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The Impact of Persistent and Recurring Conflicts on Authoritarian Consolidation and the Democratic Deficit in the Middle East

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Abstract: Recurring conflicts do not necessarily weaken political regimes or pave the way for democratic transition. On the contrary, they may contribute to reinforcing authoritarianism, further consolidating existing power structures. In this context, this study examines the relationship between ongoing and recurring conflicts, the consolidation of authoritarianism, and the democratic deficit in the Middle East. It also examines how the historical legacies of colonialism and new imperialism interact with domestic political elites and external actors' interventions to shape political institutions and consolidate authoritarian rule. The study adopts a qualitative, historical, and analytical approach to trace the evolution of political structures and to examine the political and institutional implications of regional conflicts. The findings suggest that conflicts are not merely obstacles to democratic development; they may also provide ruling elites with opportunities to reinforce existing power structures through security measures, institutional arrangements, and external alliances. The study argues that the relationship between conflict and authoritarianism is interactive rather than linear, as authoritarian regimes can adapt to recurring crises and exploit them to preserve existing power arrangements. These findings highlight the importance of analyzing historical legacies alongside contemporary political dynamics to understand the persistence of authoritarianism and the determinants of the democratic deficit in the region.

Keywords: Colonialism; Neo-imperialism; Energy security; Foreign intervention; Political elites

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1. Introduction

The Middle East occupies a pivotal position in international political dynamics due to its geopolitical significance, strategic resources such as oil and gas, and its function as a corridor connecting key global regions. These factors have established the region as a site of competition among international and regional powers. As a result, economic and strategic interests are closely linked with foreign interventions and regional conflicts, collectively influencing the political evolution of the area throughout various historical periods (Ghazala & Ahmed, 2025).

The effects of these conflicts have not been limited to international power balances or control over resources; they have also extended to shaping the state, its institutions, and its systems of governance. Following independence, countries in the region inherited institutional structures and political practices shaped by the colonial experience, including the nature of state–society relations and the position of civil institutions within the political system. These legacies interacted with the interests of ruling elites and external alliances in contexts marked by persistent tensions and conflicts, thereby complicating the trajectories of political development and the prospects for institutional change (Alrubaie et al., 2005, p. 19).

According to this, the study examines conflicts in the Middle East as an interconnected historical and geopolitical phenomenon that extends beyond direct military confrontations to include competition over influence and resources, foreign interventions, and the related changes in power structures. It focuses on the relationship between these conflicts and authoritarian consolidation, with particular attention to how their historical roots interact with their persistence and recurrence in the present, and how this may affect the prospects for democratic transition in the region.

2. Research Problem

The continuation of authoritarianism and the stalled process of democratic transition in the Middle East represent one of the region's most significant political challenges, particularly given the limited attention paid to the historical roots of colonialism and new imperialism and their enduring effects on state structures, systems of governance, and state-society relations. This highlights the importance of understanding the relationship between these historical roots and the persistence and recurrence of conflicts in the region, as interconnected processes rather than isolated

events. The interaction among colonial legacies, ongoing conflicts, the interests of ruling regimes and political elites, and external alliances has created conditions that reinforce the consolidation and reproduction of authoritarianism while limiting prospects for democratic transition.

The significance of this problem became particularly evident in the difficulties faced by the political transformations that followed the Arab Spring Uprisings of 2011 (Hinnebusch, 2014, p. 17). Popular uprisings in several countries in the region did not lead to sustainable democratic transitions. Instead, some cases witnessed the return or reconsolidation of authoritarian rule, while others, including Syria, Libya, and Yemen, experienced a shift towards armed conflict (Clausen, Hassan, Malmvig, & Khorto, 2018, p. 2). These trajectories raise questions about the extent to which the historical roots of conflicts, together with their persistence and recurrence, help explain stalled democratic transition and the reproduction of authoritarian patterns of governance in the Middle East. Accordingly, this study seeks to analyze the relationship between colonialism, neo-imperialism, and the persistence of conflicts in the region, and to explain their role in consolidating authoritarianism and impeding democratic transition.

Against this background, this study addresses the following central research question: How does the persistence and recurrence of conflicts in the Middle East, in interaction with colonial legacies, neo-imperialism, local elite interests, and foreign interventions, contribute to authoritarian consolidation and stalled democratic transition?

To answer this question, the study advances a central claim: the persistence and recurrence of conflicts are major factors contributing to authoritarian consolidation and stalled democratic transition in the Middle East, within a context in which colonial legacies, neo-imperialism, local elite interests, and foreign interventions interact with conflict dynamics and their political and institutional consequences.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three interrelated theoretical perspectives: historical institutionalism, the literature on authoritarian reproduction and elite interests, and the relationship between conflicts and foreign interventions. Together, these perspectives help explain how persistent, recurring conflicts consolidate

authoritarianism and hinder democratic transition in the Middle East, where colonial legacies interact with local elite interests and foreign interventions.

3.1. Historical Institutionalism

Historical institutionalism emphasizes that political institutions develop along historical paths that can shape their later evolution through path dependence (Pierson, 2000, pp. 251-252). Established institutional rules and practices may constrain opportunities for change without making change impossible (Hall & Taylor, 1996, pp. 938-941). In the context of the Middle East, this perspective helps explain how patterns of governance that emerged during the colonial period influenced the development of state institutions after independence and contributed to the continuation of certain mechanisms of exercising political power. The effects of this legacy are not limited to institutional structures; they also interact with subsequent conflicts and their evolving trajectories.

3.2. Authoritarian Reproduction and Elite Interests

Historical continuity alone cannot fully explain the persistence of authoritarian regimes. The interests and political choices of local elites also play an important role in maintaining existing patterns of rule. From this perspective, institutions are not merely structures inherited from earlier periods; they may also serve as mechanisms through which ruling elites preserve their power and protect their interests. In this context, Levitsky and Way explain that early crises and existential threats arising from civil and external counterrevolutionary wars may prompt elites to establish strong institutional and organizational arrangements that help protect the regime from coups and defections (Levitsky & Way, 2022, pp. 4-5). Hinnebusch, in turn, highlights the specific features of authoritarian persistence in the Middle East by examining the interplay among institutionalized power, social structures, and the interests of political actors. He explains how institutions, patronage networks, and the political and economic interests of elites help maintain existing patterns of rule and limit opportunities for democratic transition (Hinnebusch, 2006, pp. 382-386).

In accordance with these perspectives, this study examines how the institutional legacy of colonialism interacts with the interests and strategies of local elites to maintain and reproduce authoritarian rule. It does not assume that any of these factors independently or inevitably determine political outcomes. Rather, it

examines their interaction to explain the persistence of authoritarianism and the constraints on democratic transition.

3.3. Conflict and Foreign Intervention as Factors in Authoritarian Consolidation

Persistent conflicts and foreign interventions are critical structural factors in authoritarian consolidation and stalled democratic transition in the Middle East, as they interact dynamically with political institutions and elite interests. This argument draws on Bellin's (2004) thesis, which holds that foreign intervention and international geopolitical interests can strengthen the state's coercive apparatus by providing strategic rents that sustain substantial military expenditure and reinforce institutional loyalty. These conflicts do not operate independently of domestic politics; rather, ruling elites may exploit them to establish a form of exceptional legitimacy (Bellin, 2004, pp. 147-152).

The historical persistence of the Arab – Israeli conflict has strengthened the military and security roles of the state and expanded state authority, while restricting political participation under the justification of national security and perceived existential threats (Lawrence, 1992, pp. 438-439). International interests, particularly within the framework of neo-imperialism, intersect with local elites' efforts to maintain power. This interaction reduces pressure on regimes to implement democratic reforms or negotiate comprehensive political settlements, thereby entrenching and perpetuating authoritarian structures throughout the region.

4. Conceptual and Analytical Framework of the Research

4.1. Conceptual Clarification of Key Terms of the Research

4.1.1. Authoritarianism

In line with Linz's ideal type in political sociology, authoritarianism is defined as: "*a regime grounded in a political mentality rather than an explicit ideology, driven by military and non-ideological control while permitting limited pluralism within the power structure. Its ruling party lacks political mobilization and organizational membership constraints, utilizing the apparatus for defense rather than terror, with a primary focus on monopolizing the government, army, and police. Consequently,*

tradition recedes as a source of legitimacy, yielding to alternative benchmarks of competence, rationalization, and performance." (Abdelkafi, 2004, pp. 273-274).

4.1.2. Colonialism and Colonial Legacy

Colonialism refers to: "The action, or a group of actions, that would control or extend influence by a state, or an organized group of people, over an area of land that did not belong to them. Or on the inhabitants of that territory, or the territory and the people together." (Muhammad, 1957, pp. 38-39).

The term "colonial legacy" in the Middle East denotes the persistent political, social, and economic consequences resulting from the actions of imperial powers, including Britain and France, during the colonial and mandate periods. This legacy is evident in the creation of artificial national borders, the division of societies along sectarian or ethnic lines, and the implementation of authoritarian governance structures. These factors continue to impede sustainable democratic transitions and contribute to ongoing regional conflicts (Owen, 2004, pp. 3-9).

4.1.3. Imperialism

According to Dr. Mieke van der Linden, imperialism is defined as: *"The relationship, whether direct or indirect, of superiority, domination, or control of one nation over another is mainly driven by political and/or economic considerations. It represents the hierarchical relationship between two nations, encompassing the tools that one nation uses to exercise power over another through settlement, sovereignty, or indirect control mechanisms."* (Linden, 2017, p. 2).

4.1.4. Neo-imperialism

Neo-imperialism represents the contemporary historical development of monopoly capitalism, which is characterized by the globalization of the economy and the dominance of financial capital. It is based on five interconnected pillars: the monopoly of production and circulation through multinational corporations; the monopoly of financial capital and the resulting dominance of financialization in the economy; the monopoly of the US dollar and intellectual property, which deepens inequalities in the international division of labor and wealth distribution; the monopoly of international alliances of capitalist oligarchies, led by one hegemonic power and several major powers; and, finally, its economic foundation and general trend, which are characterized by the continued expansion of dominance through this monopolistic structure (Enfu & Baolin, 2021).

4.1.5. Consolidation of Authoritarianism

In line with Christian Goebel, the concept of authoritarian consolidation in contemporary political science refers to the systematic process through which the ruling elite strengthens the authoritarian regime's capacity to survive and endure by consolidating its control over the main institutions of the state and transforming the mechanisms of governance from exclusive reliance on direct military repression to domination through formal institutions and organizations (Goebel, 2010, p. 176).

4.2. The Analytical Framework of Research

This section builds upon the theoretical perspectives presented in this study by formulating a conceptual and analytical framework that explains how historical legacies, domestic political dynamics, and external factors interact to shape authoritarianism, facilitate its consolidation, and impede democratic transition in the Middle East. The framework defines the colonial legacy as a historical context that has influenced the formation and evolution of political institutions and governance patterns. These institutional arrangements interact with the interests and strategies of local elites, who utilize existing structures to maintain power and perpetuate authoritarian rule. Persistent conflicts, foreign interventions, and geopolitical interests further reinforce security-oriented governance, strengthen ruling elites, and constrain political participation and democratic change. Rather than treating these factors as independent causes, the study views them as interconnected processes that mutually reinforce one another, providing an analytical basis for examining the reproduction of authoritarian rule and the persistent constraints on democratic transition in the region. Figure 1 depicts the explanatory relationships among these factors, the mechanisms of their interaction, and the resulting political outcomes.

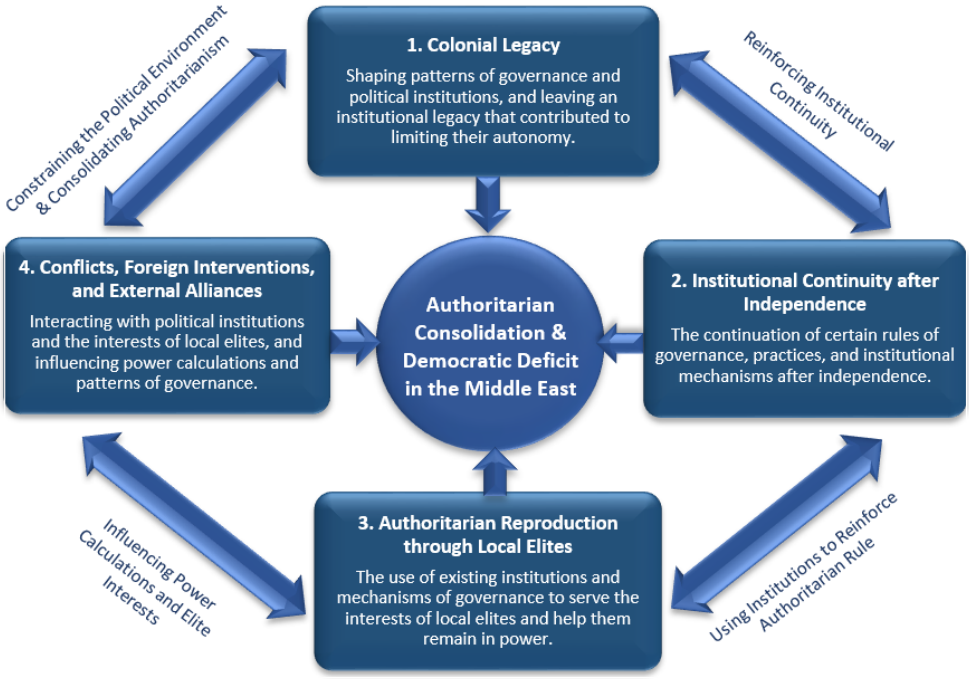

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of the Interactions Reinforcing Authoritarianism in the Middle East

Source: Author's own elaboration

5. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2009, pp. 70-77) with a historical and analytical orientation to examine the relationship between the continuation and recurrence of conflicts in the Middle East, the consolidation of authoritarianism, and the stalled process of democratic transition. Within this approach, the two main methods are the historical method (Salatnia & El-Jilani, 2012, pp. 59-74) and the descriptive-analytical method (Ubaidat, Adas & Abdul Haq, 2021, pp. 179-219). The historical method traces the development of patterns of rule and political institutions since the colonial period and examines the continuity of certain mechanisms for exercising power after independence. The descriptive-analytical method, in turn, examines patterns of regional conflicts and their development and analyzes how they interact with political institutions, the interests of ruling elites, and external interventions and alliances.

The analysis focuses on how the continuation and recurrence of conflicts shape the political environment in which ruling regimes operate, and how these conflicts interact with the colonial legacy, neo-imperialism, and the interests of local elites in ways that may contribute to the consolidation of authoritarianism and limit opportunities for democratic transition. Accordingly, conflicts are examined within their historical and political contexts rather than as isolated events.

The study draws on secondary sources, including relevant academic books, scholarly articles, and historical and political studies. These sources are critically examined to identify patterns and explanatory mechanisms and to assess the links between the colonial legacy, the continuity of mechanisms of rule, elite interests, conflicts, and external interventions. The study also draws on historical and political developments discussed in the sources to illustrate how historical, regional, domestic, and external factors interact, while accounting for differences across national and regional contexts. Given its reliance on secondary sources and its broad geographical and historical scope, the study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach with two objectives: to analyze how recurring conflicts consolidate authoritarianism and hinder democratic transition in the Middle East, and to identify how these conflicts interact with historical, domestic, and external factors.

6. Conflict in the Middle East: A Brief History

6.1. Historical Roots and Geostrategic Significance

Before the Roman Empire, the Middle East experienced military, religious, economic, and colonial struggles. Although the United States initially seemed distant, it became involved in the region in the early nineteenth century by participating in battles against the Barbary pirates in North Africa (Gerner, 2003, p. 19). The Middle East's geography is its most significant and dangerous feature. Historically, its strategic importance has played a key role in shaping the fate of its inhabitants. In the 19th century, it was a crucial link between Europe and Asia, serving as a major transportation artery for the British Empire. The region's significance is further heightened by its status as the birthplace of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, which has made it a battleground for ideologies and conflicts (Alkaki, 1986, p. 154).

The Middle East has historically occupied a pivotal position due to its geographical centrality, influencing neighboring regions while maintaining its unique strategic

significance. On January 22, 1916, the German writer Ernst Jäckh stated in the German magazine *"Deutsche Politik": "The war comes from the East, and the war will break out because of the East, and it will be decided in the East."* (Zain, 1971, p. 14). Concerning the historical stages that the region has gone through, it is possible to divide these developments into three important stages (Alkaki, 1986, pp. 154-155):

- **The first stage** is the development of ancient civilizations, especially Egypt and Iraq;
- **The second stage** is characterized by the decline between the sixteenth century and the end of the First World War in 1918;
- **The third stage,** called the contemporary stage, extends from the end of the First World War until our time.

The intense colonial rivalry in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries drove significant European nations to expand their empires, particularly in the Middle East. The French controlled parts of North-West and Central Africa, while the British took Egypt, the Persian Gulf, and southern Yemen and Iraq. Italy aimed to compete by asserting influence over Libya and other African territories. Despite differing colonial policies and the diverse nature of Arab societies, European powers sometimes employed similar engagement methods. This variation reflects each region's specific contexts and each colonial state's goals (Ahmed, 2021, p. 1).

In the early 20th century, the discovery of oil in the Middle East significantly increased the region's strategic importance. This development led to escalating international conflicts, especially after World War II, as it highlighted the area's critical role in global oil distribution and intensified competition between major powers like the United States and Russia (Alkaki, 1986, pp. 164-165).

The Muslim Arabs of the Middle East dreamed of liberation and unity after discovering their energy resources. However, in 1920, the English and French imposed political divisions that dashed these hopes. This led to a desire for unification during the 1930s, fueled by the rise of Islamism and Arabism, which believed that problems of development could be addressed through unity. Post-World War II brought a brief period of independence and optimism, marked by the establishment of the Arab League and the shift of influence from European powers to the United States. However, the declaration of the state of Israel by Zionism ignited the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict (Lawrence, 1992, p. 438).

European Jews were instrumental in establishing a Jewish state in the nineteenth century. Initially, they focused on escaping persecution and showed little interest in the presence of others in Palestine, but their ambitions evolved (Brieger, 2012, p. 19).

The Arab - Israeli conflict has led to the emergence of powerful, dictatorial states in the region as countries sought to confront Zionist expansion and ensure their survival. This ongoing conflict has driven front-line states to strengthen their militaries while prompting others to seek support from great powers for security. It has also fueled the rise of Arabism and Islamism, legitimizing combative ideologies. Ultimately, the conflict serves as a driving force in contemporary Arab history, with the ideologies and policies of Arab states acting as tools rather than ends in themselves (Lawrence, 1992, pp. 438-439).

In the changing international context of the Middle East, foreign affairs during the mid-20th century were largely shaped by two major conflicts: the Arab -Israeli conflict and the Cold War. As the Cold War ended by the early 21st century, the Arab - Israeli conflict persisted, with both conflicts having lasting repercussions on the region's internal politics and future (Gerner, 2003, pp. 143-144).

6.2. International Conflict over Energy in the Middle East, and its Implications

The Middle East has a long history marked by international conflicts. These conflicts are driven by two main factors: the region's strategic location and its substantial oil wealth as a significant power supply in the world (Berjas, 2000, p. 360), depending on the fact that energy security is considered an essential element of state power and a decisive tool for exerting influence (Rashad, 2022, p. 122). Contemporary history has seen no commodity impact destinies like oil, influencing economies, politics, and security while driving wars and conflicts. The Middle East, particularly the Arab countries, has faced significant dangers over oil since its discovery. Although conflicts existed before, the considerable oil reserves heightened the region's importance, drawing colonial ambitions and leading to intense struggles to control this vital resource (Berjas, 2000, pp. 153-154). Such development occurred especially since energy security relies on dealing with three key challenges: ensuring a stable energy supply, maintaining safe extraction, transmission, and consumption practices, and finally, enhancing energy efficiency for environmental, economic, and social benefits (Rashad, 2022, p. 133). In history, Britain was the first major power

to initiate a global conflict over Middle Eastern oil resources and sought concessions for exploration beyond its borders. Other countries like Germany, France, and later the USA followed suit. Before World War I, the great colonial powers competed for hegemony in the Middle East due to its geographic location and natural resources. With the war's outbreak in 1914, the region's importance surged, especially its oil, which became crucial for warfare as Britain switched its naval fleet from coal to oil under Sir Winston Churchill. During this time, U.S. oil companies supplied around 70% of the oil needed by the Allied forces against Germany (Berjas, 2000, pp. 200-204). At that time, the United States was concerned about its dependence on Middle Eastern oil due to a projected global shortage and sought alternatives to meet oil demand, particularly cheap and easy-to-transport options (Sorour, 2016). Thus, the war highlighted the necessity of oil for national security, underscoring the importance of controlling the region's oil wealth in the military strategies of major powers. It also revealed how Western nations benefited economically from privileges in the area, with local countries receiving only a fraction of their natural wealth, particularly from oil resources (Berjas, 2000, p. 205).

The Middle East became a focal point in international conflicts over Arab oil wealth, particularly after World War II, as Western demand for energy grew. Recognizing the region's vast economic and oil reserves, the West, especially the United States, sought to weaken and fragment Arab countries to prevent oil from becoming a political tool. This concern intensified following the 1973 war when Arab nations used oil to pressure the West and prompt Israel's withdrawal from occupied territories, underscoring oil's significance in global relations (Matar, 2020). Not only that, but the strategy of using oil as a political weapon can achieve what military action has not, given that Arab oil supplies 30% of U.S. needs and about 80% of the needs of its key allies, including Japan and the European Economic Community (Miloud, 2018, p. 139).

The United States aims to control key oil sources in the Arab Gulf region to maintain its interests and influence. The second Gulf War provided an opportunity for the U.S. to establish a military presence, initially to expel Saddam Hussein from Kuwait and protect the Gulf States. Since then, U.S. forces have increased in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain. The U.S. views the region as strategically serious for accessing oil reserves and securing transportation routes while also ensuring Israel's security. Under President Trump, the U.S. shifted to a model of protection in exchange for money, complicating Arab national security and fostering ongoing conflict. The involvement of international powers highlights the political and

economic complexities as the region continues to face significant unrest (Matar, 2020).

Since its emergence, the oil conflict has highlighted economic, security, political, and military repercussions as follows:

- Economic repercussions: Conflicts negatively impact economic activity by reducing human and material capital due to casualties and population displacements, destroying infrastructure, and disrupting trade. This leads to lower growth rates and increased pressure on public budgets from higher spending on security and military needs, ultimately burdening the poor and vulnerable while degrading public services (Fund, 2015, p. 21);

- Security implications: The oil conflict in the region poses significant challenges to Arab national security, exacerbated by inter-ethnic disputes and bilateral conflicts. Many oil-producing countries, such as Iraq, heavily depend on oil revenues for their economies. As a result, a drop in oil prices could lead to a financial crisis, particularly for nations that base their budgets on expected oil prices, risking their economic stability due to decreased oil exports amid ongoing security issues;

- Political repercussions: The growing economic dependence of Arab countries on industrialized nations due to the oil industry has increased debt levels and political reliance. These consequences have weakened Arab states, resulting in fragmented political decisions that allow external powers to impose their conditions and military presence in the region (Matar, 2020);

- Military repercussions: Western countries, led by the United States, have tried to influence oil-producing nations in the Middle East through privileged relations and military pressure. The U.S. aimed to bolster authoritarian regimes in the region, ensuring their loyalty while destabilizing progressive governments (Primakov, 1984, p. 109).

6.3. The Role of Colonialism and Neo-imperialism in the Consolidation of Middle Eastern

Authoritarianism

For centuries, the Middle East has been a battleground for colonial competition, war, and political turmoil. Colonial powers sought to divide and control the region, weakening its countries. The Western invasion in the 20th century contributed

significantly to the fall of the Ottoman Empire, paving the way for expanded Western imperialism and chaos in the region (Berberoglu, 2002, p. 17). Some writers even consider that the current chaos in the Middle East shows that the region has not yet found the right solution to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I (Kaplan, 2015).

In the mid-1920s, the British and French became masters of the Middle East. They were the ones who determined who should rule and what form of government should prevail. In addition, with their close relations with the Americans, they had the upper hand in controlling and plundering the region's wealth, especially the oil fields (Berberoglu, 2002, p. 24).

The current form of Arab States is a product of an imperial legacy, evident in their geopolitical borders and governance structures. After gaining independence, these states inherited not only institutions from colonial powers but also the patterns of governance and state-citizen relationships established during that era. Thus, the Arab State has maintained colonial-era structures and practices (Alrubaie et al., 2005, p. 86). The relationship between imperialist powers and occupied societies is characterized by a vertical structure focused on domination and control. As noted by German researcher Hannah Arendt, imperialism prioritizes profit and expansion, aiming to subdue local populations rather than promoting civil and political institutions. Arendt emphasizes that imperialism seeks "*assimilation, not integration, and subordination rather than justice,"* marking it as an arbitrary authoritarian phenomenon. In her book *"The Origins of Totalitarianism,*" she details the key characteristics of the imperialist project as follows (Salam, 2004):

- Exporting the instruments of political power, i.e., the institutions of coercion and subordination, without civil political institutions. This means giving the highest priority to exporting instruments of violence, primarily the military and security organs, at the expense of civilian institutions and regulated laws governing political life, so that organized violence in an atmosphere of imperialist expansion becomes a well-established situation in the administration of political affairs;
- In the German writer's view, imperialism is based on **two main pillars:**
    - **Pillar I:** a theoretical realism represented by the racist ideology that legitimized the control of many of the colonial peoples by a few imperialist powers;

- **Pillar II:** The realistic existence of authoritarian coercion relies on the triangle of the army, police, and bureaucracy. Arendt views bureaucracy as a key tool for imperialist expansion, representing arbitrary authority wielded by violent administrators who use secret decrees to control people rather than improve their lives. Thus, bureaucracy is seen as an arbitrary power, contrary to Max Weber's perspective of it embodying rationality.

State formation and bureaucratic development in the Middle East began under Ottoman rule but were disrupted after World War I by European dismantling of Ottoman institutions. Although some administrative processes continued in Egypt and Tunisia, European-imposed political systems, shaped by external interests, weakened institutional legitimacy, deepened social divisions, and undermined civil society. Despite limited democratization efforts under British and French mandates, these efforts remained largely superficial. Consequently, many states gained independence after World War II with weak institutions and civil societies. As Michele Penner Angrist notes, postcolonial party systems significantly shaped the political structures that emerged after independence (Bölme, 2019). Thus, after the passage of centuries, the countries of the region found themselves in isolation with a clear selective feature, as they accept the migration of goods, money, technology, and weapons while rejecting knowledge, theories, and opinions coming from outside the region geographically, or even dealing with them with caution (Alrubaie et al., 2005, p. 176).

6.4. Neo-imperialism and the Roots of Authoritarianism in the Middle East

Over the twentieth century, Western capitalist powers entered a fierce rivalry to dominate Middle Eastern oil and its reserves in what was known as "oil imperialism". The same century witnessed three historical stages of competition among the major imperialist and capitalist powers in the world's economy, as follows (Berberoglu, 2002, pp. 25-27):

- **Stage I: 1818-1914,** from the rise of British imperialism in the final decades of the nineteenth century to its rivalry between the primary capitalist powers (Britain, France, Germany, and the United States of America) during the first decade of the twentieth century, in addition to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire that led to World War I;

- **Stage II: 1918-1939,** during which the victorious powers of World War I (Britain and less so France) sought to impose their control and influence on the world economy. It also sought to extend its imperial influence across North Africa, the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, and the Arabian Peninsula. As a result of British and French hegemony, the challenge escalated with other countries such as Germany and Japan, eventually leading to the outbreak of World War II;

- **Stage III: 1945-1991** (after the 2nd World War). The U.S. emerged as a capitalist superpower in the 20th century, dominating its rivals' economies. Since the 1991 Persian Gulf War, the U.S. has acted as the primary authority in Middle Eastern conflicts, especially after the Soviet Union's collapse, exerting significant control over global resources through neo-imperialism. Colonialism and imperialism have left enduring legacies in the region, impacting Arab states and contributing to the persistence of authoritarianism (Amziane, 2020, p. 8). The Arab peoples are not a creation of the past, and just as there are negative or dark points in their historical legacy, the legacy of Europe has, over a long history, suffered from tyranny, as its splendor or its democratic transition only began nearly two hundred years ago, and gradually (Abdullah, 2004).

One of the key reasons for the formation of authoritarian states in the Arab world is the historical legacy of governance and established political traditions. This legacy is compounded by external pressures from colonialism and military oppression, which have created a repressive political environment. Additionally, the dominance of opportunistic political elites loyal to occupying authorities has played a significant role in shaping the power structure during the transition to independence (Amziane, 2020, p. 8).

For more than a century, colonial rule in the Middle East has left a lasting legacy that affects political, social, and economic development. While colonial capitalist nations introduced advanced science and technology, which led to limited economic growth in some areas, this growth primarily served to exploit local populations. The capitalist system's expansion was largely based on the plundering of colonies (Lei, 2013, pp. 69-70).

Post-colonial regimes in Arab countries have struggled to develop a nation-state system and build a national economy. They attempted nationalization to counter former colonial powers and sought to establish economic independence by reforming colonial dependencies. However, a significant gap exists between the intended roles of these regimes and their actual performance (Nagasawa, 2015, pp. 137-138). The

peoples of the Middle East continue to grapple with the colonial legacy even after the end of colonial rule. They face complex challenges in political, economic, and social development. ***At the political level***, colonial powers imposed arbitrary borders, leading to divisions among nationalities and ongoing conflicts, as seen in Yemen and Sudan, which were split into northern and southern regions. In Lebanon and Cyprus, colonialism fostered a complex political landscape dominated by religious pluralism and multinationalism, resulting in prolonged turmoil and civil wars. ***On the cultural level***, colonialism distorted the cultural life of the region's peoples by imposing Western beliefs and traditions. A notable example is Algeria, where French was made the official language during colonial rule, replacing Arabic. After gaining independence, Arabic was reinstated as the official language in the 1963 Constitution (Lei, 2013, pp. 70-71). ***On the economic front***, in the essence the colonial ideology, colonialism embodies a persistent human aspiration and economic necessity, driven by the need to exploit raw materials and invest resources, especially when the people of the colonial countries cannot capitalize on them (Zouzou, 2009, pp. 20-21).

In this context, the authoritarian colonial rule in the Middle East has led to a heavy dependence on advanced capitalist nations in the West. Colonists transformed the region into a source of cheap raw materials for their factories, making it a market for their products. Even after World War II, the Middle East lacked a strong industrial base, relying mainly on small handicraft workshops. Colonial legacies have perpetuated persistent challenges, including nationalism, religious tensions, territorial disputes, unequal wealth distribution, and governance problems. These factors have contributed to escalating complexities that foreshadow future conflicts and have collectively transformed the region into a center of ongoing instability (Lei, 2013, pp. 71-75).

No one can deny that the colonial stage serves as a key political reference for independence, highlighting the culture of warfare adopted by occupying powers. Through military control and repressive regimes, these authorities have subjugated occupied nations, disregarding civil institutions and political laws (Amziane, 2020, p. 9). According to Rafiq Abdussalam, colonial authorities did not intentionally initiate or enable colonial states to establish civilian institutions such as the Parliament and constitutional and judicial oversight institutions, where tools of violence remained available and permitted in the administration of colonial affairs (Alrubaie et al., 2005, p. 86). There is no doubt that this view has its basis when examined in light of the realities of the political history of colonialism, where limited

civic institutions emerged, such as party organizations and cultural bodies, albeit within a repressive environment. These entities were often created or supported by occupying authorities to manage conflicts, while political resistance was suppressed through persecution and exile, establishing authoritarian traditions backed by military force. Colonial violence controlled political and administrative life, hindering the development of civic institutions. The occurrence of military coups in Arab countries coincided with the struggle for independence, reflecting the weakened state of political institutions due to imperialist practices that aimed to maintain control and influence (Amziane, 2020, pp. 10-11). In this context, most of the Arab countries witnessed tragic changes in the regimes, particularly after the Second World War. The first coup in the Arab world took place in Syria in 1949, followed by the coup in 1952 in Egypt, which ended the rule of the Muhammad Ali family, and then later the coup in 1952 in Iraq. The Arab world has witnessed more than forty successful coups since 1949, while 83 other coups have failed so far (Khalil, 2008, pp. 11-12).

The current state of Arab authoritarianism, whether under civilian or military governments, stems from a legacy of imperialist oppression. This colonial past created authoritarian institutions and dire conditions that political elites used to manage governance during and after independence. These elites inherited a state with weak civilian institutions, relying on military and security forces to maintain their power, which shaped their political actions and reinforced the practices established by previous regimes (Amziane, 2020, p. 11). Here, we have to emphasize that the importance of institutions lies in their concept, which refers to: "*All formal organizations, rules, procedures, and informal provisions that regulate political behavior or actions. Institutional analysis requires the inclusion of the full system of state and societal institutions which constitutes how political actors define their concerns and interests, and which regulate their relations with power and with other groups.*" (Posusney & Angrist, 2014, p. 24).

National elites who led liberation movements often reproduced colonial rulers' oppressive mechanisms after gaining power. Colonial powers supported loyal local leaders to safeguard their interests, disregarding popular aspirations and fostering foreign interference and unequal relations between states. Driven by political survival and self-interest, these elites have maintained alliances with former colonial powers. This strategy also cultivated opportunistic local classes aligned with colonial authorities, deepening social inequality and corruption while obstructing genuine political reform (Amziane, 2020, p. 12).

Neo-imperialism has perpetuated authoritarianism in Arab countries due to the influence of international powers and institutions like the IMF and World Bank. These entities impose policies for structural reform on borrowing nations, leading governments to prioritize external demands over local needs. This dynamic fosters internal authoritarianism and societal enslavement, complicating efforts for genuine development and change (Alrubaie et al., 2005, p. 542).

"*Thinkers wrote a lot about the characteristics of a free democratic society, and philosophers talked about ideal societies, but they did not tell anyone how to reach them. The religious people turned to religion, the military to power, the economists to capital and the means of production, the revolutionaries to demonstrations, the extremists to terrorism, and the pacifists to non-violence. What are the best ways? Has authoritarianism remained an inevitable fate for the Arabs?*" (Travellers, 2019, pp. 126-127).

7. Determinants of the Democratic Deficit in the Arab Countries

In the past decade, there has been hope that democratic values and human rights emerged following the collapse of totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. This trend suggests that many countries will adopt similar paths, leading to optimism about democracy worldwide. However, the Arab region is a notable exception to this development (Al-Alawi & Abah, 2014, p. 66).

Since the movements for liberation and independence, the Arab world has faced numerous challenges that hinder its development and transition to democracy. Key issues include conflicts (national, tribal, and sectarian), political division, the influence of military and religious institutions, and ineffective opposition lacking popular support. Many specialists identify four main challenges that contribute to the deficits in democracy in the region, which are (Ahmed & Hammoud, 2020):

- Obstacles related to political culture: A flourishing democracy relies on cultural values such as individual responsibility, community participation, and tolerance. Researchers argue that the stability of democracy depends on a widespread belief in it as the ideal system. In contrast, Arab societies often lack a political culture that is conducive to democracy, leading to the establishment of authoritarian regimes that oppose democratic values to maintain their power. This authoritarianism has caused limited diversity, tolerance, and the development of effective national institutions, which in turn have contributed to persistent societal anxieties regarding the future.

Thus, these factors collectively have rendered the region susceptible to unrest. Therefore, arguments asserting that the West can impose democracy on Arab states fail to account for these complex national legacies and the deeply entrenched nature of existing authoritarian regimes (Hamzawy, 2018);

- Obstacles related to domestic governance and regimes: Arab governance structures fundamentally diverge along two distinct axes: dynastic family monarchies and highly centralized personalist dictatorships. Dynastic Family monarchies often involve multiple royal family members in decision-making, which can lead to more accountable governance compared to dictatorships. In contrast, one-person rule tends to face strong public opposition, often resulting in violent crackdowns, as seen in Libya under Muammar al-Qadhafi and Syria under Bashar al-Assad. This institutional divergence is shaped by the ways external powers influenced postcolonial state formation. On the one hand, Western security guarantees and energy revenues served as the primary guarantors of family-based power-sharing within dynastic monarchies. On the other hand, anti-colonial struggles, foreign interventions, and the Arab-Israeli conflict militarized republican regimes, resulting in the concentration of absolute power in the hands of a single strongman. Researchers attribute the lack of political pluralism and democracy in the Arab world to factors such as traditional Islamic political culture and the historical pressures from colonialism. Additionally, the region's significant energy reserves and the Arab-Israeli conflict have increased military spending, diverting attention from essential social and economic development (Ghalioun, 2004). In their book "The Middle East Crisis Factory", Ahmed Gatnash and Iyad El-Baghdadi offer an analytical perspective that sees the region in a critical phase of structural disintegration, driven by three fundamental factors that reinforce one another: authoritarian rule, Western intervention, and terrorism. The authors compare this contemporary upheaval to Europe's historically turbulent trajectory toward modernity and stability, marked by wars and conflicts spanning more than a millennium. In the twentieth century alone, Europe experienced two world wars that claimed millions of lives. The authors argue that prolonged and painful transitional phases, characterized by wars, foreign interventions, and the displacement of millions of refugees, are among the consequences of the breakdown of social contracts, a reality whose manifestations are already evident in the Middle East (El-Baghdadi & Gatnash, 2021, pp. 17-20).

- Obstacles related to regional geopolitics: Geography lies at the heart of the Middle East's core dilemmas, driven primarily by the protracted Arab-Israeli conflict

and the strategic gravity of its oil and natural gas deposits, both of which control the critical transport arteries linking Asia, Europe, and Africa. Additionally, the presence of oil has contributed to rising authoritarianism in the Arab world. A report by "The Raed Research Institute" notes that the Arab region holds about 60% of the world's oil reserves and 40% of its traded oil. This wealth allows oil-exporting countries to provide a high standard of living and avoid raising taxes, creating a perception that political change is unnecessary**.** Thus, further consolidating the existing authoritarian structure.

- **Obstacles related to external intervention:** The Arab world's economic importance primarily stems from its vast energy resources, particularly oil and gas, making it strategically significant to global powers. While developed countries, especially the U.S., may not openly support authoritarian regimes in the Arab region, they often seek their loyalty to safeguard national interests, notably Israel's security. This political orientation has resulted in continued support for these regimes, often at the expense of their people, who endure oppression. Additionally, the legacy of colonialism has influenced local elites, discouraging democratic developments and fostering reliance on the status quo, which weakens efforts for meaningful change (Ghalioun, 2004). Those limited elites in power exhibit repugnant phenomena related to clinging to their positions in power, sharing benefits in a closed circle, centering around the leader by protecting him, and competing for his satisfaction even if at the expense of the interests of the country and the citizens. Such self-serving practices severely weakened the state from within. Consequently, they reflected the cracks in those totalitarian regimes and their permanent failure to resist external influences and pressures. Instead, it revealed their orientation and their only option: subordination to allied external forces to preserve their existence (Al-Attar, 2018);

8. Conclusion

This study casts an overall view of authoritarian persistence and the challenges of democratic transition in the Middle East and emphasizes that such approach requires analyzing conflicts within their historical and institutional contexts, rather than as isolated events. The colonial legacy established governance patterns and state institutions that persisted after independence and subsequently interacted with domestic elite interests and foreign interventions in evolving conflict contexts.

Competition over energy and influence in the Middle East reflects the intersection of international interests and local regimes' survival strategies. Political and security alliances with external powers provide resources that help regimes consolidate power. Understanding these conflicts therefore requires looking beyond competition for resources and influence to examine how it interacts with existing power structures and local actors' strategic interests.

One of this study's primary implications is the role of political adaptation in authoritarian persistence. Renewed crises do not necessarily weaken regimes or create opportunities for democratic transition. Instead, regimes often repurpose their institutions, security apparatuses, and alliances to adapt to pressures and maintain existing power arrangements. Consequently, the political *status quo* can endure despite recurring crises, as certain adaptation mechanisms actively reproduce the conditions that limit opportunities for change.

Conflict and authoritarianism are deeply interactive, with conflict management inherently intersecting with regime survival strategies. The persistence of crises does not fundamentally contradict authoritarian stability; rather, a regime's capacity to adapt to these crises actively sustains existing power structures despite ongoing instability. This analytical perspective ultimately explains how protracted crises can coexist with authoritarian durability and stalled democratic transitions, rather than inevitably precipitating political change.

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