



Editorial

The Fragility–Grievances–Conflict Triangle in the MENA Region: Conclusions of the Special Issue

Timo Kivimäki

Department of Politics, Languages and international Studies, University of Bath, Bath BA2 7AY, UK; tak35@bath.ac.uk

Several problems related to violence, grievances and states' lack of legitimacy and capacity to manage economic, social and political issues are clustered together as a lump of misery in the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA). These problems and many more have been revealed in a Special Issue of *Social Sciences* on "The Fragility–Grievances–Conflict Triangle" in the MENA region (Kivimäki and Jawad 2021).

The introductory article of the Special Issue reveals that almost all incidents of organised violence take place in fragile states with problems of legitimacy and efficiency in management, and almost all fragile states have a greater risk of violence. In particular, corruption and the use of the state for the benefit of group interest (fractionalisation of states) predict organised violence by states and non-state actors in the MENA region (Kivimäki 2021). State fragility has also made mediation of conflict more difficult as it has increased risks for conflicting parties and delayed the emergence of a ripe moment for the mediation of conflicts: even though conflicting parties feel the hurt of conflict and would like to end it, political fragmentation makes mediation and conflict resolution risky for some of the parties in conflict. This reduces the likelihood of ending the conflict (Beckerman 2022).

International humanitarian interventions have not addressed these problems, but rather, they have escalated violence and have thereby contributed to state fragility and developmental grievances. While these interventions may have punished some of the criminals and terrorists committing atrocities in the Middle East, they have also deepened divides between ethnic and religious groups. Talip Alkhayer reveals in this Special Issue how terrorist orators have managed to utilise international military interference into nations' or religious groups' domestic affairs to demonise other religious groups and create a feeling of panic and threat (Alkhayer 2021). All this has further expanded the lump of misery in the MENA region.

While the relationship between developmental grievances and violence could not be revealed clearly in the statistics of conflict and development, more detailed studies have revealed the complex relationship between such grievances and social protection on the one hand and organised violence and state fragility on the other. Rana Jawad's, Oliver Walton's and Walid Merouani's article explains the question of how service delivery affects state legitimacy and conflict in the MENA region by using the 5th Wave of the Arab Barometer, a micro-level survey on Arab citizens' perceptions of socio-economic conditions in their countries, and macro-level social welfare expenditure data from the World Bank World Development Indicators. It turns out that the link between service delivery, state legitimacy, and conflict is non-linear and that liberal frameworks focusing on formal politics are of limited use to understand state legitimacy in MENA. The focus on politics and the economy in the study of the triangle of legitimacy, service delivery, and conflict needs to include the perspective of informal economy (informal sector) and politics (protests). External revenues, as well as regional and international interventions, are crucial in explaining the relationship between service delivery and conflict. MENA populations are generally unsatisfied with government services, but this does not seem to predict conflict in the



Citation: Kivimäki, Timo. 2022. The Fragility–Grievances–Conflict Triangle in the MENA Region: Conclusions of the Special Issue. *Social Sciences* 11: 92. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11030092>

Received: 1 February 2022

Accepted: 8 February 2022

Published: 22 February 2022

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

region. Many governments in the region appear to be more effective in delivering security than services (Jawad et al. 2021).

The Special Issue penetrates deeper into the group and individual levels, as well as informal and formal sectors of economic relations. In their article on Magreb countries Walid Merouani, Claire El Moudden and Nacer Eddine Hammouda reveal the differences between states' approaches to delivering welfare to citizens and thus to mitigating social grievances and avoiding conflicts. However, a special challenge faced by all these states is the large proportion of workers in the informal sector outside the official social protection network. It is often assumed that voluntary opting out of the formal labour market demonstrates problems with state legitimacy as people choose to work outside it, while at the same time, involuntary drifting into the informal sector may indicate inefficiency in the state's social protection management. Yet, as the study by Merouani and others reveals, the individual motives for staying in the informal sector are numerous, and neat and parsimonious classifications of motives may be simplistic (Merouani et al. 2021).

From the informal economic sector, the Special Issue moves on to the informal political sector. By using a micro-level data survey on the determinants of protest participation in Arab Spring countries, Zahraa Barakat and Ali Fakhri show in their article that gender, trust in government, concern with corruption and social media usage have influenced the individual perception of protest activism. Echoing the findings of the introductory article, the authors found micro-level confirmation of the fact, especially in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, that the effect on protests of economic factors was inconsistent, whereas political grievances were more clearly associated with the motive to participate in the uprisings (Barakat and Fakhri 2021).

However, economic and social issues are important for the prevention of structural violence in MENA and for the overall popular satisfaction and the relationship between people and the state. Marcus Loewe and Tina Zintl reveal in their article how social protection plays an important role in the consolidation of legitimacy in states. The social contract between citizens and the state is based on tax contributions and popular obedience to public order on the part of the citizens, while, as a quid pro quo to this, states offer protection and provision to the citizens and allow popular participation. When citizens or the state fail to keep to their end of the contract, states become fragile, ineffective and illegitimate. While democratic participation is rare in the MENA region, Lebanon can be seen as the main case of a state's failure to provide social protection. The lack of social protection predicts state fragility and conflict despite the fact that this happens through a complex process involving state legitimacy and changing popular understandings of the social contract (Loewe and Zintl 2021). Georgeta Vidican Auktor and Loewe, further show how different approaches can be used to move from provision based on subsidies to securitizing protection (Egypt), new ways of provision (Iran) and participation (Morocco) and how these strategies fare in terms of sustaining or reforming the social contract and maintaining social peace (Vidican Auktor and Loewe 2022).

The lack of both protection and provision is also a problem in the semi-state of Palestine, and the problems of state fragility and political fragmentation haunt not just states but also state-like entities similar to Palestine. Abdalhadi Alijla reveals this in his article. State fragility can thus also exist as a problem where an internationally recognised state does not exist (Alijla 2021).

All in all, the Special Issue offers a much-needed overview and several explanations on the otherwise confusing triangular problems of state fragility, grievance and conflict, focusing on one of the conflict hotspots in the world. The MENA region provides an especially revealing case for the study of how different problems of governance interact. In many other regions where state fragility is a serious problem, economic problems are more severe and dominant, such that the interaction between state fragility, developmental grievances and conflict cannot be identified as well as it can in the relatively more affluent MENA region. While one of the three interrelated problem areas is dominant in some regions, in the MENA region, each side of the triangle is strongly linked to the other sides,

and thus some of the interaction that may be difficult to identify globally may in fact be revealed in this region.

The Special Issue also demonstrated that many “regularities” related to the interaction between conflict, state fragility and developmental grievances are very much region-specific, in some cases time-specific, country-specific, and even sub-country-region-specific. To understand how different aspects of state fragility interact with conflict and development in a specific region, we need to understand both the generic features of such interaction as well as the spatiotemporal context of such triangular interrelationships.

Funding: This research was funded by the UK Global Challenges Research Fund project “Conflict and peace-building in the MENA region: is social protection the missing link?” (Grant number AH/T003537/1).

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Alijla, Abdalhadi. 2021. The (Semi) State’s Fragility: Hamas, Clannism, and Legitimacy. *Social Sciences* 10: 437. [CrossRef]
- Alkhayer, Talip. 2021. Fragmentation and Grievances as Fuel for Violent Extremism: The Case of Abu Musa’ab Al-Zarqawi. *Social Sciences* 10: 375. [CrossRef]
- Barakat, Zahraa, and Ali Fakih. 2021. Determinants of the Arab Spring Protests in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya: What Have We Learned? *Social Sciences* 10: 282. [CrossRef]
- Beckerman, Carly. 2022. Political Fragility and The Timing of Conflict Mediation. *Social Sciences* 11: 76. [CrossRef]
- Jawad, Rana, Oliver Walton, and Walid Merouani. 2021. Service Delivery, State Legitimacy and Conflict in Arab Countries: Exploring the Key Linkages Using a Social Policy Perspective. *Social Sciences* 10: 481. [CrossRef]
- Kivimäki, Timo. 2021. The Fragility-Grievances-Conflict Triangle in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA): An Exploration of the Correlative Associations. *Social Sciences* 10: 120. [CrossRef]
- Kivimäki, Timo, and Rana Jawad. 2021. Special Issue “The Fragility-Grievances-Conflict Triangle in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)”. *Social Sciences*. Available online: https://www.mdpi.com/journal/socsci/special_issues/MENA (accessed on 1 February 2022).
- Loewe, Markus, and Tina Zintl. 2021. State Fragility, Social Contracts and the Role of Social Protection: Perspectives from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region. *Social Sciences* 10: 447. [CrossRef]
- Merouani, Walid, Claire El Moudden, and Nacer Eddine Hammouda. 2021. Social Security Enrollment as an Indicator of State Fragility and Legitimacy: A Field Experiment in Maghreb Countries. *Social Sciences* 10: 266. [CrossRef]
- Vidican Auktor, Georgeta, and Markus Loewe. 2022. Subsidy Reform and the Transformation of Social Contracts: The Cases of Egypt, Iran and Morocco. *Social Sciences* 11: 85. [CrossRef]