO estimates)

FIGURE 6
AVERAGE EMPLOYMENT SHARES IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR THROUGHOUT THE 2000S
– MENA COUNTRIES VS. OTHER MIDDLE-INCOME ECONOMIES



Source: Gatti, R., Angel-Urdinola, D., Silva, J., Bodor, A. Striving for Better Jobs: The Challenge of Informality in the Middle East and North Africa. Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2014. (retrieved from IZA World of Labor website)

Islam has been blamed for various ills that are said to hamper capitalist economic development, including impeding independent reasoning (Noland and Pack, 2007). But a more objective view would be that the issue lies more in how Islam is interpreted and practiced than to the religion of Islam itself. Islamic societies were innovative and ahead of their times in creating flexible institutions to facilitate exchange; and underdevelopment is not due to flaws within Islam as a religion but to the failure of these institutions to adapt to new economic and social conditions, argues Timur Kuran (2011), the expert on Islamic

traditional institutions. Among the notable Islamic institutions that are considered to have inhibited capital accumulation in the Middle East region figure inheritance laws, marriage regulations, trusts, and contract systems, according to Kuran.

Weakness in Capability of State

State capability is crucial for political stability, peace and most of all, sustained national development. MENA countries show a wide difference in the level of political stability, ‘authority’ of state, provision of public services and economic management. The MENA region as a whole comes in a mixed bag of everything. “MENA is not only highly diverse region, it also puts on a multitude of facets that often appear contradictory...Yes, there are conflicts and violence happening...but in many MENA countries that we know very well to be stable and peaceful, business and life cannot be more normal” (Jong-Dae Park, 2022). Overly generalizing or viewing it from a narrow perspective of one or two things (ideology, religion, geopolitics, power-struggle, sectarianism, tradition, etc.) has the danger of misrepresenting the region. It is just that everything happening in the world is also happening in the region.

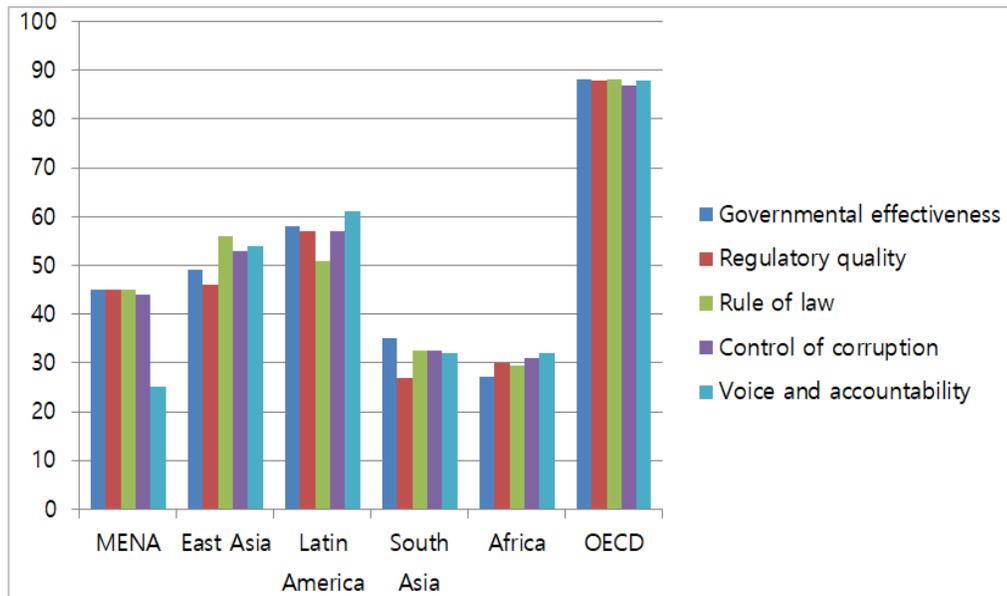
If we take capability of state to mean the ability of state of get things done, then this would entail so many things. Governance and provision of public services are the basic functions of government, but managing the economy to enhance economic activities for the sake of people’s livelihood has become ever important capability of state. Figure 7 below shows the level of MENA’s governance in comparison to other regions. While it clearly outperforms South Asia and Africa, it falls behind Asia and Latin America markedly; its level in voice and accountability is the lowest of all the regions. Within the

MENA region, the authoritarian republics like Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen scored below average, while Arab monarchies particularly Jordan, Morocco, Kuwait (followed by UAE, Oman, Qatar) all scored higher than average in the level of governance (Robert Springborg, 2020).

The state capacity for economic development is perhaps most consequential for the MENA nations as would for any other country in the world today. As was mentioned, the region performs poorly when it comes to GDP growth rate and other basic economic indicators, and the rentier state features that more or less characterize most of the countries restricts the dynamism and expansion of private sector which should be the engine of economic growth. Even in the case of the countries with plentiful natural resources, ensuring long-term development of their economy would not be possible without robust and competitive private sector. This will be all the more so, given the dwindling oil reserve and the trend of de-carbonization. Running the economy with a primary objective of attaining social peace and political conformity risks being short-sighted and status quo oriented, which would only incur fundamental weakening of the economy in the long run, mindful of the competitive international environment.

Developing world is in the ‘big stuck’ in state capabilities, specifically in terms of *implementation* capacity; countries are as ‘developed – in economic prosperity, social inclusion, being politically well governed, etc. – as their capability for implementation will allow (Matt Andrews, Lant Pritchett, Michael Woolcock, 2017). Grand visions and schemes, even well thought out policies would not matter if they are not actually implemented to the very details in a timely fashion, similar to other forms of institutions. Once again, ‘having’ and ‘doing’ are very different things. Economic tasks require economic approaches based on economic logic. Without question, MENA nations are faced with an uphill battle to level up their state capacity, and their focus should be on how to make changes in this regard.

FIGURE 7
GOVERNANCE INDICATORS FOR DIFFERENT REGIONS
(AVERAGE PERCENTILE RANK) 2012



Source: World Bank “Governance Matters” 2013

The Issue of Religious Reform and Secularization

Tackling the issue of secularization in the context of seeking harmony between religion and society should not be about passing judgments on the religion itself. It should be about enabling coexistence of religion and secular society, maintaining balanced and harmonious relations between the two. People adhere to religion for good reasons, as humans are imperfect beings, and their lives are tumultuous. But in the human nature there are contradictory traits that bind human thinking and actions. I call this the ‘default of human mind’: emotions vs. reason; freedom vs. society (belonging); self-interest vs. moralism; stability vs. change (Jong-Dae Park, 2021). Humans differ from other creatures in that we do not live on instincts alone but have the ability to reason and act accordingly.

What needs to be considered is that to remain as humans, to keep human sanity, we need to have a certain balance between these opposing tendencies of human nature. Individuals cannot be either all emotional or reasonable all the time; people seek freedom but they also need to be a part of community; people must satisfy their individual needs and interests but they also pursue moral values to fulfill their lives; and there is a yearning in everybody for both stability and change, as life that is too disruptive would be unbearable while that which is immutable and fixed would be lifeless and not worth living.

The fundamental spirit with which Prophet Muhammad managed the Umma and spread the Islam was tolerance and mercy: Prophet Muhammad made commerce for a living, and his success as a trader could not have been possible if he did not practice harmonious relations with others; for Muslims, true jihad means the struggle against oneself, a great crusade that takes place within each individual to realize a world of tolerance and mercy (Haruaki Deguchi, 2019). The issue of fundamentalism that is often associated with radical Islamism is actually a universal religious issue, concerning also Christianity and Judaism. Pope Francis mentioned that “Fundamentalism is a sickness that is in all religions ... Religious fundamentalism is not religious, because it lacks God. It is idolatry, like idolatry of money” (Pope Francis, Nov. 30, 2015). And fundamentalism is actually “a religion of rage” (Karen Armstrong, 2001).

The reason why the teachings of Moses, Jesus, and Buddha were espoused by the people at the time was that these teachings were accepted by the people to be desirable and valuable. If it is wrong to apply the modern standard in criticizing the teachings of the religions in their old times, then, by the same token,

it is wrong to interpret the religious teachings of the old times in the literal sense without taking into account the changes that have taken place over time, and today's reality. Religious belief is based on awareness, conviction and voluntary attraction. The interpreters of religion, or religious jurists, must be highly knowledgeable and competent. If they don't have the intellectual capacity and become out of touch with the real world, how can they be relied upon?

It is the rule of nature or natural phenomenon that people and their society evolve with the passage of time. This is what differentiates humans from other beings. If the substance and settings of society have changed significantly with the passage of time, then the religious teachings should at least consider the context of the world in which we live. Religion is powerful because it makes people believe. If religion is forced upon people, then, it will not be the religion proper. Religious dogmatism or fundamentalism in excess cannot but increase tension with secular society. Absolutism, whether political, ideological, or religious, inevitably leads to a separation from reality. Secularism that is pursued in the context of promoting harmonious coexistence of religion and secular society must be upheld. But secularism shouldn't mean denying the religion itself, and religiosity should not mean disallowing secularism and secular society.

In the West, there was the Renaissance and then effective religious reforms have taken place, followed by the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment. The Western thinkers have come up with ideas on how religion and scientific reasoning can coexist or be reconciled. But in the Arab Islamic world, there is a virtually unchallenged consensus that "religion has a primary, principle, sometimes even an exclusive role" in shaping a whole range of individuals' thinking and behaviors in Muslim settings (Hassan Mneimneh, 2020).

In the Middle East religious reforms have not occurred in any significant way, although there have been various reformist scholars at work. The earliest reformist scholars showed a scripturalist desire to return Islam to the tenets of the sacred texts. The philosophy of renewal (ijtihad) and reform (islah) has been a recurrent theme in Islamic intellectual and political history (Muqtedar Khan, 2015). In the 19th century, a new wave of reform movements surfaced partly as resistance to European imperial expansion, on the premise that this was due to religious laxity on the part of Muslims.

This 19th century reform movement included a new strain of Islamic reform that was modernist; like earlier reformers, these modernists called Muslims to return to the sacred texts of Islam but the difference was that they identified a happy coincidence between the spirit of these texts and contemporary European values and institutions. Jamal al Din al-Afghani (1838-1897) and Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) sought to establish Islam's compatibility with scientific and rational thought, technological advancement, and the social and political realities of modern life (Charles Kurzman, 2002).

Over the past several decades, the dominant trend in Islamism in the Middle East has been that of political radicalism and intellectual conservatism, often referred to as fundamentalism. However, there has also been a reformist tendency within many Muslim countries in the last two decades, and its goal has been to "reinterpret many accepted Islamic axioms in light of new conditions in order to bring them closer to modern standards of rights, responsibilities, and behavior" (Shireen T. Hunter, 2013).

There are three parties in the Arab and Islamic worlds that are engaged in a heated debate regarding the need for a renewal of religious discourse. The first one considers religious reform a necessity for objective reasons, notably as an antidote to extremism and terrorism; the second, while recognizing some validity in such call for reform, sees it as insincere, having ulterior motives and hidden objectives, like seeding discord among Muslims; the third party rejects the call as invalid a priori, asserting that Islam is perpetually relevant with no need of change. It claims that deficiencies are not in the religion itself, but in its followers (Hassan Mneimneh, 2020). Lately, the prominent Tunisian scholar Mohamed al-Haddad (2020) has called for a new reformist departure that synthesizes modernism and core Islamic values, citing that the fundamentalism embodied in Wahhabism and Muslim Brotherhood has failed, and that the traditional Islam no longer attracts youth or the elites.

There is no question that religious reforms are needed, first of all, for the religious institutions' sake, for the maintenance of their relevance in society, before being a need for its citizens. Along with this, secularization must be respected for the harmonious relationship between religion and society, and to balance religion and modernity.

CONCLUSION

There is no arguing that societies, peoples and nations must adapt and respond well to the trends, changes, and challenges of the times in order to endure and thrive. This means that over a long stretch of time, it is necessary for them to undergo institutional and behavioral changes as deemed appropriate. The reality and the status of the Middle East today is a huge disappointment when compared to what could have been for the region given the long period of glory that it once enjoyed.

To put the MENA in proper perspective, it is imperative not to be bogged down in current events, focused on particular features or issues of the region. There is also a big risk of misreading or over-reading the implications of a particular factor in one-dimensional manner, like exaggerating the dominance of religion, 'lingering historical animosity,' 'Arab solidarity,' etc. Of course, considering the political-strategic architecture of the region has merits of its own and it would be beneficial for understanding the dynamics of the region in terms of power relations among the nations concerned, for instance, as in the case of Northeast Asia.

However, applying the framework of political realism to the Middle East and North Africa has limitations because in reality, the countries lack coherence and unity as nation state actors. In fact, a majority of the MENA countries are far behind in their task of 'within-state development' that includes state-building and nation-building. Israel-Palestine conflict is just one component of many intra-regional conflicts that have been taking place. The severity, scale and duration of human catastrophe that the civil wars and proxy wars have incurred on the peoples over the last decade in particular attest to the lack of fundamental and comprehensive development at the national level on the part of the countries concerned.

The essence of the problems plaguing many MENA countries, such as lack of economic opportunities for the youth, misrule and mismanagement of state, political and social repression, sectarianism, inequality, etc., that fuels division, instability, and conflicts, pertains to development. Why developmental approach is relevant for tackling such challenges is that development is premised on change: to change and to bring about change. In this respect, in the broad sense, efforts to strengthen, upgrade, update and harmonize all three pillars of long-term national development – science and technology, institutions, and behavioral culture – need to be embarked on with all seriousness and sense of urgency in the region.

With such frame of mind, this study examined the main root causes of the MENA's challenges: lack of or failure to achieve (i) within-state development; (ii) participatory development; (iii) capacity of state; (iv) religious reform and secularization. Making progress in these areas is crucial for the MENA countries to ultimately break the status quo and come out of the entrenched state that they find themselves in, to advance along the path of sustained stability and prosperity. Statehood or nation-statehood is a given reality for all. This must be recognized. The state is the most significant and potent entity or unit of 'human community' that bears permanence and profoundly affects our lives. Many nations in the MENA region have undergone precarious and turbulent times because they have not been able to adequately carry out these core tasks that are all relevant to the nation-statehood.

Taking steps to reverse the negative trends and rebuild the fundamentals of national development would take a whole new mindset and determination. We live in this age of great irony where, despite technological and scientific advancements and improvements in living conditions, extremely violent conflicts and blatant atrocities against humans would occur. This calls for a sober and deep introspection of what has gone wrong, or not been done, and a major turnaround in our approach. The answer lies in confronting and adapting to realities, not in the escapism. Greatness comes from wisdom and reasoning, and human society is made to evolve. When the context changes, so must the methods.

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