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Who made the Arab Spring into an Arab crisis?

The violence sweeping across the Arab world isn't a consequence of the Arab Spring, but of decades of dictatorship.

http://www.aljazeera.com/ indepth/opinion/2016/11/arab- spring-arab-crisis- 161119120842618.html

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A recent news item on the BBC's English website neatly captured the sharp contrast in how, five years later, various Arab rulers, citizens and non-Arab observers view the popular uprisings that swept leaders from power in several Arab states and challenged others. The headline read "Arab Spring 'cost region $600bn' in lost growth, UN says", but what the latter actually said differed substantially.

In its Survey of Economic and Social Developments in the Arab Region 2015-2016 (PDF), the United Nation's Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), which covers 18 Arab countries, attributed a net loss of $613.8bn in economic activity and an aggregate fiscal deficit of $243.1bn not to the attempt to bring about democratic political transition, but to the armed conflicts now involving nearly a dozen Arab states. Whether intentionally or not, the BBC's headline echoes those who portray the chaos and bloodshed suffered by several Arab states since 2011 as the direct result - indeed the essence - of the Arab Spring. But, there was nothing inevitable about this.

Rather, the current reality, or potential threat of state failure and civil war in Arab states, is the outcome of their problematic past trajectories prior to 2011 and of the choices made by those in power on how to respond to evolving political, socioeconomic and institutional challenges since then.

Authoritarian byproducts

Crucially, decades of authoritarian rule in the Arab states now in crisis or breakdown have eroded their social contracts and constitutional frameworks.

As the ESCWA report rightly noted, ruling regimes invested heavily in repressive, bloated security sectors in order to maintain power while budgeting less for social protection, infrastructure and other priorities.

Significant material rewards were provided, as even authoritarian regimes generally find it cheaper to co-opt society rather than to rely wholly on coercion, but these shrank as economic cronyism deepened and productivity and investment in all sectors of the economy - other than oil and real estate - declined from the 1990s onwards.

The reallocation of state resources and economic opportunities towards privileged elites and social sectors in an era of prolonged financial contraction further "hollowed out" state institutions.

In short, Arab states had left themselves with few reserves - political, economic, social, or institutional - to cope with the impacts of wider events affecting their finances and economies in the decade leading up to 2011, even when macro-level indicators, such as gross domestic product and foreign investment, appeared positive.

Violence was not inevitable

This bleak legacy did not wholly preclude more effective responses, whether before the Arab Spring or after. So, why have Arab states in transition fared so poorly?

A significant part of the answer lies in how incumbent regimes chose to respond to popular uprisings and the democratic challenge they posed. Contrary to those who claimed there was "no other choice", the resort to force was neither necessary nor unavoidable.

The Tunisian army's insistence that civilians design and manage their country's entire transitional process, from start to finish, is proof positive of this. So was the "soft security" approach adopted by the Jordanian authorities in response to their own protest movement in 2010 and 2011-2012.

The deployment of massive coercive power in every other instance has led either to open armed conflict and state breakdown or to the corrosion of basic freedoms and social peace and to an endemic crisis of political legitimacy.

But it is the elimination of safeguarded arenas for the conduct of legal - that is, peaceful - political contestation and social negotiation that poses the biggest threat.