

The International Dimension of “Arab Authoritarianism”

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Introduction

Authoritarian power in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is predominantly understood as pertaining to authoritarian regimes and to the open repression and violence deployed by Arab dictators, unelected monarchs, secret service agencies, the police, and militaries. While those actors are without doubt key pillars for the maintenance and deepening of authoritarian power, an exclusive focus on regime actors ignores the fact that the (Arab) state has become a globalized institution.¹ As the transnational and/or international dimension of authoritarian power is downplayed and/or ignored, Orientalist discourses and deeply problematic binaries of Western democracies vs. Arab autocracies are perpetuated. Drawing on the emerging body of literature that explores this international dimension of authoritarian power,² this chapter seeks to discuss select examples that illustrate the ways in which authoritarian power structures in the MENA, despite their violent local manifestations, are inherently transregional and global.

Emphasizing the “dynamic nature of governance,” Glasius focuses on “extraterritorial practices” and the territorial unboundedness of authoritarian power.³ Bruff and Tansel, Hanieh, and others have shown the close interconnection between global processes of capital accumulation and authoritarian power.⁴ The financialization and commodification of nature at large and of renewable energies in particular further resource extraction and exploitative labor regimes. Public-private partnerships increase public debt and reproduce socioeconomic inequalities. EU and US efforts at externalizing the authoritarian effects of violent and repressive migration regimes also point to transregional connections. Further, El Kurd has illustrated through the example of efforts at Arab-Israeli normalization how peace initiatives may facilitate authoritarian practices.⁵ Finally, El Kurd, Brownlee, and Schuetze have demonstrated how processes of technocratization—often directly supported by so-called “development agencies” and/or “democracy promoters”—enable the reproduction of authoritarian power behind a façade of seemingly ongoing procedural reforms.⁶

If these global connections of “Arab authoritarianism” remain unexposed, our understanding and analysis of “Arab authoritarianism” remain incomplete, and its violent and repressive manifestations become harder to contest. By focusing on authoritarian practices and their spatial and temporal articulations,⁷ and by demonstrating the fundamental mismatch between the involved actors on the one side and the territorial boundaries implicit to notions of “Arab authoritarianism” on the other, this chapter argues that more attention must be paid to the inherently international dimension of “Arab authoritarianism.” The chapter illustrates this by exploring how debt-funding of renewable energy megaprojects in Morocco, EU-Tunisian collaboration in the fight against migration, “Western”-supported efforts at Arab-Israeli normalization in Jordan, and US and European “democracy promotion” initiatives must all be understood as inherent components of “Arab Authoritarianism.” While the selected examples do not cover all aspects of the international dimension of “Arab authoritarianism,” they focus on key dynamics shaping regional politics: neoliberal continuities in efforts at transitioning to post-fossil politics, structural racism and the violent containment of migration, Israeli settler colonialism and its role within US imperialism, and liberalism’s unabated claims to moral superiority, which effectively only serve to further reinforce the mentioned forms of structural violence.

Climate Crisis, Neoliberalism, and the Debt Financing of RE Megaprojects

The intersection of the climate crisis and authoritarian practices in the MENA region requires more than an analysis of environmental policies; it calls for a critical examination of the neoliberal economic structures that sustain them. The urgency to transition away from fossil fuels and secure energy independence has sparked an unprecedented push for ambitious renewable energy (RE) plans in North African countries.⁸ Due to optimal weather conditions to produce energy from wind and sun, Morocco aims to produce 52 percent of its energy from solar, wind, and hydroelectric sources by 2030.⁹ Impressive images of vast solar fields covering the Sahara, and specifically the unprecedented construction of the gigantic solar complex Noor Ouarzazate in southern Morocco with its 580 MW capacity, epitomize dreams of an energy transition away from fossil fuels. However, these RE megaprojects—hailed as solutions to both climate change and energy security—are deeply embedded within neoliberal frameworks that prioritize private capital over social equity. As we see in Morocco, the push for RE expansion is framed as part of a broader strategy to modernize the energy sector and meet climate goals. Yet the implementation of utility-scale RE power plants needs to be critically analyzed in the context of privatization policies, debt-driven financing, and public-private partnerships (PPPs) that often result in the concentration of power and wealth among transnational corporations and political elites, rather than benefiting the broader population.

Morocco's RE expansion is unfolding against the backdrop of neoliberal reforms in place since its debt crisis in the 1980s. As part of the structural adjustment program implemented in 1983, Morocco launched a process of privatization by which the energy sector was among the first to be affected.¹⁰ The country's only refinery, Société Anonyme Marocaine de l'Industrie du Raffinage (SAMIR), for example, was privatized in 1997 by transferring around 67 percent of its capital to the Swedish-Saudi group Corral Petroleum Holding.¹¹ Mismanagement, noncompliance with contractual obligations, and illegal accounting practices provoked the SAMIR company's complete shutdown in 2015 and the biggest bankruptcy in the country's history, including 40 billion Moroccan Dirham (US\$ 4.1 billion) debt to the state and 4,500 direct and indirect workers made destitute.¹²

These neoliberal policies—including the disastrous privatization of SAMIR and a 1994 law that ended the monopoly of the national utility grid company, the Office National de l'Électricité et de l'Eau Potable (ONEE)—paved the way for private (transnational) electricity producers to enter the (renewable) energy market in Morocco.¹³ To fund utility-scale wind and solar projects in Morocco, the PPP model is widely promoted. Although the drive for privatization has been present since the 1980s, PPPs are considered a distinct manifestation of the privatization trend. While the privatization of infrastructure projects was previously driven by perceived potential for efficiency, PPP policies are nowadays designed in response to the availability of global finance, turning infrastructure projects into “bankable” assets with lucrative yields.¹⁴

To ensure stable, long-term returns on capital invested in RE megaprojects, governments play a key role in minimizing regulatory and financial risks, thereby facilitating Green investment.¹⁵ Morocco's flagship project, the Noor Ouarzazate solar power plant, exemplifies this approach through a PPP between the Moroccan Agency for Sustainable Energy (Masen), a public entity, and the Saudi private developer ACWA Power. To attract foreign investment, Masen handled

land acquisition and secured substantial financing from several development banks. The debt financing accounted for around 80 percent of the total project cost, which was more than US\$ 3 billion.¹⁶ Additionally, Masen has secured a state-backed Power Purchase Agreement (PPA) for the investment. A PPA is a long-term, binding contract between a privately owned power producer and a public sector purchaser, or “offtaker,” typically lasting between five and twenty-five years. During this period, the purchaser agrees to buy electricity at a fixed, prenegotiated price from the generator.¹⁷ In the case of the Noor Ouarzazate project, Masen and ACWA Power negotiated a twenty-five-year PPA. After this period, ACWA Power will transfer ownership of the Noor plant to Masen. However, this arrangement places a financial strain on Masen: under the PPA, Masen must buy electricity from ACWA Power at a price significantly higher than the rate at which it sells the electricity to Morocco’s national electricity provider. As a result, Masen is currently incurring annual losses exceeding 800 million Moroccan Dirham (US\$ 80 million).¹⁸ Furthermore, the PPA requires the national electricity utility to purchase the entire output of the plant, regardless of actual demand.¹⁹

Mechanisms like PPPs and PPAs show that the financial and contractual architecture of these projects is designed to guarantee high returns for private investors, often regardless of actual electricity demand. The Noor Ouarzazate power plant is not just a financial burden but also a mechanism through which transnational private actors gain control over essential public goods, often at the expense of local communities. Indeed, authoritarian practices have expanded to Morocco’s rural hinterlands, where the local population was excluded both from the decision-making processes in building the solar complex, including the property transfer of the previously communally owned land, and from the profits the solar plant will generate.²⁰ In this sense, the introduction of RE into Morocco’s energy landscape is not merely a response to climate change; it is also a tool for reinforcing a neoliberal agenda that deepens socioeconomic inequalities, while simultaneously solidifying the political and economic dominance of both local elites and global investors. At the same time, the governance structures surrounding these projects, such as Morocco’s state-backed PPPs and Masen’s oversight of the Noor project, are largely unaccountable to the public. Key figures in these institutions, like Masen’s former CEO Moustapha Bakkoury and its current CEO Tarik Hamane, are appointed by the king and operate with little to no parliamentary oversight.²¹ This underscores the broader entrenchment of authoritarian practices at the heart of Morocco’s energy sector. The entanglement of local elites with (transnational) private companies, formally manifested within a PPP, but ultimately freed from any democratic decision-making processes, shows the global dimension of the so-called “Arab Authoritarianism.”

Lastly, transnational private actors not only managed to take over electricity production, but also started to expand into the transmission and distribution of electricity. The \$1.32 billion loan that Morocco obtained from the IMF’s Resilience and Sustainability Trust in October 2023 is subject to “Green conditions” such as the unbundling of Morocco’s publicly owned electricity and water company by privatizing generation and distribution of electricity, while leaving ONEE with the least income-generating sector, namely the transmission.²² This attempt to unbundle ONEE is presented as a technical necessity due to the company’s accumulation of debt in the 2000s and early 2010s. That debt was a result of ensuring low electricity prices for consumers despite fluctuating international prices for fuel and raw materials, in particular coal, and the obligation to pay high prices due to concession contracts—such as PPAs—with private operators.²³ With consumer bills having risen by 20 percent in 2014 due to ONEE’s unprecedented structural financial crisis,²⁴ the IMF promised that the unbundling of ONEE would lead to lower electricity

prices.²⁵ However, since all recent utility-scale RE projects are based on PPA contracts, which prioritize guarantees of fixed incomes for private developers rather than lower electricity prices for consumers, it remains questionable whether any restructuring of the electricity sector can guarantee affordable electricity prices.

The dynamics surrounding Morocco's RE expansion provide a critical lens through which to understand that RE megaprojects are not just about energy transition, but intricately tied to the international dimension of "Arab Authoritarianism." The involvement of transnational actors in Morocco's energy landscape—particularly through debt financing and long-term contracts—illustrates the ways in which authoritarian regimes in the region are supported and even strengthened by global capital. The increasing privatization of energy production, transmission, and distribution, supported by international financial institutions like the IMF, shifts power away from local democratic processes and further embeds authoritarian governance practices. By focusing on renewable energy projects and their financing models, we can see how authoritarian regimes in the MENA region are not isolated or simply internally driven; rather, they are deeply entangled with global capitalist forces and international financial institutions that help sustain and reproduce these power structures. In Morocco, the expansion of private capital in the energy sector is not only a response to the climate crisis, but also a strategy for reinforcing the state's authoritarian control. The exclusion of local communities from the benefits of these projects is symptomatic of a larger pattern in which economic policies are used to consolidate political power, rather than to advance genuine socioeconomic development.

Migration Containment: How Authoritarian Border Practices Are Produced from the Outside

The relations between states in the MENA and in Europe are often negotiated around specific political and commercial domains that enable flows, as is the case in the field of renewable energies. In contrast, South-North human mobility between the shores of the Mediterranean is strictly contained. European efforts to fight migration have received growing attention over the last years and have increasingly moved to the center of institutional agreements. In the case of Tunisia, the number of migrants attempting to cross or successfully crossing the Mediterranean has increased empirically. Tunisia's current president, Kais Saied, who has reinforced authoritarian rule in the country since 2019,²⁶ strongly builds on xenophobic hate speech and conspiracies that fuel violence against Black migrants.²⁷ In addition to migrants from other African countries using Tunisia as a transit country, an increasing number of Tunisians also try to exploit migration routes toward the European continent. We will show in this section how authoritarian practices in the field of migration containment are exercised through transnational entanglements between state actors and security forces.

The way migration is currently "managed" in Tunisia should not be understood in terms of nation-state boundaries only. A variety of European and international actors are involved in the containment of migration in Tunisia. The diverse technologies and rationales in the fight against migration are largely produced through the cooperation between Tunisian and external state ministries, agencies, and security forces. This subchapter therefore shows how authoritarian practices in the containment of migration are the product of transregional entanglements between multiple state and private actors. We will argue that instead of only "outsourcing" mi-

gration containment to Tunisia,²⁸ European actors are directly involved in the creation of the authoritarian practices targeting migrants. This highlights the extraterritorial dimension of migration and mobility control.²⁹

Migration between Tunisia and the EU is increasingly presented as a topic that can be “managed” through specific techniques and rationales.³⁰ Migration management is indeed a central concept to political relations as they manifest in various agreements between Tunisia and EU countries. The EU-Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding of July 2023 mentions the term “border management” as a key policy concept for the joint fight against migration.³¹ In the months after the signing of the agreement, the Tunisian Ministry of Interior and other authorities regularly published figures of prevented attempts at transregional migration.³² This illustrates how administrative logics of new public management such as indicators and statistics are performatively used to underline the achievement of state-led migration containment.³³

To present the fight against migration in a primarily procedural and managerial manner nevertheless obfuscates the violence that security forces exercise against migrants and people on the move. Several authoritarian and violent practices are used to repress migrants and their allies in Tunisia. Specifically, migrants and human rights organizations have described how security forces deport Black migrants to the desert, mostly without drinking water or any form of health care, which has caused several deaths. Migrants are also increasingly incarcerated in detention centers.³⁴ So-called “voluntary returns,” which are often facilitated through regional UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and International Organization for Migration (IOM) offices in Tunisia, can therefore hardly be seen as voluntary. The concept of voluntary returns rather builds on a depoliticized depiction of structural violent repression.³⁵

A further transregional dimension of this depoliticization is the reinforcing restriction of NGOs and solidarity movements in the field of migration, both in Tunisia and the EU. Raids and repression against solidarity organizations for migration have not only been reported in Tunisia,³⁶ but also in European countries such as Italy, where the activities of NGOs for the search and rescue of migrants are becoming increasingly criminalized.³⁷ The transregional character of authoritarian migration containment therefore requires a deeper analysis of the actual practices of security forces. The cooperation between security actors is a major field in which authoritarian practices are produced and unfold transregionally.³⁸ The containment of migration is increasingly securitized and has become subject to logics and rationales of security forces.³⁹ As Uzomah shows, security technologies have become integral parts of the detection and physical control of human movement.⁴⁰

Several European countries have provided technical assistance to Tunisian security forces to ensure a stricter control of migration movements. For instance, Germany has supplied diverse equipment and technologies to Tunisian security forces, for instance, inflatable boats, all-terrain vehicles, and night vision devices. Germany’s federal police (Bundespolizei) has additionally been training Tunisian coast guards and police units in practices of border surveillance since 2015.⁴¹ The state of Italy has also repeatedly provided ships for Tunisian coast guards.⁴² The actual authoritarian practices and the underlying technologies of migration containment are in this sense also shaped and negotiated from outside the state.⁴³ Via the outsourcing and transmission of authoritarian practices to Tunisia, EU countries can extend their state power and the violence of border practices to North Africa.⁴⁴ Racialized differentiation and violent processes of alienation thus manifest locally, but are transposed transregionally through diverse authoritarian practices.

This section showed how transnational entanglements between coastguards, security forces, and state ministries facilitate the externally driven shaping of migration policies. While flows across the Mediterranean are enabled in fields such as trade or renewable energy, migration and attempts at showing solidarity with migrants are increasingly contained. The applied authoritarian practices are produced jointly by Tunisian, European, and international policymakers.

The Authoritarian Effects of Efforts at Arab-Israeli Normalization

Peace initiatives and efforts at Arab-Israeli normalization that only further embed Israeli settler colonialism facilitate authoritarian practices⁴⁵ and “entrench, extend, and adapt the ongoing violent erasure of all subjects—Palestinians, Bedouins, migrant workers, and others—on which these existing distributions of power are predicated.”⁴⁶ Such a policy first and foremost serves the interests of US hegemony, and the interests of the United States’ regional allies, and has thus been at the core of US and European interventions in the region.⁴⁷ Ultimately, normalization seeks to further integrate Israel into a regional regime of authoritarian repression. In this context, anti-normalization protests must be understood as an act of resistance against Israeli settler colonialism, US imperialism, and the authoritarian practices relied upon by US regional allies, such as Jordan.

Since October 7, 2023, popular demonstrations and vigils have been taking place in various Arab cities, denouncing the unfolding genocide⁴⁸ committed by Israel against the Palestinian people, and voicing support for the Palestinian resistance. Demonstrators in Jordan, where protests witnessed multiple ebbs and flows in the months leading to the culmination of anti-normalization protests in March 2024, have been subjected to brutal authoritarian suppression with batons and tear gas at times, and with arrest, legal prosecution, and exorbitant fines at other times. More than 2,500 protestors have been detained in Jordan since October 7, 2023. Demands at daily demonstrations by the solidarity activists included the closure of the Israeli embassy; the cancellation of all normalization agreements with Israel, including the Green-Blue Deal; and the relinquishment of the Wadi Araba “peace agreement.”

In its response to popular anti-normalization protests, the Jordanian regime relies on a whole range of authoritarian practices. For instance, the security apparatus excels at attempting to peg demonstrators against each other by temporalizing release dates between protesters, thereby manufacturing a sense of declining responsibility on those who are released first while insinuating a sense of increased guilt for those still in detention. This spatiotemporal fix—that is, physically alienating leading protest figures from demonstrations for a prolonged period of time in order for the momentum to wane—has readily been applied against activists, many of whom, in spring 2024, lingered in prison cells all through Ramadan for the simple crime of chanting for Gaza and Palestine. The ensuing ideological vacuum was readily filled by the National Forum to Support the Resistance (NFSR) and Muslim Brotherhood chanters and organizers. In essence, then, the Jordanian security apparatus—at times demobilizing the masses, at times repressing activists, events, and organizations—preserves a balance of hegemony and repression. This was also carefully maintained during the September 2024 parliamentary elections, which saw the Muslim Brotherhood claim almost a third of parliamentary seats.

In November 2023, the official spokesman for the Jordanian government, Muhannad Al-Mubaideen, said of the government response to post-October 7 protests that “the arrests were

very limited.”⁴⁹ He denied that the arrests had anything to do with protesters’ solidarity with Gaza and the Palestinian struggle, insisting that the Jordanian government’s position was to “protect the freedom of expression, which is assured according to the constitution,” and noting that Jordanians were protesting “with a high degree of patriotic spirit and a keen interest in the preservation of law and order and public and private property.”⁵⁰ However, authoritarian repression is a key feature of the Jordanian regime’s response to protests. The Freedoms and Human Rights Committee (FHRC), for instance, noted that procedures defendants needed to complete in order to be released included signing guarantees that they would pay fines up to 50,000 Jordanian Dinar (JOD). Al-Mubaideen’s speech and the deployment of fines, arbitrary arrests, and uneven and combined releases are all indications of the Jordanian regime’s strategy of differentiating between “good protesters” who follow “law and order” and preserve “public and private property,” on the one hand, and “dangerous protesters,” who must be punished and alienated from society, on the other.

In a botched attempt at diffusing tensions, the king announced, in connection with the twenty-fifth anniversary of his reign, a general pardon to be enacted for “most crimes” preceding March 19, 2024. Having failed to convince the wider population of his support for the Palestinian cause with performative airdrops of humanitarian aid into Gaza and empty speeches, the king announced the pardon to coincide with the midst of Ramadan and the King’s Silver Jubilee commemoration tour. In the end, however, it did not cover political detainees, including the approximately 2,000 people detained under the Cybercrime Law, most of whom had been apprehended after October 7. The regime clearly tried to use the general pardon to ride the wave of celebration and ease tensions, only to amend the draft to suit its purposes once mobilization from below had waned.

March 24, 2024, saw one of Jordan’s biggest demonstrations during Ramadan. Chants denounced cowardly and complicit Arab regimes, praised the Palestinian struggle, and touted the resistance. Organizers called on protesters to flood the streets in front of Amman’s Kalouti Mosque near the Israeli embassy, to enact the “same blockade the Zionists were enacting against our people in Gaza.” Police forces were present in large numbers, as usual, but the level of repression was unprecedented. Nevertheless, protesters celebrated two armed individuals who had crossed the Jordanian border earlier that week and been apprehended by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) (Jordan Times, 2024).⁵¹ The act of crossing back into Palestine to volunteer for the cause recalled the thousands of fedayeen who had taken similar paths in the past. Conjuring this symbolic act was meant to deterritorialize the imposed separation between the West Bank and Jordan, and to reterritorialize the idea that Palestine is not just an abstract struggle, but a daily praxis that requires resistance against complicit authoritarian regimes and normalization schemes.

It is important to consider how normalization functions beyond individuals and institutions, but is actualized through transnational megaprojects that economically integrate the Israeli market into the region, like the by-now-abandoned water-for-energy deal between Jordan and Israel: Prosperity Blue-Green. On this global scale, normalization is a mechanism of assimilation that maintains the existence of (settler) colonial structures and integrates them into other political economies.⁵² As such, Israel and its allies use normalization deals to naturalize the settler occupation of historic Palestine and the slow genocide it has enacted on Palestinians for seventy-six years. Furthermore, normalization presents economic and political cooperation with Israel as normal, legitimate, or even an act of peace—shifting Israel’s geopolitical image from violent occupier to a strategic partner. Energy deals and climate policy have been pivotal tools in this pro-

cess. Whether it is via renewable energies, dubbed eco-normalization by Palestinian researcher and activist Manal Shqair,⁵³ or “gas diplomacy,”⁵⁴ the logic remains the same: create new economic dependencies by melding Israel into regional and global energy markets, thus expanding its apparatus of settler colonial control beyond initial borders carved by imperialism.

For many protesters, the Israeli annexation of 8 square kilometers of land in the Jordan Valley in the occupied West Bank in March 2024 tipped the balance. Western governments rushed to performatively condemn Israel’s move while they continued to supply weapons, logistical support, and legitimacy for an unfolding genocide in Gaza. But the Greater Israel project had become more concrete in the Jordanian imaginary and could no longer be brushed aside as a phantasmagorical project by an extremist Israeli government. The Shifa massacre in Gaza, committed by the IDF, did not go unnoticed in Jordan, as hundreds of women gathered in front of the Kalouti mosque hours before the announced protest on March 24, in order to stand in solidarity with their Palestinian kin whose bodies had been defiled and killed by Israeli soldiers at the Shifa hospital.

The protest on March 31 came as a direct response to the heightened repression against demonstrators, as organizers and political activists were adamant that the anti-normalization momentum was a crucial juncture to build on. The more bot armies attempted to discredit the protests in Kalouti, the more it was clear that a constellation of the Jordanian security apparatus, the Palestinian Authority, and sections of the old Jordanian guard were behind electronic attempts to discredit the movement and spread disinformation.⁵⁵ Chants were even more defiant than the ones earlier and were now linking the authoritarian practices deployed against demonstrators with the impetus toward normalization and its need to be upheld by the Jordanian regime.

The disinformation campaigns launched against the anti-normalization movement are eerily similar to the ones deployed by Israel. As Kenney-Shawa has shown, “propaganda and disinformation produced at industrial scale by official Israeli government and military sources ... contributed to the decay of truth, and how they hamper efforts to organize a global response.” He adds that “hasbara aims to shape the very parameters of acceptable discourse.”⁵⁶ This resonates with the Jordanian ruling class’s obsession with controlling the narrative. The most recent example of this is the initial denial of the existence of a land bridge to Israel, which allows the latter to circumvent the Red Sea in the context of the ongoing Houthi blockade, followed by the eventual acknowledgment that individual Jordanian contractors are in fact sending produce to Israel over land, coupled with the argument that the Jordanian regime cannot constitutionally curb the “free market.” Acceptable discourse under the Hashemite order progressively acknowledges an open secret by gradually admitting a controlled version of reality that is progressively divulged by coordinated efforts of an assemblage of authoritarian practices. The main point of such disinformation campaigns is not the mistruth itself but the discrediting of those who disseminate information that might harm Israel, such as the purveyors of the land bridge story. This type of personification is a very effective authoritarian practice in an age of “fake news.”

On March 30, the Jordanian security apparatus attempted to stunt the anti-normalization momentum in Kalouti, as it carried out a brutal arrest campaign. The campaign targeted well-known activist figures and involved the deliberate public humiliation of women as they were arrested. March 30 was also notable because it saw the cautious and yet widely televised participation of members of the lawyers’ and doctors’ unions in the protests. That night, as every night, security services forcefully dispersed demonstrators. Over the next two days, the official tone shifted as

official incitement against participants in anti-normalization demonstrations began. News outlets called for the need to impose “order,” justifying their call by claiming that protests in Kalouti were full of “saboteurs” who were deliberately insulting the national army and the police, and by association the Hashemite aura of stability and order, “enabling the spread of chaos.”

As demonstrated—and despite public statements of Jordanian solidarity with Palestine—the Jordanian regime confronts resistance against efforts at Arab-Israeli normalization with open authoritarian repression that clearly ties its actions to Israeli occupation and US imperialism. The list of political figures incarcerated due to their stance against normalization with Israel continues to grow.

Promoting Democracy, Reinforcing Authoritarianism

Besides Arab-Israeli normalization, “democracy promotion” is another key stated goal of US and European foreign policy in the MENA. As this section argues, the persistence of authoritarian practices in the region is not despite US and European “democracy promotion” interventions, but to some extent because of them. Like the previously discussed examples, the role that so-called “democracy promoters” play in the reconfiguration and reinforcement of authoritarian power in the MENA highlights the importance of acknowledging the international dimension of “Arab authoritarianism.”

A closer exploration of “democracy promotion” interventions reveals that the promotion of narrow procedural understandings of democracy—what practically all “democracy promotion” efforts in the region revolve around—is fully reconcilable with different forms of socioeconomic authoritarianism.⁵⁷ The practice of “democracy promotion” in the MENA must thus not be understood as an attempt at challenging authoritarian power, but rather as a consensual means of social control⁵⁸ that serves the purpose of perpetuating socioeconomic inequalities. Supposedly liberalizing and/or moderately authoritarian regimes like those in Morocco and Jordan have quite effectively used external attempts at “democracy promotion” to reproduce authoritarian power behind a façade of eternal reform.

“Arab authoritarianism” must be understood as a matter of deeply uneven power structures, in which US and European donors, policymakers, border guards, normalization advocates, and “democracy promoters” are intimately implicated. Existing US and European “democracy promotion” programs mostly focus on civil society support, electoral observation, decentralization, rule of law, civic education, political party training, and support for independent journalism. While the stated objectives of such programs are in most cases important and worthwhile, in reality, they ignore or downplay, and thereby help reproduce, underlying authoritarian power structures. While “democracy promoters” on the ground are passionate about their work, at the level of direct bilateral relations, US and European states deliberately attempt to manage and control public discontent with authoritarian power structures via the promotion of narrow procedural understandings of democracy. These can easily be reconciled with existing socioeconomic authoritarianisms.

“Democracy promoters” regularly associate authoritarian power in the MENA with a somewhat inadequate political culture, due to which Arab populations are supposedly “not yet ready for democracy.” Such Orientalist tropes are widespread and have a strongly self-perpetuating dynamic, as practical failure of concrete projects is linked to target groups’ supposedly inadequate

understanding of, for instance, the importance of political parties, elections, or civic education; conveniently, such shortcomings seemingly require ever more interventions. While culturalist narratives are widely criticized in academic literature, they continue to shape US and European policies in the MENA.

The former director of a German association involved in “democracy promotion” efforts in Jordan stated during an interview in Amman that one of the key reasons for authoritarian rule in the country was the lack of Jordanian partners “who are able to think in a European or Western way.”⁵⁹ Low turnout in elections and many Jordanian voters’ tendency to choose a candidate from the same tribe rather than one holding the same political beliefs, however, in fact point to Jordanians’ excellent grasp of the relevance of their vote and the lack of power of Jordan’s parliament. “Democracy promotion” tends to shift the blame for authoritarian power away from its foundations, including—in the case of Jordan—highly discriminatory electoral laws, the King’s right to dissolve parliament, and US and European support for Jordan’s highly repressive security apparatus. Instead, “democracy promotion” focuses on a supposedly inadequate political culture. This not only opens up an apparent need for a whole range of training courses, but also allows for the juxtaposition of the Arab society in question with desired self-understandings as “modern” and “democratic.” External efforts at “democracy promotion” are in this regard more about the maintenance of racist assumptions of cultural difference, than about overcoming them. The international dimension of authoritarian power in the MENA, including the problematic role of “democracy promoters,” is of course not lost on local prodemocracy movements, such as the Jordanian *ḥirāk*, which have deliberately resisted external attempts at collaboration and “support.”

Despite reasonable doubts about how genuine different Arab regimes’ will to democratize is, “democracy promoters” overwhelmingly subscribe to supposedly liberalizing regimes’ procedural reform narratives and adopt the functionalist view that the formal procedures and institutions put in place can indeed—with the help of well-intended external partners—be transformed into means for democratization. However, in an authoritarian environment, the elections and parliaments in place do not simply constitute minor deformations of the desired democratic ideal; they cannot be “fixed” via technocratic support projects and foreign experts. Instead, they operate along logics of authoritarian upgrading.⁶⁰ The Jordanian parliament, like many others in the region, is not a strong and independent legislative body, nor does it aspire to be one, nor do US and European policymakers desire it to be. Rather, it is a democratic façade for a deeply authoritarian regime that regularly approves with overwhelming majority constitutional amendments that expand royal prerogatives. These amendments help safeguard the position of Jordan as a close ally of the United States and Israel. Technical support programs for rubber-stamp parliaments like the Jordanian one at best are a waste of time and financial resources, and at worst directly contribute to the professionalization of an institution that has deliberately been designed as patronage provider and safety valve, insulating the regime from public discontent.

While some US and European policymakers openly acknowledge this, “democracy promoters” continue to buy into the slick reform agendas formulated by supposedly liberalizing regimes and thereby reproduce authoritarian power in the name of democratization. However, in most countries in the region, prodemocracy activists are rarely to be found in the kind of institutions that textbook descriptions of democracy portray as its foundation. Low voter turnout and low trust in political parties and parliaments throughout the MENA are not signs of an inadequate political culture or a lacking readiness for democracy. Instead, they point to Arab citizens’ unwillingness to participate as passive objects in the spectacle of authoritarian regimes performing

democracy on behalf of their US and European donors. It then goes without saying that most Arab prodemocracy activists hardly see US and European “democracy promoters” as facilitators of democratization.

Most US and European “democracy promoters” understand democracy along narrow procedural and liberal lines. This not only ignores the essentially contested nature of democracy,⁶¹ but also disregards popular demands that first and foremost focus on socioeconomic justice. By making socioeconomic inequalities seemingly irrelevant to questions of democracy, “democracy promoters” have constructed democracy as a means of social control. It is in this context that our argument about “democracy promotion” as stabilizing and reinforcing abstract moral, and very real political and economic, hierarchies of power must be read. Attempts at institutional support, political party training, electoral observation, and civil society support hold little emancipatory potential in a context in which market rationales are the dominant governing principle and in which security apparatuses operate without any public control.

Conclusion

Recent scholarship has highlighted the role of “democracy promoters,” transnational corporations, and “developmental aid” agencies in producing transregionally connected authoritarian practices⁶² or a form of “globalized authoritarianism.”⁶³ In doing so, it helps overcome tiresome culturalist arguments and the continued dominance in scholarship on authoritarian power of state-centric approaches. The pillars of authoritarian rule in the MENA extend beyond distinct regimes and their coercive apparatuses, and also encompass public and private actors based in formally democratic states. The (Arab) state is a globalized institution, and (Arab) authoritarianism has a distinct international dimension, which far too often remains ignored. The different acts and practices that produce authoritarian spaces in and beyond the Arab world do not neatly coincide with the territorial boundaries of the nation-state, nor with the physical presence of typical regime actors, such as secret service and police.

This chapter explored the international dimension of “Arab Authoritarianism.” Drawing on examples from efforts at renewable energy expansion, the EU’s fight against migration, attempts at Arab-Israeli normalization, and US and European “democracy promotion,” it demonstrated the spatial and temporal interconnectedness of authoritarian power. Future research on “Arab Authoritarianism” must pay more attention to this international dimension. Among other points, this means anchoring the analysis of authoritarian power structures in the Arab world in a discussion of the Arab world’s role in US imperialism, and focusing on transnationally linked authoritarian practices rather than allegedly territorially bounded boxes of authoritarian regimes.

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