# CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRATIZATION IN THE ARAB WORLD

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*This article attacks the "civil society" thesis, a prevailing assumption of political analysis toward the Arab world today, which argues that vigorous civic activism can generate democratic regime change. First, analysts have reached little consensus in defining civil society in the Arab context. Second, the recent expansion of the associational sector is more a function of autocratic rulers' strategy of controlled liberalization rather than its objective weakening, which means that Arab states remain robust in their will and capacity to repress. Ultimately, observers should exude caution in their endorsement of civil society as the answer to stubborn authoritarianism in the Middle East.*

Since the early 1990s, and particularly since September 11, 2001, Western observers have embraced civil society as the precondition for democratic transition in the Arab states of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Echoing the recent popular upheavals in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, a regional parade of "people power" in the first half of 2005--from anti-Syria protests across Beirut to pro-democracy rallies in the heart of Cairo--seemed to demonstrate the validity of this assumption. Western scholars, development agencies, and policymakers reason that if Arab civil society organizations (CSOs) continue to pressure their authoritarian governments for meaningful reforms, then political transformation will ripple throughout the region; an armada of international diplomatic, financial, and moral support thus endorses CSOs as a pivotal force in stimulating the collapse of Arab autocracy. Indeed, never before has so ambitious an external campaign for regime change enveloped the MENA states, much less one that imbues civil society as the fundamental prerequisite of democratization.

However, fervent sponsorship of civic activism could fail to bring about any Arab spring of democracy, for the "civil society thesis" stumbles over two problems. First, there exists no consensual definition of what organizations Arab civil society precisely comprises. This is no mere linguistic problem; for instance, whether Islamists are considered part of civic life presents severe dilemmas for scholars and aid practitioners, who are unsure of whether they could support democratic objectives. Moreover, tangible evaluations of the "strength" or "weakness" of Arab civil society simply depend on which groups political analysts strategically choose to include within its contentious definitional boundaries.

Second, the civil society thesis presumes that through the collective force of its demands and interests, the associational sector can compel unwilling authoritarian

governments to instigate periods of democratization. However, over the past two decades Arab states have leveraged a cyclical strategy of liberalization-repression to control swells of civic activism. As a result, the much-celebrated resurrection of Arab civil society has signaled not the retreat of autocratic regimes, which still stand strong in their political will and physical capacity to repress, but rather their stubborn instinct for survival--despite suffering gaping deficits of economic resources and political legitimacy.

These arguments do not intend to discredit the continued study of Arab civil society. After all, in the absence of significant multiparty political competition, most anti-state political activity is routed through non-regime spaces and groups rather than the hopelessly outgunned opposition parties, where they exist. Yet it does not follow that civil society can cure the autocratic ills of Arab societies. CSOs have not made incumbent kings and presidents truly serious about embracing electoral democracy by dismantling the coercive institutions that typify their rule. In short, a vigorous dose of caution concerning the potential of civil society should accompany current prognoses of Arab democracy.

## THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: CIVIL SOCIETY AND ARAB AUTOCRACY

The concept of civil society emerged in Western social science as the Cold War ended, when comparative social scientists borrowed the concept from European history in order to explain the ongoing wave of democratic transitions across the world. A cadre of neo-Tocquevillian scholars has since repeated a simple causal claim: no civil society, no democratization.[1] Though the civil society thesis encapsulates several distinct hypotheses, the relevant one here entails that under conditions of authoritarian rule, an energetic associational life--comprising independent, voluntary organizations distinct from the state, economy, and family--can trigger democratic transitions by challenging autocratic leaders and forcing the state to accept liberal reforms.

In the classic sequence, years of official repression by the authoritarian state trigger spontaneous bouts of political activism among civic groups, who organize a critical mass of resistance against the regime. The sheer force of this popular pressure impels ruling elites to instantiate piecemeal changes and bargained pacts that eventually snowball into a full-fledged institutional transition towards electoral democracy.[2] A vast political science literature has traced the role of CSOs in the collapse of autocratic governments in Latin America, Central and East Europe, East Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa. Across these regions, civil society facilitated democratization by restraining state coercion, inflating the overt cost of repression, and marshalling international support for reforms.[3] By the mid-1990s, the Western academic and policy-making consensus was that the emergence of a dynamic civil society represented the sine qua non of democracy. According to one report, civic resistance played a vital role in driving 50 out of 67 modern transitions from

authoritarian rule.[4] Mythical images of nonviolent opposition--boycotts, protests, strikes, and other forms of disobedience-- became fashionable symbols of democratic change.

Such arguments have permeated scholarship on the MENA region, whose authoritarian languor remains exceptional in the world. Of course, the region presents impressive political diversity; hard-line states like Syria, Libya, and Sudan far outpace their neighbors in crushing societal pluralism and eradicating dissent, while more liberal polities like Jordan, Kuwait, and Morocco are more lax in allowing social activism and diversifying policy inputs. Further, more than half of the Arab countries have convened elected national parliaments since the late 1990s, and even basic indicators like media and expressive freedoms vary across countries. Yet the irreducible reality is that executive power alternation via the ballot box seldom transpires, and for this reason—the absence of genuine political contestation for the chief offices of supreme veto power-- almost every Arab state fails to qualify as a democratic regime.[5]

After the first Gulf War, regional specialists recalibrated their vocabularies and began to debate civil society as the critical factor in the Sisyphean task of democratization. No longer could they echo Ernest Gellner's declaration that these societies "are suffused with faith, indeed they suffer from a plethora of it, but they manifest at most a feeble yearning for civil society."[6] Scholars have traced the genesis of autonomous associations from Ottoman rule; their expansion under European imperialism, and then rapid demobilization under post-colonial populism; and finally, the renaissance of civil society by the late 1980s, when macroeconomic decay, demographic youth booms, and cultural tumult combined to produce widespread frustration with the state.[7]

Since then, Arab authoritarian regimes have witnessed an explosion of associational activity, similar to other autocracies prior to democratization. The chronic failures of rulers to meet popular economic and political demands carved a public space in which new groups could "attract a following, develop a bureaucratic form, and formulate policy alternatives."[8] Citizens were "drawn into political life to an unprecedented degree" as activists stirred waves of dissent[9] while complacent elites reeled from social unrest, amplified by sluggish economic growth and draining fiscal endowments.[10]Observers have hence concluded that any sustained process of Arab democratization will require an effective civil society, a sphere in which civic leaders can pool their resources and direct their social forces to defy the state.[11]In terms of both the total number of CSOs and their "density" (quantity of organizations per 100,000 inhabitants), Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories enjoy the largest and most active civil societies, the oil-rich Gulf countries the most enervated, and the other Arab countries in between.

For their part, political donors, bilateral aid agencies, and multilateral financial institutions in the democracy promotion industry have clinched civil society as the magic bullet against Arab autocracy-- empowering associational forces can stimulate would-be democratizers and impel authoritarian rulers to accept compromises regarding political rights, fair elections, and

civil liberties.[12]Since the early 1990s, civil society assistance has constituted the linchpin of international MENA democracy promotion efforts.[13] The United Nations Development Program portrays civil society as a vital pillar in sustaining human development and fostering transparent political governance;[14] the World Bank and European Commission (EC) employ a broad portfolio of aid to support civil society, often bypassing governments and transferring funds directly to designated groups;[15] and U.S. foundations like the Ford Foundation and National Endowment for Democracy run numerous grant competitions for Arab CSOs, rewarding them with liquid funds, training workshops, and exchange programs.

Direct American governmental assistance also reflects these patterns. American strategy for endorsing Arab democratization turns on "gradualist logic," consisting of numerous small programs that channel resources towards reformist groups within the legislative, judicial, economic, and civil sectors. Over time, civil society has come to receive the most attention. Between 1991 and 2001, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) allocated $150 million to projects classified as "civil society strengthening," representing the lion's share of a $250 million MENA democracy promotion budget during the same time span.[16]Since 2002, the State Department's Middle East Partnership Initiative has targeted Arab civil society through millions of dollars of direct financial assistance, as well as sponsorship of high-level conferences between leading CSOs and their state counterparts. Finally, the American reconstruction in Iraq is the most revealing indicator: through 2004, USAID and its private partners had pledged over $730 million to rebirthing Iraqi associational life.[17]From the U.S.'s "freedom agenda" to the EC's "Barcelona process," and from the World Bank's goal of "sustainable development" to the UNDP's target of "good governance," the diverse strategies of pro-democratic Western actors converge on a single plank--supporting Arab civil society through diplomatic, financial, and moral support, in the hope that a crescendo of opposition from below can elicit momentous regime shifts from above.

Yet despite this enthusiasm, the icy reality is that nearly two decades after scholars heralded its rejuvenation, civil society has not yielded any results in pushing Arab states towards democratic transitions by undermining the foundations of their authoritarian institutions. Arab CSOs watched as liberalizing reforms initiated in most countries during the early 1990s stalled within years, while several countries like Egypt and Tunisia backslid even further into autocracy, ending the decade with tighter restrictions on civil liberties and political pluralism. Further, the three most important advances of MENA democratization in 2005--competitive national elections in the Palestinian territories, Iraq, and Lebanon--resulted not from years of arduous struggle by domestic activists, but rather by immediate political and military shocks (i.e., the sudden death of Yasir Arafat, the military removal of the Saddam Hussein regime, and

international insistence for Syrian withdrawal). Arab autocrats have indeed collapsed--but from foreign invasions and brain strokes, not civic pressure. The following two critiques of the civil society thesis explain why expectations of Arab democratization fail.

## WHICH CIVIL SOCIETY? WHOSE CSO?

The first problem concerns the theoretical parameters of Arab civil society. The simplest of questions--what is Arab civil society, and what counts as a CSO?--reflect conceptual disarray. Civil society has become "a normative football" in Arab discourse; public officials use the term "to promote their projects of mobilization and 'modernization;' Islamists use it to angle for a legal share of public space; and independent activists and intellectuals use it to expand the boundaries of individual liberty."[18] Most Western political scientists and liberal Arab research institutes, such as the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies in Cairo, define civil society as "the place where a mélange of groups, associations, clubs, guilds, syndicates, federations, unions, parties, and groups come together to provide a buffer between state and citizen."[19] Thus, CSOs must be secular in ideology, civil in their behavior, legally recognized, and supportive of democratic reform (islah). The following groups meet these parameters:

1) Membership-based professional groups, such as syndicates of lawyers, engineers, and doctors. Their main purpose is to provide economic and social services for their members, and they possess a long history of involvement in nationalist political campaigns.[20] They have large and influential

rosters; in Egypt, for instance, 19 syndicates claim four million registered members--six percent of the total population.[21] 2) Non-government organizations (NGOs) that provide social services (e.g., commercial micro-credit, job retraining, civic education) or else are outright political, demanding greater associational and media freedoms from the state. Their number across the region grew from 20,000 in the 1970s to 70,000 by the mid-1990s.[22] Egypt alone holds about 14,000, while Morocco, Lebanon, Jordan, Yemen, and Tunisia collectively possess 21,000 more.[23] The fastest growing community, NGOs perceive themselves as the vanguard of political change and have become increasingly professionalized and media savvy employees.

3) Public interest advocates, such as human rights activists, women's movements, corruption watchdogs, think tanks, and other associations that press rulers to adhere to international norms.[24] These activists first emerged in the North African countries in the 1980s but soon multiplied across the region, thanks to an influx of foreign support. This young sector embodies the hopes of Western democracy promoters, who mirror their views on the importance of fair elections, civil liberties, and liberal secularism in political life.

4) Unions, whose authority reached a zenith in the 1960s and in most countries rival the syndicates in terms of membership size and financial resources. However, their influence has undergone serious erosion since the instantiation of structural adjustment programs and the waning of the Arab Left, many of whose leaders have adopted new roles in the NGO sector.[25] 5) Informal social groups, such as mutual-aid networks,

cooperative societies, recreational clubs, and youth leagues. These casual organizations are more communally oriented than other CSOs and draw a stronger following among the poor.[26]Indeed, the UNDP views them as the richest source of civic vitality in the Arab world, guiding citizens with an "invisible social hand."[27]

The post-Gulf War period commenced a period of rapid growth for civil society. The total number of CSOs in every Arab country except Sudan enjoyed an absolute increase during the 1990s. Bahrain and Yemen experienced a staggering 400 and 1000 percent enlargement, respectively; CSOs tripled in number in Lebanon and doubled in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait; and by 2002, the region boasted nearly 130,000 recognized civil society groups.[28] In particular, NGOs and public interest advocates proliferated as entrepreneurs reaped a growing pool of international donor funds. Yet despite this brisk civic revival, authoritarian governments appeared no closer to downfall than before. What accounts for the failure of Arab associational activism in this regard? Two explanations prevail.

First, individual CSOs have not mobilized a critical mass of supporters throughout society. For example, although NGOs can limit the depredations of authoritarian rule by publicizing abuses such as torture of political dissidents, they cannot directly challenge the state without popular support, which is limited since most are single-issue oriented.[29]Meanwhile, larger CSOs suffer from widespread apathy among their members. In Egypt, for example, board

elections for trade unions seldom elicit more than ten to fifteen percent voter turnout. Similarly, groups that rely on foreign funding lack public trust, since many are undemocratic in their internal governance-- e.g., suppressing dissent, privileging elite interests, nurturing corruption. Second, no cross-sector coalition unites these groups, and different segments regard each other with suspicion. The lack of any overarching anti-regime slogan results in cycles of "dissonant politics" rather than consensus over pathways to reform, resulting in the absence of any united constituency for democracy.[30]With few regional or national networks encouraging cross-organizational cooperation, combined with growing ideological radicalization, Arab civil society appears to suffer from weak broad-based support and endemic fragmentation.

The conspicuous element missing from this framework is the Islamist trend, which poses stern challenges to the civil society thesis. Though Western donors only court the kind of secular liberal groups that composed the bread-and-butter of democratic movements elsewhere, some find that this view truncates vast areas of Arab public life. They point to the Islamists, a category encompassing entities as divergent as political parties, healthcare providers, terrorist groups, and social clubs.[31]Explaining their popularity has become an academic industry, with writers ascribing the Islamist resurgence as the product of successive historical failures by the state--the crash of pan-Arab ideology in the 1950s, bankrupt socialist development models in the 1960s,

military defeats to Israel in the 1970s, and declining socioeconomic conditions in the 1980s.[32]

Although there is "no organized, unitary Islamic sector," the popular phrases in currency--e.g., Islamic economy, traditionalist reawakening, social Islam--refer to the same phenomenon: the sprawling growth of voluntary religious associations founded on Islamist ideas.[33] In many Arab metropolises, their institutional infrastructure provides charitable venues and social services to fill voids where the state has withdrawn; their raison d'être demands the imposition of Islamic law (Shari'a), the more extreme voices calling for violence but many articulating peaceful means.[34] Though often banned, they have Islamized Arab societies through the back door, penetrating educational institutions, the language of politics, and even other CSOs, thereby giving ordinary citizens their real sense of political participation.[35] However, the increasing popularity of the Islamists produces two dilemmas. The first is a question of intention: as Gudrun Krämer articulates, "Are Islamist activists sincere when they declare their democratic convictions, or do they merely hope to gain popular support and reach power through democratic elections?"[36] If democracy donors address them as part and parcel of Arab civil society, much of their assistance could support religious groups who see democratic reform as means rather than ends; cynical spectators envisage them as recipes for political chaos--an "Algerian scenario," referring to the 1991 Islamist electoral victory and the resultant domestic conflict. Embracing these organizations could affront the most sacred assumptions of the civil society thesis, since some Islamists make no pretence about the rights they would abrogate, the theocracy they would impose, and the minorities they would expel should they win free elections.[37] Yet discounting the Islamists altogether ignores the many groups that defend the institutional requirements of democratic rule, as in the case of Turkey's AKP party. This ambiguity haunts leading Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin*) in Egypt, who have yet to garner the international support that elsewhere empowered domestic movements to undermine the state. More practically, it ensnares external democracy promoters in an uncomfortable position: major donors refuse to throw their financial and diplomatic weight behind Islamists, despite the fact that many command ardent grassroots support, lead large and efficient organizations, and, in many Arab societies, represent the strongest opposition against the ruling elite--all ideal traits that few secular CSOs possess.

Second, the controversy over Islamists' role in democratic reforms reflects the difficulty of measuring the effectiveness of Arab civil society. If only secular democrats count, then the civic sector appears weak and fragmented, unable to extract weighty reforms from autocratic executives. No wonder, then, that regional specialists have little faith in those Arab liberal elites in charge of democratic NGOs and human rights groups, who "cluster ever more closely around Western embassies in capital cities…while the bulk of the Arab world grows more angry, more desperate, and more estranged."[38] On the other hand, should Islamists be included within the conventional view of civil society, then traditional explanations behind the failings of people

power lose relevance; the "Arab street" appears passionate and popular, as measured by the Islamists' membership and resources, and on numerous fronts seems on the brink of mounting a frontal assault on the authoritarian state.[39]

This dichotomy underscores the troubling reality that analysts fetishize polar terms when assessing Arab associational life--it is either "strong," "lively," and "healthy," or else it is "weak," "disorganized," and "sick."[40] But it cannot be both, and it is likely neither. Arab civil society consists of numerous interests and associations that fluctuate across countries and sectors, and its political potency is more a function of researchers' implicit prejudices when addressing the region's social landscape than a measure of empirical fact.

And yet further conceptual clutter abounds. New strands of research have highlighted additional associations that do not categorize as either secular CSOs or Islamist movements, yet still carry political importance. These include tribal councils and intermediary social institutions, such as those in Yemen's underdeveloped south;[41] informal mutual-aid neighborhood networks, which thrive in the urban quarters of Arab metropolises like Cairo;[42] marginalized legislative parties that function more like advocacy groups rather than electoral machines, since they have little chance of forming the government;[43] organizations that straddle the line between state and society, such as reformist social foundations run by royalists in Jordan;[44] longstanding cultural authorities predicated on traditional religious reputation, such as *ulama* scholars in nearly every Arab society;[45] and sectarian associations, such as confessional councils and clubs in Lebanon.[46]

These entities embody unique forms of social mobilization distinct from the state, economy, and family, but they have few analogues in the Western perspective. Hence, many foreign analysts ignore their potential, preferring instead to focus on the familiar blueprint of secular liberal CSOs. This further demonstrates that the plain concept of an Arab civil society, far from being neutral, conceals normative assumptions that reflect the impossibility of imposing a singular model of political change. Indeed, one writer disparages all such attempts to universalize: "efforts to locate civil society or other 'prerequisites' of democratic reform reveal more about the preoccupations of Western scholars than they do about new social configurations in the Middle East."[47] While such a position seems too extreme, throwing out the civil society baby with the universalist bathwater, it neatly encapsulates the key finding here. If Western observers believe that Arab civil society symbolizes the best possibility for democratic transitions in the MENA countries, then they should recognize the complexities inherent in employing this contested term across the uneven terrain of Arab societies.

**ENTER THE STATE: LIBERALIZATION, REPRESSION, AND RENTS**

Whereas the first problem implicated the nebulous boundaries of Arab civil societies,

the second concerns the practical logic of the civil society thesis. Nearly two decades of escalating activity from the civic sector should indicate that Arab authoritarian political systems are moving closer towards regime change; after all, this is the central prediction of the civil society literature. Yet surges of associational activity have signaled not an inexorable process towards democratization, but rather the state's enduring fierceness in maintaining autocratic control. From a comparative perspective, the distinguishing discrepancy between cases of successful versus failed regime transitions is state strength--authoritarian regimes collapse if and only if ruling elites lack the political will, the physical capacity, or both to defeat challenges to their rule during periods of instability.[48]

During pre-transition scenarios in other regions, an extensive array of civic activism generated crises of confidence for rulers, who granted political concessions after unremitting oppositional pressure weakened their will or capacity to repress. A benchmark case is 1983 Argentina, when the reemergence of trade unions, business associations, and human rights groups corroded the resolve of a military junta already lurching from the Falklands War defeat; though they possessed adequate resources to repress, the generals lacked the will and so instead chose to restore electoral institutions. However, such an expected sequence has not arisen in the Arab world. Instead, Arab autocracies have kept their will and capacity to rule intact by harnessing civil society as part of a wider strategy of survival, manipulating the rules of the game to keep the prize of political change constantly out of reach. These regimes continue to leverage

their mammoth coercive machinery to trounce threats from below despite the growth of associational life, an outcome that the civil society thesis fails to predict.

By the first Gulf War, economists and political scientists agreed that most MENA regimes had reached conditions of crisis. As Samuel Huntington long predicted, when economic and political development climb at different speeds, Arab states and their bloated bureaucracies can no longer keep pace with the rising aspirations of a progressively more educated and socially mobile citizenry.[49] Pervasive discontent with declining mass opportunities eroded the legitimacy of authoritarian incumbents; Arab governments found themselves "under siege from citizens no longer willing to buy empty promises or tolerate self-serving and incompetent officials."[50] By the early 1990s, as reformist demands from a nascent civil society burgeoned, an astonishing range of liberalizing reforms swept across the region. Several governments, like the Sabah family in Kuwait and the Fahd regime in Saudi Arabia, inaugurated national parliaments or consultative assemblies, establishing fresh openings for popular participation into previously opaque decisionmaking processes. President Saleh of Yemen and the post-war Lebanese parties ended years of domestic factionalism and conflict by adopting national unity pacts, promising democratic constitutions and institutional equality. Autocrats in republican states, such as Tunisia's President Ben Ali, Egypt's President Mubarak, and Algeria's President Zeroual, promised *ta'addudiya*, meaning enhancing political pluralism by relaxing media restrictions, legalizing new parties, and respecting a broader view of human rights.

Even in monarchical Jordan and Morocco, youthful and Western-educated King Abdullah II and King Muhammad VI infused national discourse in the late 1990s with a spirit of civic participation absent in their fathers' reign, exciting former critics with pledges of multiparty competition and the release of imprisoned dissidents. Only Libya, Sudan, Iraq, and Syria escaped this wave of liberalization. Elsewhere, Arab CSOs exploited their newfound victories by launching unprecedented campaigns of grassroots activism to nudge rulers further towards democratization.

Yet during this period, civil society grew not because the state retreated, but because authoritarian incumbents deployed a new tactic of control--they could reassert power and slake dissension by granting concessions too mild to produce systemic change, but hefty enough to merit symbolic applause at home and abroad. In this calculated survival strategy, Arab autocrats promote reforms that encourage political competition and liberal opposition; but when civil discord becomes a viable threat, the state deliberalizes, retracting its indulgence and intensifying repression until anti-regime sentiment has abided. Such repeated oscillation between narrow pluralism and brutal suppression is the trap of what Daniel Brumberg calls "controlled liberalization," a method by which governments give "opposition groups a way to blow off steam. The steam valve must meet opponents' minimal expectation of political openness… but prevent them from undermining the regime's ultimate control."[51] At heart, the modern Arab state remains a master of repression, commanding a constellation of coercive actors that deploy violence, co-optation, and other tactics to neutralize societal challenges. Certainly, the Arab world is not monolithic, and specialists have identified unique trajectories of political control in each state--e.g., "defensive democratization" in Jordan,[52] "tactical liberalization" in Yemen,[53] "democratization from top down" in Saudi Arabia,[54] and so forth. But across the region, a similar pattern emerges: token reforms offered by the regime achieve toothless versions of liberalized autocracy rather than electoral democracy, resulting in "a protracted cycle in which rulers widen or narrow the boundaries of participation" by exercising "an adaptable ecology of repression, control, and partial openness."[55]

This ecology of control over civic life encompasses three components. The most obvious is blatant repression; when the demands of civil society violate the state's threshold of comfort, the regime clamps down with targeted arrests, harassment, and other forms of legal coercion against opposition groups. The Egyptian government's 2001 decision to incarcerate Saad Eddin Ibrahim, the foremost academic critic of the Mubarak regime, and to impose three-year closure upon the Ibn Khaldun Center--a leading think tank on Arab democratization--represents one well-publicized case. Obsolete "emergency laws" in Egypt, Sudan, Algeria, Syria, and until recently Bahrain and Jordan provide an additional safety buffer, since they freeze legal protections of activists and enable

governments to activate draconian laws to periodically flatten public discourse and cow the media into subservience.[56]

Second, Arab autocracies utilize systematic policies of legal constriction that defuse civic activism long before it becomes threatening. In most states all CSOs must register with Interior or Social Affairs Ministries, which use complicated "Associations Laws" to vet new organizations. To receive operating permits, civic groups must clear arduous security investigations and promise to refrain from activities of "subversion" (*şiba*). Moreover, state administrators exercise tight authority over existing groups; they may audit operating budgets, direct the internal intelligence services (*al-mukhabarat*) to infiltrate major associations, cancel board elections of unions and syndicates, impose arbitrary fines for mismanagement, ban financial contributions from blacklisted donors, and dissolve any group found to commit minor legal infractions. In short, as Quintan Wiktorowicz finds, CSOs are "embedded in a web of bureaucratic practices and legal codes which allows those in power to monitor and regulate collective activities," rendering civil society institutions as "more an instrument of state social control than a mechanism of collective empowerment."[57]

The final method is co-optation, which dilutes opposition forces and drives the civic sector towards dependency on the state. For instance, Arab authoritarian regimes often establish shadow organizations mimicking the function of independent CSOs, but which actually serve as surveillance mechanisms that silence discord through patronage. In Syria, the hegemonic Ba'th Party has co-opted the emergent bourgeoisie by funding its own professional associations and civic councils, siphoning middle-class support away from reformists.[58] The Jordanian regime's General Union of Voluntary Societies serves as the umbrella organization for all national NGO interests, colluding with the Ministry of Social Development to regulate civic activity; but because its operates on volunteers from existing NGOs, it lures CSO leaders into corporatist participation with state interests.[59] Some Arab governments also run their own human rights boards, designed to appease foreign critics while usurping resources from grassroots activists. During the 1990s, the Algerian state operated the National Observatory for Human Rights (Observatoire National des Droits de l'Homme), which published regular reports and enjoyed cordial relations with European embassies but seldom criticized ongoing military abuses.[60]More recently, in 2003, Egypt's ruling National Democratic Party established the 27-member National Council for Human Rights, with appointees including acclaimed lawyers and diplomats. Yet the advisory body has ignored notorious infractions, such as crackdowns on Islamists in Sinai and the spring 2005 persecution of Mubarak foe Ayman Nour; for many Egyptians, the Council already faces a "credibility deficit."[61] Finally, the Saudi government permitted the founding of the National Organization for Human Rights in 2004 as the first non-governmental human rights group in the country. Predictably, the group lacks legal teeth, carefully heeding official views on the state of Saudi civil and political freedoms.

The totality of these tactics enables Arab autocratic elites to regulate civil society, manipulating the rules governing the public

sphere.[62] Meanwhile, foreign analysts and democratic donors fall into the trap of conflating such orchestrated liberalization with institutional democratization, reflecting the principal hypothesis of the civil society thesis--civil society growth causes the authoritarian state to weaken. Yet over the past two decades, Arab regimes have turned this equation on its head: the durable state permits the civic sector to bloom, because it can manage the resulting opposition through a battery of legal and coercive controls. This demonstrates that Arab civil society has little meaning outside the context of the state, and in turn that state's relations with structural dynamics that affect its will and capacity to rule.

The Arab state is, as Lisa Anderson describes, a "cumulative variable composed of numerous subsidiary variables: bureaucratic administration, military force, financial resources, territorial integrity, ideological legitimacy, and perhaps others."[63] The most important determinant of its autocratic resilience is what Eva Bellin calls "the robustness of its coercive apparatus," the military-security establishment responsible for demolishing democratic initiatives against the state.[64] The strength of this institution depends on its fiscal resources and patrimonial ties with ruling elites; thus, Arab leaders throw colossal patronage and financial rewards at these agencies to ensure their loyalty.[65]

During regime transitions elsewhere, authoritarian rulers brandished adequate coercive machinery but not the will to smash opposition forces during major periods of instability--the price of repression outweighed the cost of abdication, so they renounced power rather than face the domestic and international consequences of violent repression. General Wojciech Jaruzelski's 1981 crackdown on Solidarity in Poland, compared to his reluctant compromises with the trade union in 1988, reveals that the process of democratization ignites when autocrats underutilize their coercive apparatus.[66] However, Arab executives hold little incentive to follow suit: when facing civic opposition, few choose to not repress, because the converse option of ordering violent repression continues to be cheap and unproblematic.

What keeps the cost of coercion so low, shielding Arab sovereigns from the usual repercussions of their abuses? The most compelling explanation is the rentier thesis. Many MENA regimes inhabit states that receive substantial portions of their budget from foreign payments rather than national productive groups. This arrangement insulates elites from domestic demands, since the state's primary task is distributing fluid wealth, not collecting it through taxation.[67] Hydrocarbon industries in Saddam Hussein-era Iraq, Algeria, Libya, and the Gulf states compose nearly half the national income and 70 or more percent of export revenues, while Morocco, Jordan, Yemen, and Tunisia also rely on extractible resources to a lesser extent.[68] Mineral-poor states also harvest shares through an "indirect" rentier effect, since prosperous governments like Saudi Arabia recirculate financing to poorer nations like Syria through subsidies and aid.[69]

Such historical reliance on exogenous revenues carries three ramifications for political governance. First, rentier regimes naturally exhibit extreme fiscal immaturity and few participatory institutions, reducing the number of "pressure points" by which CSOs can press the regime for openness.[70] These countries resemble "preindustrial welfare states," since the profundity of rents has conditioned authoritarian elites "to buy acquiescence to their rule" through complex networks of clientelistic patronage rather than engage challengers through open contestation.[71]

Second, rents have encouraged bloated, inefficient public sectors that resist economic openness and channel massive amounts of patronage to political and business clients, dampening private sector performance and encouraging the growth of the informal sector. The state is not only a political Goliath, but an economic Leviathan as well.[72]

Finally, rentier income finances the military-security establishment, even in periods of economic duress. When the 1980s oil collapse rippled throughout the region, many regimes accepted structural adjustment packages that drained government coffers and increased real income inequality.[73] Social turmoil crested, but aging autocrats persisted in financing the coercive apparatus while initiating their system of controlled liberalization vis-à-vis civil society. Two international factors intervened to strengthen their will and capacity to rule despite conditions of immediate crisis.

First, the external strategic demands of Western allies--i.e., continued reliance on regional energy supplies, the need to ensure Israeli security, and the desire to contain the Islamist menace after the 1979 Iranian Revolution--endured well after the Cold War ended.[74] Thus, the unrelenting refusal of Arab leaders to heed democratic demands and instead repress or co-opt civil society (and annihilate the Islamists) failed to trigger deep international consequences from global powers, which reinforced their coercive will.[75] This further fortified an elite culture of Praetorianism, in which the patrimonial heads of coercive institutions perceive their authority as a matter of right, producing military dominance in politics that culminated in what John Waterbury correctly identified as the "*mukhabarat* state."[76] As Barry Rubin notes, this also encouraged regimes to defend their waning domestic legitimacy by parading before the public a litany of perceived foreign threats against Arab society, such as American imperialism, Israeli aggression, and cultural corruption; these "trump issues" always took precedence over local democratic projects.[77]

Second, while traditional rents like oil revenues did diminish in the 1980s, Arab regimes found new fiscal resources to underwrite their coercive capacity. Rent-seeking behavior became institutionalized on the international level, with Arab autocrats perennially searching for new external patrons and sources of monies.[78] Fresh revenue streams emerged through strategic rents, such as international economic assistance (American aid to Egypt and Jordan alone is worth nearly $2.5 billion); foreign military basing and transit payments, as in the Gulf countries; tariff reductions through trade preferences; labor remittance cuts from workers abroad; and other exogenous incomes that far exceed domestic productive capacity. In addition, oil markets recovered by the late 1990s, providing many Arab

regimes with fiscal cushions in their newly replenished treasuries. [79]

The role of rentierism in bolstering Arab executives' will and capacity to rule generates two insights. First, it explains why MENA authoritarian regimes flourished during a time when civil society enjoyed a meteoric rise in activity and diversity. Persistent linkages to external financial and political resources bestowed confidence to rulers' decisions to control the civic sector while crushing immediate threats, all the while pay lip service to reformism.

Second, the argument uncovers analytical confusion within the civil society thesis. In other regions and cases, analysts witnessed how "close" an authoritarian regime appeared to democratic transition by measuring how much CSOs had corroded the state's will or capacity to rule. Yet in the Arab world, this crude state-society binary does not run on zero-sum logic, whereby "more" civil society means "less" state, and a "strong" civic sector means a "weak" regime. Arab autocracies may be bereft of legitimacy and suspicious of associational life "as a kind of unpredictable force," [80] but they still control a coercive apparatus that holds little interest in committing political suicide. Arab civil society may be stronger than in the past, but the state remains far more powerful. The state subsists as a Janus-faced entity, tenacious yet brittle--as Sheri Berman observes, it "is managing to hold on to power but is hollowing out." [81] In conclusion, observers should approach the civil society thesis in the MENA context with considerable caution. First, it is unclear which organizations and interests Arab civil society includes, a theoretical headache that devastates efforts to promote democratization using conventional templates of gradual reform. Second, modish fixation with Arab civil society as the harbinger of autocratic collapse obscures the centrality of these states' coercive will and capacity to repress, their oscillating strategy of controlled liberalization, and the role of rents in supporting this elaborate system. Consequently, even well intentioned Western intellectual, financial, and political support of CSOs may not quicken the pace of regime turnover. Arab autocracy will not crumple unless a major shock snaps the underlying political-economic framework upon which the coercive apparatus rests, and foreign donors pouring resources into CSOs may be as useful as toothpicks attacking tanks.

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**NOTES**

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