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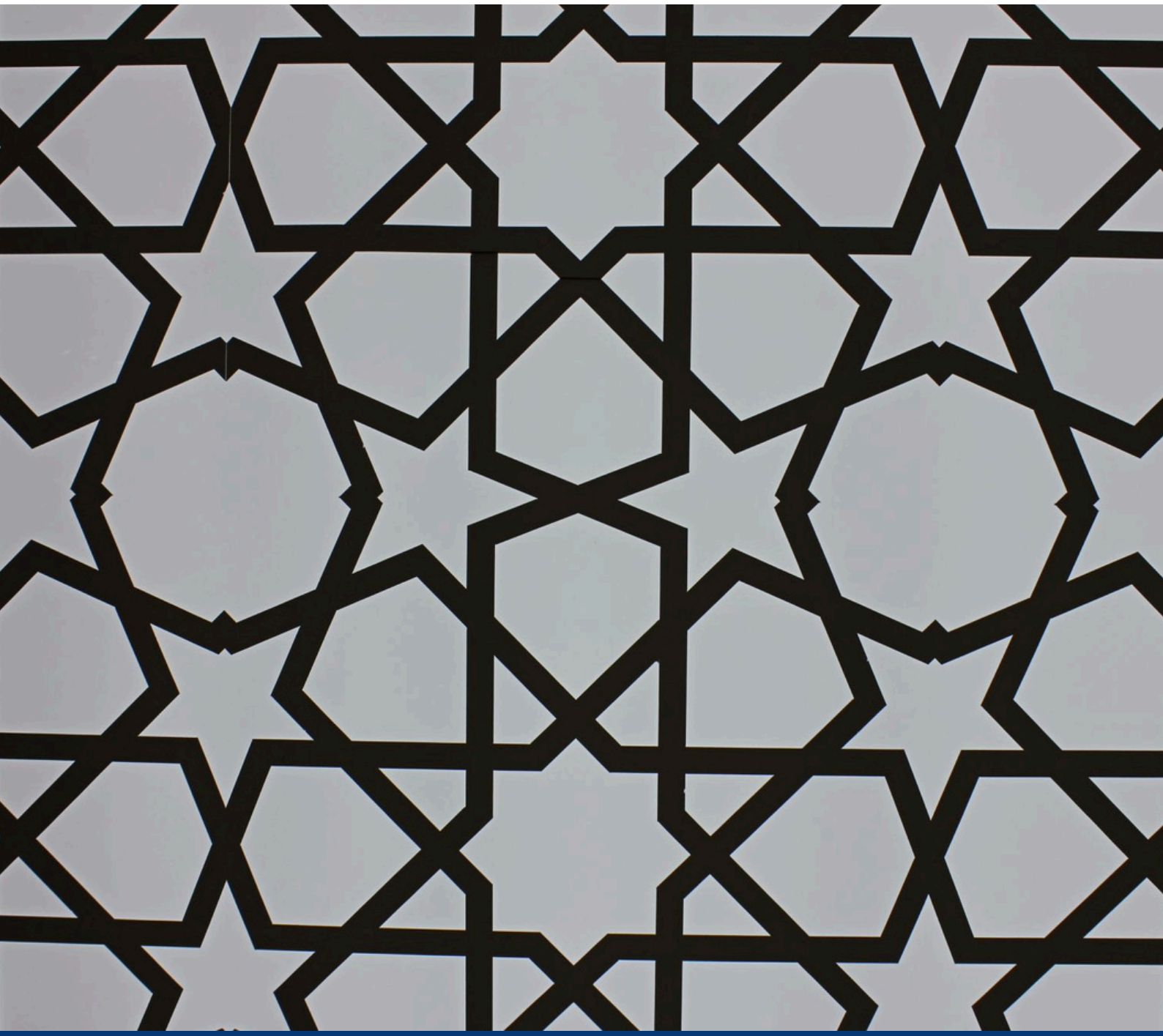

THE ARAB SPRING ROLLBACK AND VARIETIES OF ARAB 'AUTOCRATIZATION'

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Executive summary

The Arab region (interchangeably Middle East and North Africa – MENA) has had a chequered history with democratization. Evidently, today, the trend is not one of democratic transition but rather one of 'autocratization', i.e. of democratic de-consolidation. The signs of this trend are written on Arab systemic patterns across the board. Authoritarian backlash is one marker of those states that for a while spearheaded what seemed after the 2011 uprisings to be a promising shift from singular brands of rule (Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia and Yemen) to a form of electoral and competitive politics. The reports, "An Eye on Arab De-democratization," seek to capture the nature of democratic erosion in a MENA Arab cluster of nine countries and one case study that covers the gender question in relation to 'democratization'.

1. In the face of autocratization, the question of **women's inclusivity** features strongly in any account of Arab politics. Layla Saleh argues that women's inclusion is a key element of democratization in the Arab setting. In her survey of the landscape of women's inclusion in politics since the 2011 uprisings, she addresses the general retreat in women's bottom-up mobilization and connects to a separation between women's political leadership and the democratic question, in contexts of conflict.
2. Hanan Kaoud brief situates the limitations of **Palestinian democratization** as a failure of institutions/governance under a colonial order that has substituted procedure for principle, and containment for liberation. Specifically, the brief zeroes in on the case of the Palestinian Authority, a structure born of the 1993 Oslo Accords.
3. Aisha Kadaoui looks at **Morocco**'s de-democratization, which has since 2021 more or less reduced political representation to procedural formalities. Through the example of a newly formed loyal political party, The National Rally of Independents, the monarchy has sustained a power structure in which formal democratic mechanisms, such as regular elections, fall short of genuine democratic practices.
4. This notion of political parties loyal to the centre has an analogue in **Egypt.** Mohammed Moussa examines the phenomenon of 'loyal opposition', noting its inability to outgrow its allocated, and in a certain sense adopted, role. In so doing, he problematizes the question of transitioning from 'loyal' to 'democratic' opposition by political parties in Sisi's Egypt.
5. Ahmedou Menna turns his attention to the features of democratic backsliding in **Mauritania**. Through evidence going back to 2017, he is able to describe political manipulation of elections, as one feature of the North African country's process of autocratization.
6. **Yemen** is one of the original Arab Spring countries that planned popularly-backed political reform. In his policy brief, Nabil Al-Bukairi attempts to provide a historical reading of the path of democratization from the time of Yemeni unification of the South and North in 1990 until the moment of the fateful coup of September 21, 2014, which 'hijacked' the country's revolutionary and democratic momentum.
7. Moncef Khaddar's policy brief looks takes up the case of **Tunisia**, the birthplace of the Arab Spring. He argues that this once-celebrated model of democratization was dismantled in 2021. He describes the July 2021 self-coup and the suspension of parliament by a democratically elected president.
8. **Iraq** was once touted as a future model to the MENA region. Khalil Osman's policy brief finds no democratic model to share regionally. He describes repeated deferment of elections and mounting foreign influence over government formation. This, he shows, has diluted key elements of a properly functioning democracy, including responsible governance, and public trust in the state's capacity to govern.
9. Dania Koleilat and Bashir Amin examine the challenges of democratization in **Lebanon** in a context of deeply entrenched confessional politics, conflict and armed militias, and weak state sovereignty in the face of Israeli occupation and aggression. Their policy brief looks at the obstacles and 'legal shenanigans' to reforming political parties and, as a result, limits to genuine democratization.
10. One year after the inglorious escape of dictator Bashar al-Assad from Damascus, **Syria**'s transition is still shrouded in uncertainty despite wide-ranging acceptance of the new power-holders. Sadiki and Saleh critically assess the content and strategies of the brand of transition attempted in Damascus by Ahmad al-Sharaa, the country's president and a reformed jihadist, and the team aiding him to rebuild Syria. In so doing, they focus on three dimensions of the transition: i) political institutions, ii) civil society, and iii) security and foreign relations.

Clarifying concepts

Conceptually, usage of terminology such as “de-democratization” and “democratic resilience” are problematic in the MENA context. A few reasons must be stated. Such core concepts in the ‘transitology’ literature are indeed undefined or contested (Whitehead 2002). Like ‘democracy’, a plethora of terms lack universal definitions because their central meaning is inherently debated, making disputes over their use crucial to understanding the concept itself, rather than just marginal cases. This ambiguity comes with the scholarly terrain. It arises from the strong normative character of some of these terms, their complex and multidimensional nature, and evolution over time. This requires MENA researchers to define their own operational meaning within specific contexts. In the MENA context, speaking of democratic resilience or of de-democratization may be unconvincing. The main reason there have been no democracies so far, with the qualified exceptions of the Arab Spring experiments with electoral democracy such in Tunisia and Egypt. Autocracies cover the most of the MENA landscape. From this perspective, reference is to ‘autocratic resilience’ may make more sense than speaking of ‘democratic resilience’.

MENA autocratization aligns in two aspects with a definition given by Lührmann and Lindberg (2019, p. 1096). Firstly, autocratization is a process where political power becomes more concentrated in the hands of a ruling elite. Cases such as Tunisia (July 2021 self-coup by President Kais Saied and Sisi’s 2013 military coup in Egypt) epitomize the shift of both North African countries away from systematic democratization following popular uprisings, new constitutions and free elections (monitored internationally). By reversing democratizing institutions, they caused erosion and breakdown of incipient democratization processes. The upshot was limitation of political competition, shrinking of civic space, limitation of media freedoms, dismantling of elected representatives and parliaments, and sidelining independent judges. This effectively returned the machinery of power and governance to arbitrary and repressive modus operandi, whilst maintaining the appearance of democracy through state-controlled system and political actors and organizations. This reverse of democratization speaks to what Lührmann and Lindberg (2019, p. 1096; also see Merkel 2010) aptly describe as a” reversal back to historical precedents”.

Where one would disagree with Lührmann and Lindberg is that reversal in MENA is not ‘involuntary’. It is calculated and forceful. This is where the original Arab Spring ‘democratizers’ stand today. It is a case of reversal back to authoritarian precedents of ousted regimes. That is, in terms of Executive Power Grab, elite capture of power (in the case of Egypt with military backup), downsizing via coercion of influential parts of the political and civil societies, erosion of any type of checks and balances, owing to absence of autonomous opposition, and control of information. The days of the old ‘police state’ in MENA is over, but each case is unique. Coercion and use of violence are deployed in varying degrees, often ‘sugar-coated’ with populist rhetoric and the use of elections. A third layer of contextualization is in order. Western established democracies, by and large, seem to favour existing autocratic elites whose political, military and/ or economic dependence is key to ruling elites and houses’ survival and overall ‘despotic stability’ within MENA. Some of these elites approach the whole business of government from the angle of Western democracy being unsuited to their peoples—a flagrant case of ‘Orientalism in reverse’. To argue that so far there are only interrupted democratization experiments in MENA is not to naturalize despotism of the Orientalist gaze’s generalizations with its known ontological and epistemological biased differentiation between the ‘West’ and the ‘rest’ (Sadiki 2004). Nor is it about condemning entire cultures, societies and polities to inhospitality to democracy. The MENA authoritarian playbook is a case of an empirically verifiable authoritarian scheme—as demonstrated in the ten MENA reports—of powerholders’ hard-nosed and ill-thought actions. Their actions entrench political singularity and present sustained threats to democratization and democratic struggles.

A case of Arab autocratization (re)turn?

The gist of the exercise is not so much to confirm trends of Arab autocratization. What is challenging to evidence is to explain how such trends have unfolded over the past decade. How do these early reforms erode? How do the functions of the democratic institutions which are created to lend credence to democratization processes atrophy? How do thereafter Arab regimes attempt to mimic participatory and competitive politics reminiscent of historical equivalents that were ousted in the 2011 uprisings? The policy reports try to survey evidence that address these key questions, whilst highlighting for readers and students of MENA democratization tentative explanations and features of Arab 'democratic backsliding'.

Integral to the puzzle at hand is the fact that some of these regimes, namely the Tunisian, have democratic elements without being fully 'liberal'. In MENA, this puzzle not only highlights the gap between the ideals and reality of democracy, but also raises doubts in the minds of MENA citizens about democratization processes. Democratic erosion in MENA leads to disillusion with ruling elites and, in some narratives, dismissal of democratization as a flawed system. This plays into the hands of populists. Populists use rhetoric that gains traction by tapping into people's anxieties and frustration with broken promises of better living standards by rival parties and politicians. Charged political rhetoric elicits anxiety and anger whilst heightening the potential for democratic erosion in 'new democracies' (e.g. Egypt, Tunisia). A slew of elections in some of the case studies showcase that the basic processes of democratic procedures and 'parliamentary politics' are present in countries like Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, and Tunisia.

However, democratic procedures mask forms of politics burdened by rising repression and continuous inequality, weak judiciary, corruption and single (and even military) rule. The resilience of Arab democratization, thus far, is a story of hollow constitutions and broken contracts, fuelling movement toward social polarization and populism. It is almost a return to the pre-Arab Spring order of outsized executive types of power that skew genuine opposition and proactive civil societies. Merkel's notion of 'defective democracy' springs to mind (Merkel 2004). It refers to a decline in core democratic institutions (e.g. elections), principles (horizontal accountability), and rights (civil and political). This erodes democratic governance, rendering democratization, as in the case of MENA, counterfeit.

Erosion footprints in MENA

Today the MENA region seems to be distinguished by a dubious relationship with good government. Those regimes that experienced democratic stirrings after the 2011-2012 Arab Spring uprisings have since Egypt's 2013 coup begun to retract initial democratic reforms. One by one, since that date, they have gradually walked back concessions or steps toward broader political participation and openness. The puzzle of the challenges that Arab Spring 'democratizers' face in staying responsive, competitive and accountable frames this MENA special dossier made up of ten analytical reports. However, a common puzzle involves identifying very loosely, the phenomenon of Arab autocratization, formulating "how?" and "why" questions, grounding the enterprise in empirical knowledge drawn from each of the Arab case studies. Thus, the policy reports aim, separately and together, to solve this puzzle by assembling evidence, more than engaging Western-centric theories, which do not always translate well in their 'travels' to non-Western settings (Keane 2009; Keane 2022).

Democratization may be a global phenomenon. However, its meaning, progression, impact, history, manifestations in non-Western regions, including MENA, are uneven (Brynen, Korany & Noble 1995). A point to keep in mind is that the various histories of 'colonization-cum-modernization' in MENA has without a doubt coloured the experience of state and nation-building, and of 'modernity' itself. To adopt 'wholesale' the contested brands of Euro-American 'democracy' or 'modernity' as if they are not stamped with particularity of experiences, knowledge-practices, histories, as suited to a formerly colonized part of the world, is to succumb to a reality of 'speech-less' cultures, effectively existing on the margins, i.e. "subaltern" (Spivak 1988). MENA has not produced theories of democratization. This should not mean that its chequered experiences with democratization share a Western-centric set of assumptions about 'good government', for instance.

Procedurally, elections feature repeatedly more than freedoms, rule of law, separation of powers, and a system of checks and balances between branches of government in MENA autocratizing regimes. Relational politics (tribal, regional, for example matter more than individualist identities); stress on institutional stability more than dramatic change in policy; the role of cultural issues, especially religion, and dependence on Western powers (with obvious preference for order than equality in MENA): all these factors condition Arab democratization processes. The US and the EU follow policies of strong ties with MENA authoritarian regimes —a point to be elaborated below through the example of US–Egypt relations. These ties mitigate against sustained democratization that threaten ruling elites and ruling houses in the Arab region. The author of *The Third Wave* (Huntington 1993) did not foresee that the floundering of new democracies and democratization altogether could happen at the hands of Western leaders. The widening map of non-democracies today and expanding populations experiencing democratic backsliding, including in established democracies such as the US, the UK, and France, shrinks the list of democratizers that featured as spearheading Huntington's 'third wave' (See Marina Nord, et. al. V-Dem 2025). The V-Dem 2025 report leaves no room for relegating the Arab region to a zone of 'democratic exile'. Key points in the report by Marina Nord and her co-authors are as follows: "The level of democracy for the average world citizen is back to 1985…Liberal democracies have become the least common regime type in the world, a total of 29 in 2024. Nearly 3 out of 4 persons in the world – 72% – now live in autocracies" (Marina Nord, et. al. V-Dem 2025).

One problematic is that authoritarian regimes arrogate to themselves the epithet 'democratic' because they hold elections or have constitutions (Diamond 2009) that stipulate the known civil and political rights integral to a democracy, a contested concept (Przeworski 2024). Authoritarian regimes of the Arab Spring variety claim to possess a degree of normative content of democracy because, performatively at least, sustain a form of competitive politics. This anomaly deserves mention in any critical reflection on democratization in MENA. Nancy Bermeo presents the 'democratic backsliding' problematic negatively and positively. The negative note concerns the paradox in-built in this phenomenon: "forms of backsliding are especially vexing because they are legitimated by the very institutions democracy promoters prioritize [such as elections]" (Bermeo 2016). On a positive note, she argues that today's "mix of backsliding is more easily reversible than the past mix and successor dictatorships are shorter-lived and less authoritarian" (Bermeo 2016). Only time will tell whether this is applicable to Arab examples. This may prove correct in the Tunisian case where Kais Saied's July 2021 self-coup has become less popular owing to weak performance legitimacy, deteriorating welfare goods and unjustified repression. He has been unable to cobble together any form of coalition or political agreement /vision to command confidence in public institutions by the people, including those who originally 'supported' his coup.

Egypt's praetorian traditions casts doubt on Bermeo's optimism about short-lived democratic backsliding. Then again, Bermeo limits her observations to Western case studies. In 2013 Sisi led a coup against a democratically elected government (in which the Muslim Brotherhood controlled the presidency and parliament). His army and the security forces carried out the Raba'a massacre (Kinglsely 2014), a heinous crime in the country's modern political annals. This flagrant act of autocratization went largely unnoticed by Western policymakers. Backing of Sisi's regime by Arab Gulf regimes, in addition to the US and the EU, remains unfettered. During the 15th of October 2025 Gaza summit in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, "Trump delivered his verdict on a man [President Sisi of Egypt] whose government stands accused of wholesale repression. "I am here with my friend, a strong leader, the president … and also a general, and he is good at both" (Wintour 2025). But the Sisi regime upended an incipient form of democratization, which looked in 2012–13 to be promising, only to refashion the system, installing his own constitution, electoral politics, and elites. In this instance, regime change has since 2013 returned politics to more repressive practices. Concomitantly, public space and contest are restricted and elections are open to select politicians and groups, licensed to participate.

The normative appeal and value of democratization–that it paves the way for transition from authoritarianism to a system in which the people are involved in self-governance–remains inconclusive in the MENA region, at least in the case studies presented in the ten reports. Its trajectory has proved not to be linear in the Arab examples reviewed in the policy papers – studies of Latin America confirm non-linearity (O'Donnell 1999, Pridham 1995). The realization of popular will or internal self-determination is not thus far evident. Democratization does not seem to enhance movement towards autonomous civil societies, judiciaries and opinion-formulators, a reference to what Sen calls "uncensored distribution of news and fair comment" (Sen 1999). If one is to go by the argument that there is a symbiosis between democracy and self-determination, as entitlement to civil and political rights that improve a people's autonomy and self-governance (Christiano 2015), the opposite may be true of democratization processes in the MENA region.

Foreign domination stands in the way of such self-determination. As in the example above of populist (Constantini 2025) Trump's endorsement of the Sisi regime, an authoritarian system by any standards, effectively takes out democratic choice out of democratization. It is not the publics within the Arab states that confer legitimacy upon their rulers; it is the 'masters' of the Western-centric global order without that determine who rules the Saudis or the Egyptians. As the so-called rules-based international system continues to decline, authoritarian elites in MENA tend to rely more and more on Western powers' economic aid, clientelism, military support and political backing instead of turning to their local constituencies for endorsement via genuine elections and forms of institutional checks on their power. At the heart of autocratization is the fading democracy promotion agenda—it itself a de-democratization trend and a sign of acceleration of the decline of the so-called rules-based system (Roos 2024). Yet some Western literature on correlations of democratization with positive outcomes such as freedom, equality and development exclude Muslim societies (Geddes 2007).

Recommendations

Given the current state of play in Arab autocracies, one can say that there are two clashing sets of resilience pitted against one another: 'democratic resilience' (popular resistance against assaults on democracy by autocrats) and 'autocratic resilience' (a capacity of reproduction of status quo politics and resisting public pressure and demands for democratic change by silencing dissent through "dictator's learning curve"-type mechanisms (Dobson 2012), including through digital techniques, spyware, and hollow democratic methods.

Building a democracy that is embedded in its capacity to use dialogic and "communicative action" (Habermas 1984) can minimize polarization, help find shared political positions and cultivate brands of bargain politics to moderate attitudes. Arab politics today at the level of the state and below it seems to be bogged in impasses that limit opportunities for decompression and power-sharing. To this end, civic education can play a major role in instilling values of toleration and compromise.

Tackling inequalities is not a socio-economic challenge. Rather, it is an issue that concerns social justice and is, therefore, political par excellence. The cries for dignity in the Arab Spring uprisings were demands for inclusivity and redress of inequality. The implications of this for institution-building and public confidence in political institutions cannot be emphasized enough. What is needed here is systematic adoption of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) can be one way for addressing marginalization, a source of polarization, conflict and populism.

Revitalising Arab democratization requires building networks of cross-country democratic resilience that propagate good practices wherever they may be across the Arab region. Despite Orientalist stigma, below the state there are communal and voluntary morals of self-support, adaptation to severe and harsh conditions of conflict or coercion and even innovation that nurture resistance against all odds, external and internal. This historical spiritual, moral, communal, and even religious repository of skills of resilience or '*murunah akhlaqiyyah*' equip these Arab settings of autocratization with the immaterial resources to confront the headwinds of critical times in which Western and regional establishments seem to collude in looking the other way where democracy and democratization are concerned.

Nurturing practices of 'democratic resilience' from below that are non-competitive and do not necessarily seek power for the sake of empowerment. Practical means that creatively boost that collective action include building a political culture that seeks consensus with others, respects difference, and taps into communal skills of conflict-resolution. Integral to such a political culture is to create and participate in advocacy groups that work for communal, as opposed to partisan, causes and issues. These can be ways for strengthening skills of democratic resilience from below that are readily available for defending against potential threats to democratic struggles and civil society.

Conclusion

The kind of setbacks experienced in MENA settings, such as those addressed in the ten reports, are a cause for doubling down on sustained work to defend democracy and democratization and act against continuous decline in the quality of public institutions (and their ability to redistribute power justly, fairly, accountably and transparently) and in the quality of human dignity in many an Arab setting. The problems of autocratization in these case studies feature common threads that threaten polity, economy, society and culture—wars, populist politics, broken promises and social contracts, and assaults on opposition forces and discourses. The problems are too familiar. They call for adaptive brands of struggle and democratic resilience from below that require practical foresight and strategies, be they maintenance, resistance or bounce-back resilience, that are people-centred and context-specific. That is, if one is guided by a Western-centric and state-centric definition, such as in this one which views resilience as “the capacity of democratic institutions and practices to absorb and recover, adapt, innovate, or transform in response to shock or crisis,” (Ville-Pekka Sorsa & Katja Kivikoski 2023) then the question becomes: what should democratic resilience look like in political systems which are yet to transcend the threshold of democracy? This is a question that is yet to be researched.

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