

# Democratic Deficit in the Middle East

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Political instability in the Middle East has been thematic of the region ever since the departure of European powers from the area in the middle of the 20th century. For years authoritarian regimes and radical religious groups have exercised control over Middle Eastern territories leaving the citizens of these states repressed and unrepresented. Despite this scenario, there has been little success in instilling a democratic political system in any of the states of the region. Experts and analysts have theorized as to what has kept democracy out of the Middle East for all this time, though I argue there is a different explanation for the absence of democracy.

Larry Diamond argues that the presence of Arab rentier states is the biggest reason for the democratic deficit in the Arab countries of the Middle East. These states rely heavily on gas and oil revenue to fund their governments, and all of this money goes directly to the bureaucracy. With the majority of the state's income being generated by oil revenue, there is less taxation of the citizens. With low tax rates, there is less need for the people to call on representation for themselves. These states have heavily centralized governments and are corrupt, leaving no reason for members of the government to consider reforming the political system<sup>1</sup>. With these centralized governments comes a very calculated form of Authoritarianism which seeks to suppress political opposition using “selective repression and controlled elections”. However, if the source of these corrupted authoritarian regimes is the accrued wealth from oil, what is the case for states such as Afghanistan, Jordan, and Lebanon which are not categorized as rentier states, yet are still at a Democratic Deficit?

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Diamond, "Why Are There No Arab Democracies?" *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 1 (2009): , doi:10.1353/jod.0.0150.

Diamond claims for the states which are not rentier states, there are other factors which are attributed to the absence of Democracy in the region. One of which is the Arab-Israeli conflict, which he says diverts Arab political frustrations away from the corruption of Government and towards the oppression of Palestinians in Israel. However, the state in which this conflict actually takes place, Israel, has the highest Freedom House Democracy score, 79/100, in the entire Middle East<sup>2</sup>. This argument is weakened even further by the fact that Arab states in the region such as Egypt and Jordan have full diplomatic relations with Israel, and recognize Israel as legitimate.

He also brings up the fact that for states who do not accrue state wealth like rentier states, such as Jordan and Egypt, US foreign aid becomes an ample replacement for oil revenue. These two states combined received over \$850 Million in US aid dollars in 2018 thus far<sup>3</sup>, essentially enabling their governments to use this cash flow the way that rentier states use their gas and oil wealth. However, Lebanon, a state who receives increasingly less and less foreign aid from the US every year, and does not fit into the rentier category, still remains devoid of democracy similarly to every state in the region of the Middle East<sup>4</sup>. Finally, he states that members of the Arab League reinforce one another in their autocratic regimes, basically upholding a norm throughout the Arab states of the Middle East to remain repressive in their political practices. This claim is valid, as there is not a single example of Democracy in the Middle East amongst any member of the Arab League.

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<sup>2</sup> "Freedom in the World 2018," Freedom House, May 08, 2018, , accessed November 15, 2018, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2018>.

<sup>3</sup> "ForeignAssistance.gov." Colombia | ForeignAssistance.gov. Accessed November 15, 2018. <https://www.foreignassistance.gov/explore>.

<sup>4</sup> "U.S. Foreign Aid by Country," FAE: Dashboard, , accessed November 15, 2018, [https://explorer.usaid.gov/cd/LBN?fiscal\\_year=2018&measure=Obligations](https://explorer.usaid.gov/cd/LBN?fiscal_year=2018&measure=Obligations).

Mohamed Sid-Ahmed speaks about the cultural issues of democracy in the Middle East in “*Initiative for Deepening Democracy in the Middle East*”. He questions whether democracy can work in these Middle Eastern states when illiteracy rates are so high, and when there are such strong “tribal allegiances and sectarian loyalties” among citizens of Middle Eastern states<sup>5</sup>. If this were an issue, how have states like Senegal and Ghana with lower literacy rates than Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan and a plethora of tribal affiliations managed to rank significantly higher democratically than any Middle Eastern State? In Polity IV Evaluation of regimes Senegal with a literacy rate of 56% ranks as a 7, whereas Saudi Arabia with a literacy rate of 95% ranks as a -10 (Ranking System: -10 = Full Autocracy, +10 = Full Democracy)<sup>6 7</sup>.

If the issues do not stem from the cultural status of Middle Eastern countries, could it be from the lack of development? In her work “*Democratic Mirage in the Middle East*” Marina Ottaway suggests that democratization has not occurred because there has been no improvement in educational and living standards due to lack of development<sup>8</sup>. While Ottaway is correct that Middle Eastern countries have some of the worse development indexes in the world, there is a correlation issue when it comes to undeveloped states and democracies. If we look at the Human Development Index(HDI) which measures living standards, education levels, and health; states like Senegal (164), Niger (189), and Nigeria (157) who rank amongst the lowest in the world in HDI, all rank above a 5 in Polity IV’s Evaluation of regimes<sup>9 10</sup>. Whereas Qatar (37), Saudi

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<sup>5</sup> Sid-Ahmed, Mohamed. "Initiatives for Deepening Democracy in the Middle East." *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 15, no. 3 (1990): 345-54. doi:10.1177/030437549001500305.

<sup>6</sup> "Democracy," Our World in Data, , accessed November 15, 2018, <https://ourworldindata.org/democracy>.

<sup>7</sup> "Literacy," Our World in Data, , accessed November 15, 2018, <https://ourworldindata.org/literacy>.

<sup>8</sup> Marina Ottaway, *Democratic Mirage in the Middle East*(Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> "Human Development Reports," Human Development Data (1990-2015) | Human Development Reports, , accessed November 15, 2018, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/data>.

<sup>10</sup> "Democracy," Our World in Data, , accessed November 15, 2018, <https://ourworldindata.org/democracy>.

Arabia (39), and Oman (48) who rank in the top 50 in HDI all rank below a -7 in Polity IV's Evaluation. If Human Development were the reason behind democratic deficiency, then these African States certainly do not follow the trend. Conversely, countries as developed as Saudi Arabia and Oman should rank much higher in democratic score if there is a correlation between development and democracy.

Asli Aydintasbas of the Washington Post views the democratic problems of the Middle East through a lense of Ethnic Conflict. He claims that the hopes of democracy are dead because of the never-ending conflicts within the region. Whether it be the civil wars in Syria and Yemen or the counterrevolution in Egypt, these conflicts brew up a state of war and terror where democracy cannot live. He explains how the Arab Spring set off a domino effect, igniting ethnic conflict and revolution around the region, which has only added to the political instability<sup>11</sup>. This type of conflict can not occur within a democracy. Yet the example of Israel, the one deviation from the Middle Eastern political norms, shows the flaw in the argument. Israel is constantly experiencing ethnic conflict between Israeli and Arab groups and has waged wars with the Islamist Fundamentalist group Hamas, and still, Israel has remained the constant sign of democratic life within the Middle East<sup>12</sup>.

Andrew Green, former Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, wrote that one of the biggest issues facing democratization in the Middle East is the United States misunderstanding of Middle

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<sup>11</sup> Asli Aydintasbas, "In the Middle East, the Dream of Democracy Is Dead," The Washington Post, November 22, 2017, , accessed November 15, 2018,

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2017/11/22/in-the-middle-east-the-dream-of-democracy-is-dead/?utm\\_term=.82e52449e21b](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2017/11/22/in-the-middle-east-the-dream-of-democracy-is-dead/?utm_term=.82e52449e21b).

<sup>12</sup> "Israel's War for Independence," CNN, , accessed November 15, 2018,  
<http://www.cnn.com/interactive/2014/08/world/israel-neighbors/>.

Eastern politics. As the United States has tried and failed many times to instill democracies in the region, they have not yet understood that the conflict and war in the region cannot withstand an installation of a democratic regime from an outside source like the United States<sup>13</sup>. This must be exclusive to the Middle East, however, because the United States government and military have played a successful role in building democratic regimes in much of Latin America. Before the 1980s, there was virtually no democracy in the region of Latin America, now democracy rules the region. The United States enacted policies against civil conflicts in the region and helped grow democracies of states like El Salvador and Guatemala. Not only were these democracies instituted, but they remain strong to this day.<sup>14</sup>

All of the elements in these arguments make great points for what the true issue is behind the struggle for democracy in the Middle East. However, none of them could provide a blanket explanation, with one single factor being responsible. Yet there are other explanations that have yet to be explored, that could prove to answer the question, why has democracy escaped the Middle East?

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<sup>13</sup> Green, Andrew. "Why Western Democracy Can Never Work in the Middle East." The Telegraph. August 16, 2014. Accessed November 15, 2018.  
<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/11037173/Why-Western-democracy-can-never-work-in-the-Middle-East.html>.

<sup>14</sup> "Latin America Shows That Democratization Is Possible Anywhere," Freedom House, August 31, 2017, , accessed November 15, 2018, <https://freedomhouse.org/blog/latin-america-shows-democratization-possible-anywhere>.

## What is the Problem?

There is one uniform characteristic that applies to every state in the Middle East, and that is the presence of Islamic Terrorist Groups. Of the list of recognized terrorist groups laid out by the US Department of State, over 60% of the world's most dangerous groups have been founded, and are stationed in a Middle Eastern state.<sup>15</sup> One important distinction to be made before delving into the issue is that Islam as a religion and Islamic terrorist groups should be held in a completely different regard. The overwhelming majority of Muslim people have no affiliation with these extremist groups, despite them being of the same faith. So for the sake of preventing mischaracterization, let us understand that Islamic Terrorists are to Islam what the Ku Klux Klan is to Christianity, only on a much larger scale.

What we must recognize first is the effect these groups have in the region, and once we understand their role in the Middle East, we can then understand how their presence has been the marquee obstacle to democracy for these states. Something that may escape the average man or woman of western states like the US or the UK, is that “The Middle East receives the brunt of the aggression from terrorist groups”<sup>16</sup> Western media coverage may have you fooled, as it seems like every Islamic Terrorist attack seen on news channels is a member of ISIS or Al-Qaeda killing civilians in an urban center in New York, London, or Paris. However, the facts will tell you that states like Egypt, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia are subject to 5 times more ISIS

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<sup>15</sup> "Foreign Terrorist Organizations." U.S. Department of State. Accessed December 05, 2018. <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm>.

<sup>16</sup> Byman, Daniel L. "The Islamic State's Long-term Threat to the Middle East." Brookings.edu. July 27, 2017. Accessed December 05, 2018. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/07/28/the-islamic-states-long-term-threat-to-the-middle-east/>.

attacks per year than any western state.<sup>17</sup> In Middle Eastern states, civilians are subject to more than infrequent spells of terror. Islamic Terrorist groups actually have a lasting effect on the political climate in the region. These groups hold territory, involve themselves in civil wars, and are at odds with dictatorial political regimes. Some states like Egypt and Jordan have moved away from political reform and maintained an authoritarian regime in order to preserve security in the state.<sup>18</sup>

Another facet of Islamic Terrorism is the threat it poses to the use of foreign aid in the Middle East. As stated previously, there is severe corruption crippling the integrity of Middle Eastern political regimes, many of which thrive off of US foreign aid, using this income to bolster military and empower the autocracy. If it weren't for the threat of instability and violence imposed by groups like The Islamic State, foreign aid contributors could see means to suspend the handout of military and monetary resources, in opposition of these authoritarian governments.<sup>19</sup> However, the presence of terrorism disrupts this possibility. Suspension of foreign aid at this juncture could be extremely costly to the region. It could cause regimes to crumble, and put in jeopardy the lives of civilians who were victims of political repression, but had some security from terrorist revolutions. If core states like the US and UK were to temporarily withhold aid in order to coerce Middle Eastern states to democratize, the region could see an onslaught of backlash from Islamic Terrorist Organizations. Democracies are

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<sup>17</sup> Lister, Tim. "ISIS: 143 Attacks in 29 Countries Have Killed 2,043." CNN. February 12, 2018. Accessed December 05, 2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2015/12/17/world/mapping-isis-attacks-around-the-world/index.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Byman, Daniel L. "The Islamic State's Long-term Threat to the Middle East." Brookings.edu. July 27, 2017. Accessed December 05, 2018. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/07/28/the-islamic-states-long-term-threat-to-the-middle-east/>.

<sup>19</sup> Miller, Andrew, and Richard Sokolsky. "What Has \$49 Billion in Foreign Military Aid Bought Us? Not Much." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Accessed December 05, 2018. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/02/27/what-has-49-billion-in-foreign-military-aid-bought-us-not-much-pub-75657>.

targeted by these terror groups because “their social and political freedoms are antithetical to the jihadists’ vision of a rigid theocracy”.<sup>20</sup>

An issue that often goes unnoticed regarding the Middle Eastern threat of terror is the internal dysfunction of Middle Eastern authoritarian regimes. The conflicts within the region are not always terrorist vs. state. With so many conflicting interests between the states and ethnic groups, often terrorist groups and the authoritarian regimes find themselves fighting on the same side. For instance, Hezbollah, a key player in the Syrian Civil War, has acted in the interest of Iran and the Assad Regime in order to receive military weaponry and support. Hezbollah is attempting to stockpile these weapons and move them to safer areas to be better suited for conflict. Hezbollah also has interest of Lebanon in mind and hopes to help maintain Syrian territory bordering Lebanon to ensure the safety from attack in the area.<sup>21</sup> In certain scenarios, it can be favorable for states to have the support of terrorist organizations to do some of their dirty work for weapons or capital in return. The terrorist presence is also a major factor in the maintenance of foreign aid from outside actors. Some states may even feel that a low-level terrorist threat can be beneficial for the country as a whole if it allows them to receive the foreign aid that they desire.

One factor that could thwart democratization of Middle Eastern states is the fact that groups like ISIS, Al Qaeda, and The Taliban can thrive under democratic regimes. Democracies

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<sup>20</sup> Bohlen, Celestine. "Why Do Terrorists Target Democracies?" The New York Times. December 21, 2017. Accessed December 05, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/15/world/why-do-terrorists-target-democracies.html>.

<sup>21</sup> "The Hezbollah Connection in Syria and Iran." Council on Foreign Relations. Accessed December 05, 2018. <https://www.cfr.org/interview/hezbollah-connection-syria-and-iran>.

by nature are better locations for terrorist groups to operate. They have limited surveillance of civilians, there are stricter guidelines for policing and investigation, and there are inherent rights that apply to all citizens. Personal protections are granted to members of democracies making it difficult to prevent terrorist activity without probable cause, and border control is weak, making it easier to move in and out of the country undetected. It is much harder to prevent impending terror attacks when there are so few limitations on the actions of citizens in a democracy.<sup>22</sup> Just look at the difference in terror threats between a liberal democracy like The United States, and the authoritarian regime in North Korea. When it comes to international terrorism, freedom can come at a high price. The authoritarian regimes of the Middle East fall perfectly in line with the values of most Islamic Terrorist groups. These groups are made up of exceedingly conservative Muslims who see women as second class citizens and believe homosexuality is a deadly sin. In states like Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan, we see the materialization of these practices every day. If democratization were to change the social and religious status quo in these states (and it would), resistance from terrorist paramilitary would be imminent.

We also must understand the role that terrorist groups play in the conflicts going on in the Middle East. The Arab-Israeli conflict has been plaguing the Gaza Strip for half a century. Now, Islamist Fundamentalist groups Hezbollah and Hamas have committed themselves in unraveling the Israeli state, and claiming land in the Gaza Strip. These groups are responsible for a number of guerrilla attacks on Israeli military in or around the Gaza Strip.<sup>23</sup> The Islamic State has also

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<sup>22</sup> Lutz, James M., and Brenda J. Lutz. "Democracy and Terrorism." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 4, no. 1 (2010): 63-74. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26298436>.

<sup>23</sup> Rabasa, Angel, Peter Chalk, Kim Cragin, Sara A. Daly, Heather S. Gregg, Theodore W. Karasik, Kevin A. O'Brien, and William Rosenau. "Hezbollah and Hamas." In *Beyond Al-Qaeda: Part 2, The Outer Rings of the Terrorist Universe*, 5-24. Santa Monica, CA; Arlington, VA; Pittsburgh, PA: RAND Corporation, 2006. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg430af.9>.

held a stake in the Syrian Civil War, as they control territory near Talul al-Safa and Palmyra. Iran has also backed Hezbollah in Syria, who have also played a role in fighting alongside the Assad regime.<sup>24</sup> Jihadists factions are also taking advantage of the civil war in Yemen. Both Al Qaeda and The Islamic State have seized control of territories in the south of Yemen and have carried out deadly military attacks near the port city of Aden.<sup>25</sup> From afar, the Middle East can appear to be one giant power struggle between different religious sects and ethnic groups, but Islamic Terrorist groups hold a legitimate stake in that conflict. Along with Sunni, Shia, Kurds, Israelis, and others... Jihadists movements are in ensconced in the struggle, trying to get their own piece of the pie.

Maybe the most convincing factor behind this causation for a democratic deficit is that the issue of Islamic Terrorism and the fundamentalist ideology that they support is present in every Middle Eastern state. In Kuwait, fundamentalists have even gained political power, and are pushing this narrow-minded interpretation of Islam on the society of Kuwait. In Israel, Hamas still remains a major threat to Israeli civilians in the name of Palestinian nationalism. The Islamic State remains present in states like Syria and Iraq....and the United States is still trying to negotiate with Taliban officials to reach a peace agreement in Afghanistan. Hezbollah continues to plan attacks on Israel while maintaining territory in Lebanon.<sup>26</sup> The Jihadist movements of the Middle East are unique in structure. They do not lay claim to any politically recognized borders making them almost impossible to pin down. They operate under a rigidly designed hierarchy of

<sup>24</sup> "Syria's War: Who Controls What?" GCC News | Al Jazeera. Accessed December 05, 2018.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2015/05/syria-country-divided-150529144229467.html>.

<sup>25</sup> "Yemen Crisis: Why Is There a War?" BBC News. November 20, 2018. Accessed December 05, 2018.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29319423>.

<sup>26</sup> "Essay: Freedom in the World 2002: The Democracy Gap." Freedom House. March 01, 2012. Accessed December 05, 2018.

<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world-2002/essay-freedom-world-2002-democracy-gap>.

leaders and officials who usually hidden from the public and uncompromising in their direction, and they feed off of the instability of their surroundings in the Middle East.<sup>27</sup> With the region in disarray, Islamic Terrorist groups have settled into the perfect scenario and will continue to thrive in the Middle East until there is some sort of structure amongst the governments.

We should never utter the word “impossible” when it comes to democratization. To give up on the prospect of freedom even in the most underdeveloped, unstable corners of the world would be a disservice to the millions all over the globe who have respectfully fought for their right to be politically active and free from religious, political, or sexual persecution. The democratic deficit in the Middle East may be the hardest obstacle to overcome yet, as the interdependence and interrelations between Middle Eastern regimes and Islamic Terrorist groups seem difficult to separate. But there can still be brighter days ahead, with the help the international community, hegemonic powers like the US and UK, and the overwhelming number of Muslims in the Middle East who dispute the beliefs and methods of groups like ISIS, Hamas, Hezbollah, and Al Qaeda. What has materialized following the Arab Spring has not been the fault of the Middle Eastern civilian trying to live free of religious persecution. It is the fault of the corrupt autocrat too power crazy to understand the value of his own people. It is the fault of the narrow-minded fundamentalist who willfully commits acts of terror upon men, women, and children in his attempt to kill the hopes of freedom and destroy the dreams of liberty and free speech. We have not failed the Middle East and its people, because we continue to try to identify the problem and seek solutions to it. This is how we be free.

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<sup>27</sup> "The Organization and Infrastructure of Terrorist Groups." Accessed December 05, 2018. <https://www.e-education.psu.edu/geog571/node/341>.

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