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# *Fragile States in the Middle East and North Africa*

Since their independence, Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa have built State institutions that have gradually ensured the provision of public services and the development of their populations. Despite the foreign dictate of borders and the persistence of powerful inter-country social relations, strong feelings of national identity have developed within each country.

Since then, however, these state institutions have suffered various shocks and crises due to internal social transformations, interactions between countries, external interventions, and international changes.

Several of these States find themselves today in a fragile situation. The World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) thus currently classify Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Palestine (Gaza and the West Bank), Somalia, Syria, Sudan, and Yemen within their list of "Fragile and Conflict-Affected States".<sup>2</sup> And the Fund for Peace puts other countries on warning<sup>3</sup> of worsening fragility.

It should be noted that the classification of a country as a "Fragile State" changes the potentiality of assistance or aid mechanisms of international institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank, the G7, the European Union, or development agencies. More than one-sixth of the world's population now lives in fragile states<sup>4</sup>.

Various international institutions have developed their own definitions of state fragility<sup>5</sup>. These definitions are generally expressed in terms of situations where a country's institutions are no longer able to manage internal social, economic, and security challenges, as well as protect their citizens from external threats. The reasons for this fragility are expressed as resulting from internal crises, such as the breakdown of the social contract, and/or external ones, such as the Covid pandemic, the war in Ukraine, or foreign destabilization.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.economistes-arabes.org/fr/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/fragile-and-conflict-affected-states>

<sup>3</sup> <https://fragilestatesindex.org/2023/06/14/fragile-states-index-2023-annual-report/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/accelerating-development-fragile-states-role-oecd-development-assistance-committee>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_emp/documents/terminology/wcms\\_504528.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/terminology/wcms_504528.pdf)

The Fund for Peace defines fragile States according to several groups of indicators:

State Cohesion: Security apparatus failure, Factionalised elites, Social groups grievances

Economic Situation: Economic decline, Uneven economic Development, Human flight and Brain Drain

Political Situation: State legitimacy, Public services, Human rights and Rule of Law

Social Situation: Demographic pressures, Refugees and IDPs, External interventions.

But these different definitions are no more than observations, without taking into account the wide diversity of situations, the dynamics at play, and the possible ways out of fragility.

One dimension is notably absent. It concerns the regional cooperation and groupings, at a time when they have become stronger in a now multipolar world and have helped stabilize their member states, as in the case of the European Union and Eastern European countries after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The Arab League, founded in 1944 as a regional grouping, may itself be classified as institutionally fragile. By contrast, the Gulf Cooperation Council, which brings together the League's richest countries, has been more structuring and has strengthened its already wealthy members alone. The Euro-Mediterranean partnership has neither strengthened cooperation between the two shores nor encouraged cooperation between the countries of the southern rim due to the way it has been conceived. The Union for the Mediterranean, on the other hand, remains an empty shell.

The role of external powers is also downplayed. Yet this role is essential for the analysis of the mechanisms induced by the creation of the State of Israel and its expansion in the region, as well as on the very "stability" of Israel as a model state for the region, as recent events have shown. Other dimensions of multipolar competition are also significant.

The scale of the "Arab Spring" events of 2010-2011 showed that the foundations of fragility existed long before these years and that they had a regional dimension. Several states were unable to peacefully manage the social challenges raised by the protests; external

interventions exacerbated the crises in many cases, transforming the unrest into civil and proxy wars. Twelve years on, the fragilities triggered by the "Spring" have worsened and become structural.

The first major dynamic of fragility is demographic and social. Most countries in the region are currently experiencing an acceleration in rural-urban migration and a youth bulge. As in Europe in the 1960s, this "youth tsunami" aspires to change the social contract governing the State. Such change is not facilitated by the fact that these countries are multi-community and multi-ethnic, with strong local particularities.

Such dynamic is combined with the dynamic of refugees and external migrations, which are far more significant than those currently being castigated in Europe. The countries of the region have suffered the successive shocks of Palestinian refugees, as well as Sudanese, Iraqi, Syrian, and, more recently, African refugees. This is to be added to shocks from massive labour migration, seasonal or more permanent, between Arab countries (Egyptians in Iraq and then Libya, Arab workers in the Gulf States, Syrians in Lebanon until 2005, not to mention Palestinians in the Occupied Territories).

New social contracts are struggling to emerge. Notions of nationhood and equal citizenship are undermined by the Israeli model of a communitarian state and by the re-emergence of sectarian or ethnic demands, manipulated by external powers, whether regional or distant, in the name of "minority" or "majority" rights. Such rights, with complex dimensions, are denied inside these same external powers in the name of national "integration". In this context, claims for federalism, or even de facto partitions, are emerging, rather than a concerted decentralization which could have optimised the action of the State and brought it closer to citizens.

Certain "elites" have also risen as a power above the State, undermining it, and leaving the latter with few real mechanisms for adaptation and consequent transformation. The extremely long terms in office of those in power and the tendency towards hereditary transmission, even in republics with an elective constitution, have created frustration at the absence of renewal. What's more, the failure to limit the prerogatives of these powers, in kingdoms and republics alike, has undermined their legitimacy.

The economic development model that has prevailed

everywhere has been aligned with that of the rentier States. Impeded by the social challenges, it has failed to ensure the necessary job creation and social protection. The relay was taken over by community and identity-based networks, and even by political formations and armed groups, often financed from abroad, working to weaken the State.

Remarkably, the majority of non-agricultural employment in these countries consists of informal urban salaried jobs, with no health or pension insurance<sup>6</sup>. The adoption of the "Washington Consensus" called for by international institutions has led to cuts in investment and spending on public services (health, education, etc.) in the midst of a "youth tsunami", exacerbating frustrations and mechanisms of fragility.

This dominant economic model is also characterized by recurrent financial crises, in foreign debt and foreign currency holdings, all not correlated to global crises. The "oil counter-shock" of the 1980s, for example, led to financial crises in several countries, and even to the cessation of foreign payments for some. This scenario has been re-emerging in recent years, with the example of the Lebanese crisis of 2019, in which external financial interventions have only delayed and amplified into one of the greatest crises known on an international scale.

Inequalities in the distribution of wealth and public services between social categories and between regions have widened in every country. Inequalities have deepened between oil-producing Arab countries and others. Together, these economic and financial aspects constitute a second dynamic of fragility.

All this has resulted in a loss of States' legitimacy as national glue, as a monopoly on the use of force based on social consensus, and as organizers of wealth redistribution.

A third major dynamic of fragility lies in the transformation of the aspirations for strong regional cooperation into competition and conflicts. Economic and political cooperation projects between Arab countries have given way to inter-Arab conflicts based on alignment with groups of powers, or under the guise of various religious, ethnic, or territorial differences. The notion of

regional peace has taken on multiple dimensions.

These dynamics led to the fragility and decomposition of Sudan in successive stages from the 1950s onwards, to a similar process in Somalia, to the events of "Black September" in Jordan in 1970, to the Lebanese Civil War between 1975 and 1990, to the two wars in Iraq in 1990 and 2003, and to the civil and proxy wars in Libya, Yemen, and Syria. Interventions from outside the region, whether military or political, in the name of "democracy promotion" have simply exacerbated these conflicts.

Several countries are thus caught in the "fragility trap", and others are on the verge of falling into it following the shocks they have suffered. International institutions, such as the United Nations Security Council for conflicts, as well as the IMF, WB, and G8 for economic and financial aspects, play a significant role in this "fragility trap".

The practices of these international institutions are not always effective in this respect, and can even be counter-productive. The "fragility trap" of States can be accentuated by the "traps" of international and regional power competitions, exacerbated by multipolarity.

And while restoring the cohesion and effectiveness of the State is the priority for overcoming fragility (institutions, institutions, institutions! ...), including in terms of security, little differentiation is made between State and power. The terminology "regime" is often used to denigrate the legitimacy of States, and communal or ethnic conflicts are unreservedly supported, making it difficult for a new national social contract to emerge.

For the consequence of the weakening of States is the emergence of sub-state groups, often heterogeneous, sharing only the desire to undermine the State, taking each other's lead, and developing criminal economies, including drug and human trafficking, to finance themselves. As a result, many countries in the region are moving towards a non-State model. The advocated "creative chaos" has generated nothing but chaos.

In addition, the mechanisms for economic and financial

6 <https://www.economistes-arabes.org/fr/the-informal-employment-in-the-arab-countries-statistics-and-challenges/>

assistance and, even more so, the unilateral sanctions imposed, tend to reduce the possibilities of economic recovery, thereby perpetuating fragility. For example, the IMF's regulatory bodies recognize the difficulties inherent in assisting fragile States: "that outcomes of any IMF intervention in fragile states depend on a range of political, military, and security decisions including by international actors that lie well outside its control"<sup>7</sup>. The same applies to current mechanisms for replacing development aid with humanitarian aid.

However, analysis of international experience has led to certain pragmatic recommendations for overcoming fragility, taking into account the complexity and diversity of situations<sup>8</sup>: realism and not idealism; national priorities and not international priorities; reconciliation first rather than prioritizing elections; work with governments and not bypass them; building institutions in parallel with nation-building.

The fact remains that the "elites" of the countries in the region that have fallen into the "fragility trap", or are on the brink of doing so, as well as others, must seize every possible opportunity to address the State-related, social, economic and political challenges posed. The channels of regional cooperation and grouping will have a major role to play in creating, or failing to create, such opportunities.

The only way of avoiding even more devastating crises and shocks in the entire region is through a regional cooperation scheme, with international support, helping countries falling into fragility to recover the legitimacy of their States, and working to reduce local and regional tensions.

The "tsunami of youth" in the region is far from over and the financial crises are escalating. Strong economic growth is needed to contain these challenges. The next waves will affect populations that are now considerably impoverished, and largely deprived of education and health services. Their effects will strengthen non-state actors and extend beyond the countries directly affected, to the whole region and Europe.

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7 Independent Evaluation Office (IEO): The IMF and the Fragile States, Evaluation Report 2018.

8 Commission on State Fragility, Growth and Development: Escaping the Fragility Trap, April 2018.