

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA)'s Moral Compass

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A Youthful Perspective

Edited by

Nehme Azoury, Patrick Abi Nahed
and Georges Azzi

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2025

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN: 978-1-0364-5090-8

ISBN (Ebook): 978-1-0364-5091-5

For the resilient and visionary youth of the region, the Middle East, and North Africa (MENA), for the brave souls who stand against the tide, dare to dream of a future based on integrity, justice, and inclusivity, and strive every day to turn those dreams into reality. Your bravery, innovation, and steely resolve inspire us all.

This work manifests the strength of yang support for guidance and support of our families and the communities who nurture our dreams and endeavors. May it be a guiding light to generations to come, seeking fair governance and harmony among communities.

“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

— Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

“In the struggle against corruption and inequity, it is often the voices of the young that resonate the loudest, reminding us of the principles we are bound to uphold.”

— Kofi Annan

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The writing of this book was made possible through the consistent support, mentorship, and inspiration of people and organizations.

Above all, we thank our collaborators, whose knowledge and support have made this work so much richer. Your support and guidance have been invaluable in envisioning and positioning the project.

We are also deeply grateful to the youth leaders and activists whose voices and actions are the foundation of this book. Your stories, your struggles, and your victories light the way to a fairer, more moral tomorrow.

To our families and friends, thank you for your patience, understanding, and ceaseless encouragement as we went through this journey. You have fueled us with your belief in our mission.

Lastly, we would like to recognize the institutions, organizations, and communities that afforded the resources and platforms that allowed this work to materialize. Thank you for your strong dedication to promoting discussion and action in the area of governance and ethics.

This book is a testament to the power of collaboration and shared purpose. Our profound thanks to all contributors to its making.

INTRODUCTION

PROF. GEORGES YAHCHOUCHI

In an era marked by rapid socio-political shifts and an increasingly interconnected global landscape, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region stands at a crossroads of profound transformation. This book endeavors to unpack the significant, yet often underappreciated, role of youth in steering the ethical and governance dialogues in this vibrant region. This book delves into the heart of ethical quandaries facing the MENA countries, exploring how the younger generation is not just witnessing but actively shaping the governance landscape.

At the core of this exploration is a pressing question: How do young individuals perceive and navigate the challenges of corruption and governance? As agents of change, the youth of MENA are redefining activism and leadership, leveraging technology and social media to mobilize and voice their demands for a more transparent and just governance system.

The vibrant history of youth activism in the MENA region is both rich and instructive. Historically, young individuals have spearheaded significant social and political movements, shaping the trajectory of their nations—from struggles for independence to transformative uprisings like the Arab Spring. These movements underscore a long-standing tradition of youth as catalysts for change, whose echoes are palpable in today's digital age of activism.

In contemporary settings, the digital landscape has revolutionized how young activists engage. Social media platforms, often regarded as mere tools for social interaction, have transformed into powerful instruments of organization and advocacy. Young leaders utilize these digital tools to amplify their voices, orchestrate gatherings, and galvanize global support. The digital sphere not only facilitates widespread information sharing but also fosters a sense of solidarity and collective action among the youth across the region.

This digital mobilization plays a crucial role in how young activists influence governance and policy-making. Through online campaigns and grassroots organizing, they bring issues of corruption and poor governance into the public eye, demanding accountability and transparency. The impact of such movements is not trivial; they often lead to policy shifts and can alter the very fabric of governance structures. For instance, youth-led initiatives have successfully pressured governments to enact or amend legislation, reflecting the priorities and values of a younger, more connected generation.

Beyond organizing and advocacy, young people in the MENA region are increasingly involved in shaping the policies directly. They engage with traditional political mechanisms and international bodies, striving to introduce reforms that reflect ethical governance and uphold anti-corruption measures. Their involvement highlights a shift towards more inclusive governance, where the voices of the youth are not only heard but are instrumental in shaping policy and practice.

The struggle against corruption, a pervasive challenge in many MENA countries, sees significant contributions from the youth. Armed with innovative ideas and a refusal to accept the status quo, they are at the forefront of campaigns promoting integrity and accountability. Their efforts are often fueled by a deep-seated desire for justice and a future that values transparent governance over entrenched corrupt practices.

This detailed exploration of youth activism in the MENA region reveals a dynamic and resilient force driving societal change. The young people of this region are not merely participants in their political and social spheres but are defining and directing the conversations around ethics, governance, and corruption. Their continuous push for change not only shapes current policies but also lays the groundwork for future governance in the MENA region.

This book emerges from a need to highlight the unique perspectives and innovative approaches of young MENA citizens. Through a combination of theoretical frameworks and practical insights—including case studies and firsthand accounts—this narrative seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play. By focusing on the ethical challenges and the transformative potential of youth, "MENA's Moral Compass" aims to contribute not only to academic discourse but also to the strategies of policymakers and NGOs active in the region.

In the forthcoming chapters, we will explore the historical context of youth activism in MENA, analyze current challenges and opportunities, and envision the future of ethical governance as shaped by the leaders of tomorrow. The journey through these pages promises to be both enlightening and inspiring, offering a new lens through which to view the role of youth in shaping the moral and ethical framework of their societies.

THE MENA MOSAIC: A CULTURAL AND POLITICAL

PROF. NEHME AZOURY

Introduction

The Middle East and North Africa (hereafter, MENA) region has a unique cultural and political landscape that has been developed over millennia and is a colorful blending of civilizations, religions, and cultures. But from the ancient cultures of Mesopotamia and Egypt to the modern statehood of today, the region has been a crucible for cultural and political development. Despite certain commonalities in their historical and cultural threads, each country comprising MENA possesses distinct characteristics, driven by its particular history.

Historical legacies shape the political and social landscape of the MENA countries. But, to illustrate — the legacy of colonialism cannot be erased - it continues to define shapes, structures, and lines that are our political and governance boundaries. These colonial imprints coalesce with entrenched tribal and familial structures that still shape political loyalties and social hierarchies. This history is essential for understanding the contemporary political and social situation.

Cultural features across MENA Region – culture has had a huge impact in shaping the nature of – regional differences as indicated by Islam as a primary religious force impacting all aspects of life in MENA, shaping not only legal systems but also daily social practices. However, the meaning and practice of Islamic principles vary drastically from country to country, depending on the customs of the region, the sects of Islam prominent there, and the historical context. This diversity existing within the framework of a common religion has often given rise to a rich mosaic of cultural practices that essentially define the social fabric of each society.

The MENA region's political systems are as diverse as its economies, including monarchies and republics with different degrees of democracy and authoritarianism. Such systems are often shaped by the legacies of colonialism and the appropriations of traditional modes of rule, like tribal chieftaincy and Islamic law. The structures that underlie international relations allow contemporary issues — the call for democratic reforms, the demand for human rights, the fight against corruption — to be seen through its lens.

The chapter also explores the implications of these historical legacies and cultural norms on contemporary issues such as gender equality, education, economic development, and political participation. For example, many countries in the MENA region have made strides in women's rights but are still struggling for equality with long-standing cultural norms and legal restrictions.

With “The MENA Mosaic”, the chapter aspires to provide a broad yet nuanced impression of the MENA region, by exploring what role its rich cultural and complex political tapestry plays in the current state of societal trends in the region. If nothing else, this insight may shed light not only on the region's past and present but also on its future trajectories.

Historical Foundations

The historical foundations of the MENA region are essential to understanding its contemporary political, social, and cultural dynamics. Over millennia, the region has been a crucible of civilization, home to some of the world's earliest human societies, powerful empires, and world religions. This deep history underpins modern MENA, where ancient legacies meld with more recent histories to provide the basis of the region's politics, borders, governance, and the structures of everyday life. These historical layers offer insights into the resilience and adaptability of MENA societies, but also evidence of continued challenges related to colonial legacies and socio-political complexities.

The ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt stand as pivotal contributors to the historical narrative of the MENA region. The region of Mesopotamia which is often referred to as the “Cradle of Civilization” introduced some of the first forms of governance, legal codes, and urban design. One of the earliest of this type of recorded law was Hammurabi's Code, which delineated principles of justice that were to have an impact not just on legal traditions within the region but on societies worldwide (Postgate, 2017). Meanwhile, blood on the other side of its body would be

glugging down ancient Egypt, as that civilization coalesced into ever more advanced forms of agriculture, architecture, and government along the banks of the Nile. The cultural and technological achievements of these societies created some of the first principles that still resonate in the region to this day in its strong focus on community, law, and resource management.

The empires that followed further shaped the MENA region's political and cultural landscape. For example, the new Achaemenid Empire instituted greater levels of administrative organization and cultural integration than ever before, which would later be adopted and adapted by the Roman and Byzantine empires, amongst others (Curtis, 2021). Islamic caliphate (Umayyad / Abbasid) During the Golden Age of Islam Such caliphates contributed immensely to the development of medicine, astronomy, philosophy, and other fields of knowledge, often synthesizing information from the Greek, Persian, and Indian traditions (Gutas, 2020). These are not just isolated incidents, the similarities were cemented by the political and cultural integration the caliphates gave the region, further promoting architectural similarities and linguistic continuity.

The early modern period saw the rise of the Ottoman Empire, one of the most prominent political structures of MENA. Over six centuries, Ottoman rule brought features like centralized governance models and religious tolerance, such as was practiced through the millet system, which permitted non-Muslim communities some autonomy in managing their affairs (Peirce, 2019). It was this pluralism that allowed Egypt's diverse ethnic and religious groups to coexist, neighboring peoples in a veritable mosaic, a demographic fact still present in the region. Yet, during the 19th century, the decline of the Ottoman Empire led to power vacuums that international powers sought to fill, leading to colonial intervention.

The colonial period is a key moment in the historical foundations of the MENA region. Particularly European powers, Britain and France especially, mapped new lines and forced governance systems that largely ignored the region's historical and tribal affiliations (Madden, 2022). Take the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, which split Ottoman territories into spheres of influence that cut along ethnic and religious lines to separate communities and manufacture artificial nation-states. These boundaries, imposed on the populations of the region, have led to tensions and the causes of conflicts such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Turkish-Kurdish conflict, etc. Colonizers established exploitative systems, systems of centralization of control, and bureaucracies all of which made the emergence of strong local political institutions impossible.

Colonial legacy juxtaposed with the independence movement are other crucial elements to the historical foundations of the region. From the mid-20th century onwards, MENA underwent a process of decolonization, with countries like Egypt, Algeria, and Syria struggling against and winning their independence. This era birthed leaders such as Gamal Abdel Nasser, who became icons of anti-colonial resistance and pushed for regional ideologies like Pan-Arabism to try and galvanize the region against foreign intervention (Khalidi, 2020). Many of these nations struggled with internal cohesion and leadership, often exacerbated by externally imposed borders and political dynamics that eroded the possibility of self-governance.

Tribal and familial structures that are deeply embedded in the MENA societies have also influenced the way that governance happens and how people affiliate politically. In contrast with Western notions of statehood based on territorial sovereignty, many MENA groups prioritize kinship and tribal loyalty. Such structures persist long after colonial rule and shape political systems, particularly in Gulf monarchies such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Tribal governance has fused with modern state systems, resulting in hybrid governance models with elements of both tradition and modernity (Al-Rasheed, 2021). Although these systems have nurtured political order in certain contexts, they have also entrenched patriarchal values and stultified democratic engagement.

Moreover, the region's historical path has been heavily impacted by the discovery and utilization of natural resources. The mid-20th century oil boom reshaped the political and economic institutions of the Gulf states, leading to rapid modernization and integration, with dependencies on volatile global markets. This resource richness has simultaneously supported authoritarian regimes and funded regional conflicts, demonstrating the dual-edged role of natural resource extraction in shaping MENA's historical narrative (Luciani, 2020). Known as the resource curse, this phenomenon symbolizes the clash between history and present-day economic advancement.

While historical foundations provide a framework for understanding the MENA region, they also underscore the ongoing tensions between tradition and modernity. The Arab Spring revolts in the early 2010s represent a modern expression of these historic patterns. Embedded in a call for political reform, economic equity, and social justice, these movements were built on the history of grievances around colonial boundaries, authoritarian rule, and economic exploitation. While the consequences of such civil disobedience and social questioning have varied in nature, often resulting in

wars or gradual change in different locations, they demonstrate that the historical legacies of MENA continue to heavily influence its possible futures (Anderson, 2019).

Cultural Landscapes

The cultural landscapes of the MENA region are characterized by a rich interplay of religious, linguistic, and traditional elements, which collectively shape societal norms and values. As a historically diverse and interconnected region, MENA embodies a cultural mosaic that reflects the profound influence of its religious foundations, linguistic diversity, evolving customs, and artistic expressions. All these elements are essential aspects of the region's identity and provide a framework for examining both its historical fortitude and current trials.

The cultural and societal values of the MENA region are heavily influenced by religion. As three of the world's leading monotheistic faiths, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism have profoundly shaped the foundations of religious culture, culture, and law. As the predominant religion in the region, Islam has become more than just a religion but also plays a role in politics, law, and everyday life. The Sharia law based on Islamic beliefs is an illustration of legalism in Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran while differing in interpretation across regions (Hefner, 2021). This variation stems from the diversity within Islam itself, particularly between Sunni and Shia traditions, as well as regional practices influenced by pre-Islamic customs. In contrast, Christianity and Judaism, while smaller in number, have also left indelible marks on the cultural fabric of MENA societies. For instance, the contributions of Christian communities to education and culture, including the American University of Beirut (AUB) and the preservation of cultural identity by the Coptic Orthodox Church in Lebanon and Egypt (Makdisi, 2020). Though increased in recent decades, the fewer Jewish communities historically took pivotal roles in trade and intellectual advancements in countless towns such as Baghdad and Alexandria.

The diversity of interpretations of Islam only adds to the cultural tapestry of the region. In North Africa, the relationship between practice and local customs is often marked by an intricate *mélange* of faith and Indigenous custom, as seen in the blend of Islam and sectarian observances tied to Berber traditions of worship [(Larémont, 2019);] Not dissimilar to the above, the application of Wahhabi Islam in the Gulf States has instituted harsher laws that borrow from a more stringent founding of traditional

Islamic belief systems, resulting in highly delineated dress codes and cultural norms. Such variations highlight the adaptability and localization of Islamic practices and can illustrate the dynamic intersection of religion with historical and cultural context. Furthermore, the differences in interpretation reflect onto legal systems; while in some countries Islamic law is implemented strictly, in others such as Tunisia it has been combined with secular elements in its legal code; an illustration of pluralist applications of Islam to governance (Charrad, 2020).

In addition to religious diversity, linguistic heterogeneity is a defining feature of the MENA region, where language serves both as a unifying force and a marker of regional identity. Arabic dominates and empowers cultural unity, but its regional dialects indicate the multi-layered history of the region. Formal Arabic is the language of the Quran and is revered throughout the Islamic world and serves as a bridge language between many different communities (Versteegh, 2017). Nonetheless, the spoken varieties, whether Egyptian Arabic, Levantine, or Maghrebi, show key differences that at times impede mutual intelligibility. This diversity of tongues points to the region's complex sociopolitical histories, as different dialects are often marked by traces of colonial and migratory impetus. North African dialects, for example, exhibit a considerable French and Berber influence, while Levantine Arabic shows a significant Ottoman Turkish and Aramaic influence, testifying to centuries of cross-cultural exchange (Owens, 2020).

Beyond Arabic, languages like Persian, Turkish, and French raise the language culture plurality of the region. With significance beyond being a means of verbal communication, Persian, the official language of Iran, serves as a canvas for expression and a carrier of a wealth of pre-Islamic culture in narratives such as Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (Dabashi, 2019). The Turkish Language (Türkçe): Spoken mainly in Turkey, the impact on the context of cultural and political discourse has reached far beyond domestic borders, especially through the spread of Turkish media and cultural exports throughout the former territories of the Ottoman Empire. For example, while Arabic is the most spoken language in Algeria, Morocco, and Lebanon, French, as a remnant of colonialism, still plays a prominent role in media, education, and politics in these countries (Boumans, 2017). These competing languages serve as a reminder of how several languages intertwined in this area represent a deep-seated fabric of the region and drive the politics and culture. The struggle to determine whether Arabic or French is more authoritative in the schoolroom is a symptom of postcolonial struggles to both retain and modernize as exemplified in North Africa.

The region's traditional customs, another cornerstone of its cultural landscape, reveal a dynamic interplay between continuity and change. Marriage customs, for instance, are still deeply embedded within cultural and religious traditions, but they have also evolved to reflect modern-day social and economic realities. Arranged marriages are still largely common in most regions which mirrors the significance of family and tribal ties in determining social networks in the area (Joseph, 2020). More recently, urbanization as well as more access to education for women have brought changes to these behaviors, and most young people today make their own choices when it comes to marriage. The same could be said for the tradition of hospitality, a staple of MENA cultures, which has adapted to modern lifestyles. While the cultural imperative to host guests generously remains strong, the forms it takes—ranging from elaborate feasts to informal gatherings—highlight the adaptability of this tradition in diverse socioeconomic contexts (El Guindi, 2019).

Another aspect of traditional customs is social interaction, which is largely determined by cultural norms surrounding gender, hierarchy, and etiquette. Gender segregation in public spaces is common in many of the Gulf countries and is often intended either to express religious beliefs or to uphold cultural norms of modesty and propriety. This contrasts with the increasing challenge to these norms presented by globalization and the increased appearance of women in education and the workforce (Al-Khateeb, 2021). Even as urban youth focus on individuality more, the negotiation between traditional values and modern aspirations is manifesting itself in the region's changing social etiquette, where respect for elders and community solidarity have remained central, but are sometimes less evident in the everyday lives of the youth.

Artistic expressions, encompassing literature, music, and visual arts, serve as a powerful medium for reflecting societal values, resistance, and conflict in the MENA region literature, for example, has a long history of talking about themes of identity, displacement, and resistance. Writers like Naguib Mahfouz and Ghassan Kanafani critique societal norms lend voice to marginalized bodies through their writings, and offer penetrating insights into the social fabric of the place (Mehrez, 2019). Music and oral poetry equally have helped express a communal memory and perseverance of spirit in times of conflict and diasporas. Palestinian zajal, a type of improvised poetry, and the Algerian rai music, which has colonial roots, demonstrate the relevance of artistic practice in responding to contemporary crises while simultaneously being part of cultural heritage (Langlois, 2020).

Visual arts and cinema also play a role in the cultural landscape, offering a means through which complex questions, such as issues of gender, identity, and political oppression, can be explored. Similarly, with the films of directors such as Asghar Farhadi and Nadine Labaki, we are exposed to the dynamics of everyday living in both Iran and Lebanon and the accompanying complexities (Khatib, 2020). They document the lived experiences of many in MENA as well as pushback against both cultural erasure and political marginalization.

Political Systems and Governance

The political systems and governance frameworks of the MENA region are complex and diverse, reflecting historical legacies, cultural traditions, and modern challenges. This variety is reflected in the existence of monarchies and republics alongside one another, the persistence of tribal and familial structures, and the widespread problems of corruption, governance failures, and human rights abuses. The region's current struggles can also be understood through the lens of reform movements like the Arab Spring, which brought to light a continuous tension in the area between authoritarianism as a legacy and the dreams of building practices of governance rooted in democracy. Understanding these dynamics requires a nuanced exploration of the interplay between traditional and modern political practices, as well as the sociopolitical forces driving change.

Monarchies continue to characterize rule in several MENA countries, including Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and Jordan. These regimes are often based on historical habits of centralized rule, buttressed by ethnic loyalties and religious sanction. Other monarchies, such as that of Saudi Arabia, which blends tribal leadership with the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, create hybrid systems of authority that balance traditional tribal power and modern governance (Al-Rasheed, 2021). The government has always been a royal family until some family member sat on the throne and became king which confused the real powers of the country. Likewise, the monarchy positions itself as both a political and a spiritual leader, based on the claim of descent from the Prophet Muhammad to justify its legitimacy (Buehler, 2020). These monarchies rely on patronage and alliances with powerful tribal and religious figures to uphold stability, yet they are increasingly pressured to reform and modernize in the face of socioeconomic hardships and call for greater accountability.

Republics in the MENA region, such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria, have adopted governance structures ostensibly modeled on democratic principles but often operate under authoritarian frameworks. In Egypt, for example, the presidency exercises substantial executive authority, frequently dominating other arms of government. Political pluralism is limited by the repression of political opposition and civil society organizations despite periodic elections (Kienle, 2022). In contrast, Tunisia emerged as a success story in terms of democratic transition after the Arab Spring, adopting a new constitution, and holding competitive elections. And even in Tunisia, political polarization and economic instability confirm that democratic achievements are fragile (Yerkes, 2021). They illustrate the tension between democratic ambitions and power structures inherited from colonialism and authoritarianism in the postcolonial era.

The enduring influence of tribal and familial structures further complicates the political landscape in the MENA region. In many countries, particularly in the Gulf and parts of North Africa, tribal affiliations play a critical role in shaping political loyalties and decision-making processes. These affiliations often tend to extend beyond formal state actors to create informal networks of power and patronage that can both mitigate and erode governance. The allocation of electoral districts in Kuwait, for instance, reflects the weight of tribal constituencies in parliamentary politics, influencing legislators' prioritization and electoral strategies (Herb, 2020). In Libya, also tribal politics have been at the forefront of the different factions that emerged post-Muammar Gaddafi's fall (Pack, 2019). Governing structures are also shaped by familial structures, particularly in monarchies, where succession and leadership are often dictated by dynastic considerations. Such systems may be successful on a certain level in preserving continuity and cohesiveness, but they also tend to identify only in groups, which may remain consistent over generations, leading to nepotism and limited engagement with the rest of the population.

In the MENA region, the practice of corruption and governance challenges are pervasive, eroding trust in institutions and deepening socioeconomic inequalities. Countries in the MENA region regularly place high up on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, highlighting systemic embezzlement, nepotism, and lack of transparency in public administration (Transparency International, 2023). For instance, pervasive corruption in Iraq has impeded initiatives aimed at post-conflict reconstruction of the state, resulting in billions of dollars of public funds going missing due to recourse to fraudulent procurement practices and ineffective oversight mechanisms (Dodge, 2020). Likewise, the entrenched

sectarian system of patronage has fostered corruption at all levels of government in Lebanon, exacerbating a sclerosing crisis (Makdisi, 2021) in the country's economy, and political paralysis. Such governance challenges are further compounded by human rights violations and restrictions on freedom of expression, arbitrary detentions, and the suppression of dissent. In places like Syria or Bahrain, authoritarian regimes have employed repressive measures to retain control, frequently violating basic rights and freedoms (Human Rights Watch, 2023)

In late 2010, the Arab Spring emerged as a watershed moment in the region's political history, placing issues of governance and reform as dominant issues. In waves of popular protest and activism that were ignited by widespread anger over corruption, unemployment, and political repression, the uprisings resulted in the ouster of longstanding regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, while also spurring major reforms in other countries such as Morocco and Jordan. Tunisia stood out as an exception in the region's wider logic of failed transitions, managing to gain a negotiated transition to a new democratic framework based on negotiations and compromises between political parties (Anderson 2019). But in many other countries, the initial optimism of the Arab Spring was replaced by new authoritarianism, civil war, or political stasis. In Egypt, the military restored control after the overthrow of Mohamed Morsi, undoing the gains of the 2011 uprising (Cook, 2021). In inform, and Yemen, the revolutions turned into protracted wars, worsening humanitarian crises as well as regional instability.

Yet, despite these setbacks, the Arab Spring also catalyzed continued efforts to promote democratic governance and human rights across the MENA region. Even more grassroots movements, such as civil society organizations, have pushed towards accountability, transparency, and social justice, despite facing the threat of punishment against their lives. In Algeria, the successful mass pacifist mobilization, the Hirak movement, which initiated this critical moment in 2019, has proven the widespread, historical cry of provinces in favor of political reforms and for the end of the military role in politics and of an elite-dominated system (Volpi, 2020). Likewise, the departure of Omar al-Bashir in 2019 is described in Sudan to have been a landmark towards democratization, against the backdrop of struggles between the military and other actors over power and the political landscape in general (De Waal, 2021). These reform movements highlight the resilience and determination of MENA populations to unsettle entrenched power structures and seek more inclusive and accountable governance.

The geopolitics of the region, in which convergence of great power rivalries and international interferences, continue to shape the political systems and governance structures of the region. The rivalry among regional powers (above all, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey) frequently intensifies internal fractures and hinders political reconciliation attempts. In countries like Yemen, the war has been exacerbated by the proxy fight between Saudi Arabia and Iran in what has become a bloody war for civilians (Salisbury, 2020). Other international actors, such as the United States, Russia, and the European Union, further influence governance dynamics as well through military interventions, economic assistance, and diplomacy. While these interventions are often well-intentioned, and designed to stabilize communities and counter extremism, they can also undermine local agencies and entrench a dependency on external provision.

Contemporary Issues

Contemporary issues in the MENA region are profoundly shaped by the interplay between historical legacies, cultural norms, and modern global forces. Key areas of focus such as gender equality, education and youth, economic disparity, and globalization show both tremendous progress and enduring challenges. These are interwoven issues that, viewed together, help make sense of the complexities of cultural change across the region, as communities seek to negotiate the balance between tradition and the demands of modernity and global integration.

Gender equality in the MENA region is a complex story of progress and persistent challenges, with some areas showing crucial development while others perpetuate deep disparities. In some parts of the region, legal reforms and social activism over decades have resulted in significant improvements in women's rights. Progressive legislation targeting women's rights has emerged in Tunisia, such as legislation addressing domestic violence as well as equality in terms of inheritance rights (Charrad, 2020). Likewise, Saudi Arabia has implemented reforms granting women the ability to drive, travel without male guardianship, and take a more active role in the workforce, representing a significant change in societal mores (Al-Khateeb, 2021). State-led modernization and grassroots movements for gender equity frequently drive these developments. And yet progress does not come equally, with many women throughout the region still facing systemic barriers, including legal discrimination, limited access to education, and restricted participation in the economy.

Patriarchal norms and conservative interpretations of religious texts continue to challenge achieving gender equity. Long-established patterns of culture and society remain obstacles in countries such as Yemen and Afghanistan making it difficult for women to obtain their agency in public life (Yadav, 2022). Conflict and political instability further compound this crisis through displacement and violence, as in Syria and Libya, where women are particularly vulnerable to violence, displacement economic deprivation. Amidst such challenges, women from the MENA region are turning to digital channels to voice their grievances and fight for equality. Social media campaigns like #MeToo and #MosqueMeToo have taken off in recent times, raising concerns about sexual harassment and gender-based violence and building forms of transnational solidarity among women's rights activists (Eltantawy, 2021). Such movements highlight the strength and determination that women have to not only navigate but also challenge the restrictions placed upon them by their communities.

Across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), education has been seen as a way to connect youth with contemporary hopes and problems and create a bridge between tradition and modernity. In the last several decades, heavy investment in education has resulted in higher literacy rates and greater access to schooling, especially for girls. Some countries in the region, such as Jordan and Qatar, are even approaching universal primary education and are now expanding both secondary and tertiary education opportunities (UNESCO, 2023). These developments are part of a wider effort to prepare the young for a globalized economy while maintaining their cultural identity. But education systems across the region have long struggled with archaic curricula, bloated classrooms, and a disconnect between students' winning grades and market needs.

The dual demands of modern education and cultural preservation create a unique tension in the MENA region. For example, on one hand, there is a growing focus on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) education to facilitate creativity and economic growth, as the establishment of institutions like the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in Saudi Arabia indicates. On the flip side, education systems are responsible for maintaining linguistic, religious, and cultural traditions, especially in countries where language and religion are closely linked to national identity (Al-Issa, 2020). However, this dual mandate also creates disparities in the quality and outcomes of education, with urban areas typically receiving better resources and infrastructure than rural and disadvantaged communities. In addition, in conflict-affected countries such as Yemen and Syria millions are out of school due to the displacement

associated with conflict and violence (UNICEF, 2023), creating an additional barrier to education. Despite these challenges, youth in the region demonstrate remarkable resilience and adaptability, with many leveraging technology and online platforms to access educational resources and pursue self-directed learning.

Another concern is economic inequality which significantly correlates with the social and political dynamics in the MENA region. The concentration of wealth among a small elite makes the majority poorer and less viable for themselves. Resource-rich Gulf states such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have been endowed with vast stores of wealth that have allowed for a rapid and luxurious standard of life. Nonetheless, wealth is often concentrated in these states with migrant workers facing exploitative conditions and little access to social services (Gardner, 2022). In contrast, resource-poor countries such as Egypt and Jordan struggle with high unemployment rates and inadequate social safety nets, leaving large segments of the population vulnerable to economic shocks.

The economic divergences in MENA are also interlinked with political corruption fronts. Patronage networks²⁶ and weak institutions²⁷ have ensured that when resources are distributed, they are rarely done so equitably, producing perverse cycles of poverty and social exclusion. Similarly, Lebanon has seen a combination of economic mismanagement and political corruption that has resulted in a damaging financial crisis, which has sapped public confidence in the government and fueled mass protests (Makdisi, 2021). In the same vein, in Iraq, due to the corrupt and inefficient oil sector, economic diversification and sustainable development have remained hampered, despite the country's huge resource blessings (Dodge, 2020). Comprehensive reforms aimed at fostering transparency, accountability, and inclusive economic policies, along with investments in education, healthcare, and infrastructure, are necessary to address these disparities and promote equality and social cohesion.

The complexities of globalization also intensify the region's current challenges, as MENA societies face a tension between embracing globalization and revealing, adopting, or maintaining traditional practices based on shared cultural values. However, it is also the era of digital technologies, and global communication networks that speed cultural exchange, and economic integration while presenting opportunities and challenges. Globalization, on the one hand, has opened international markets, encouraged innovation, and broadened the cultural outlook of MENA societies. Conversely, it has also created concerns about the loss of

both cultural diversity and traditional values. One such consideration is the rising influence of Western consumerist culture, especially through social media and entertainment, inspiring discourse regarding cultural authenticity and the effects of globalization on youth identity (Hassan, 2020).

Balancing global influences with local traditions requires a nuanced approach that respects cultural diversity while embracing modernity. In countries like Morocco and Tunisia, efforts to promote cultural heritage through tourism and the arts demonstrate how globalization can be harnessed to preserve and celebrate local traditions. The emergence of regional media such as Al Jazeera and MBC, which has amplified Arab voices and perspectives in a media landscape often dominated by Western narratives, has also emerged. However, these efforts are not without challenges, as globalization also amplifies economic disparity and political tensions. As an example, the accelerated influx of foreign capital and urbanization is seen to have reconstructed social structures in Gulf states, offering opportunities yet producing cultural disruption (Davidson, 2021). Likewise, the dependence on global supply chains and foreign assistance in conflict-affected countries like Yemen and Sudan reveals the region's weakness to external economic forces and geopolitical situations.

Conclusion

The MENA region represents a tapestry of cultural richness and complex political, social, and economic dynamics, shaped by millennia of historical legacies and contemporary influences. The history of the MENA region is one of ancient civilizations evolving into modern nation-states, influenced by the complex relations of religion, language, tradition, government, and external forces that define its unique and diverse character. Such complexity can be essential for understanding and explaining the region's challenges and opportunities.

Historical legacies shed light on how empires, colonialism, and tribal structures shape the political and cultural landscapes of the MENA region today. These strata of history are not just remnants left in the backdrop of history that are passively resurrected in contemporary institutional arrangements, social practices, and collectivization processes. While the region's ability to nurture and protect its heritage whilst still progressing toward the future demonstrates a level of resilience, this adaptive approach is not without lingering friction between conservative ideologies and the influences of globalization.

Cultural landscapes demonstrate the diversity of MENA in terms of religion, language, social practices, and art forms, all of which contribute to the region's vibrant identity. Religion, especially Islam, acts as both a unifying factor and as a source of diversity, influencing societal values and governance structures, while linguistic and cultural pluralism, reflects the region's historical richness and complexity. Traditional customs rooted in hospitality, such as meeting and greeting, gradually adjusted themselves to modern times, balancing the enduring nature of customs with the ever-shifting social landscape.

The region's political systems and governance structures, which include a combination of monarchies, republics, and tribal affiliations, are also a case and point. Systemic barriers to progress are evident in the governance challenges and corruption, human rights issues, and economic disparities that plague the region. Reform movements, such as the Arab Spring, illustrate both the ambitions and challenges of populations struggling for democratic governance, human rights, and accountability. These efforts reflect a wider balancing of authoritarian legacies with demands for inclusive governance.

Modern challenges like gender equality, education, economic inequality, and globalization highlight the interconnectivity of MENA's problems. Although there has been progress in fields like women's rights and education, there are still inequalities and structural obstacles that need to be addressed. Economic inequality is an enduring challenge, contributing to social and political unrest, and while the forces of globalization offer prospects, they also incite tensions as the region grapples with the demands of modern integration and the protection of cultural heritage.

The traditional MENA region is like a living sculpture as it lives through its roots, ideals, and beliefs in the present time while offering a mixed answer to all the challenges and experiences presented by the modern world. Its difficulties are multiple and interspecific, calling for holistic solutions that acknowledge its diversity and complexity. Grasping and tackling these dynamics is not only key to the region's advancement but also to bringing forward a global dialogue and cooperation. The MENA region could thus harness its cultural wealth and tackle systemic hurdles to reshape itself as a beacon of resilience and creativity, uniquely blending deep-rooted heritage with transformative prospects.

THE FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION IS A LEGAL OBLIGATION FOR MENA STATES

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Abstract

Corruption in business conduct and State institutions exists in most countries regardless of their political and economic systems. The MENA region is not immune from this phenomenon, which has negative impacts on the development of business, the efficiency of State action, and the performance of the economy. Corruption is also a cross-border phenomenon that accompanies the development of international transactions, investment, and trade. The purpose of this chapter is to look at the way MENA countries tackle corruption at the international and regional levels through agreements and commitments to implement a common anti-corruption agenda, by their domestic frameworks, and in respect of the principle of State sovereignty. The chapter also deals with what can be considered a diversion of this anti-corruption agenda, which is the practice, mainly by the United States of imposing its anti-corruption law in different regions including the MENA region, accompanied by coercive measures, jeopardizing the sovereignty of States and the business of economic operators.

Keywords: Corruption, international obligations, treaties, cooperation, sovereignty, unilateral sanctions, extraterritoriality.

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