

## Beyond Sect and State: Exploring the Causes of Political Instability in the Islamic World

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### Abstract

This article is an exploratory one that focuses on complex factors that have led to the political instability which is ailing the Islamic world. Herein lies the concept of historical legacies of colonialism and the Cold War, where borders were arbitrarily drawn and regional problems were manipulated by external forces. As a result, tensions have been escalated not only in the region but also in the world at large. Additionally, the predominance of authoritarian governments and their suppression of dissent, along with the lack of satisfactory mechanism in participation in politics, will worsen frustration and discontentedness. This too is a subject I will cover, delving into the issues of internal divisions within Islam including their origins some dating back to the early rise of Islam and how they are sometimes exploited by political figures for their personal aims. The economic gap, both vertical (within) and horizontal (between) Muslim majority countries increase the level of dissatisfaction and social issues that hinder the development and growth for all Muslim countries. In addition, the impact of external factors, such as foreign meddling and global weapons trade, together with the upsurge of radical doctrines and splinter groups that lay claim to disputed grievances to stir up the conflict, are considered. Nonetheless, focusing on the possible ways, to spread peace and stability, one of the current debates is dealing with reconciliation of the Islamic principles with the modern democratic systems' inherent rules and the importance of education in the development of the creative thinking and active engagement for peace.

**Keywords:** Political Instability, Islamic World, Economic Inequality, Civic Engagement

### Introduction

Political instability, a complex phenomenon comprising lengths of time when nations miss having stable political structures and quality administration, expresses itself in several forms, including often high turnaround in governments, armed conflicts, social destabilization, and a weakened capacity of state institutions and organizations. In the Muslim world including various nations, old enough to be known as main actors of cultural and historical heritage, this problem has still been an issue recently (Marshall, Gurer & Jagers, 2017). Unemployment and poverty are immediate and violent consequences of financial instability, which in eroding the social cohesion they also impede economic progress, accelerate displacements of populations,

and provide a fertile environment for violence. Even economic development is threatened since it is the most susceptible to the different cultures that come with movements and investments which are usually followed by lack of security and high levels of unemployment, thus reducing social cohesion which faces unrest and displacement. In addition, the fall in law-and-order strength heightens possible terrorism and thus insecurity as well, thereby creating more havoc. In this case, it is on the spot to see that lineal problems can be addressed for example to create lasting peace then it is of paramount importance to gauge the underlying factors that lead to political instability in the region. It means that one needs to undertake the studies at a comprehensive scale taking into account the history contexts, socio-economic orders, geopolitical situations, and cultures.

As a result of the comprehension of these intricacies, stakeholders can make efforts to implement targeted initiatives, advocate for inclusion in the government institutions and promote the peace as a mean for the improvement and the betterment among the countries across the Islamic region. The problem of political instability in the Islamic world is multilayered and moreover black and white explanations cannot be limited to the mere linking of Islam and violence, the contributions of Michel Foucault (Roy, 2004). Although religious aspects and divisions of sects might add on to the mix, basing the instability on religion solitarily is synonymous to overlooking some critical historical, social and economic dependencies. Instability, as well as civil unrest, is most often connected with colonial legacies, authoritarian rule, high levels of economic differences, and so on. Moreover, the “Muslim world” which is the label to the most diverse region ever, includes a broad number of political regimes and ethnicities. Also included is the culture. However, not seeing stability all around is not synonymous with instability. A comprehensive approach that acknowledges all these

vulnerabilities including the dynamics of how those weaknesses are interconnected is the key to understanding the causes of instability. This paper gives explanation beyond the simplistic narratives that solely blame Islam or sectarian tensions for the region's instability. It delves deeper, aiming to explore the multifaceted causes of political instability in Muslim-majority countries. It will examine a range of historical, political, economic, and social factors that contribute to the complex dynamics of unrest in the Islamic world. By acknowledging this multifaceted nature, the paper seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by these countries.

### Historical Context

The evolution of political structures in the Islamic world inside these periods of caliphates, empires, and governments that were understood to be different from each other is complicated, covering hundreds of years. Nevertheless, this era of colonialism that influenced the region in the 18th and 19th centuries left an indelible assertion on its political structure. (Robinson, 2010). Imperial dominations compelled by not always inclusive borders which often dismiss local tribes and ethnic affiliations, that were the source of conflicts and instabilities in many regions. The period after the desolating colonial domination manifests itself in the fight for independence and self-determination, thereby creating more political dynamics. However, in the same way, the Cold War period indirectly worsened the already existing problems. Throughout the Islamic world, a proxy conflict was fueled by the standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union. This conflict involved arms and money being supplied for the strategic reasons only to authoritarian regimes supported by the two powers (Meade, 2008). Therefore, the popular support for the authoritarianism mechanized political participation and left the critical voices unheard often creating a gap that fledged to the

repetition of the cycle of repression and instability. Hence, the misjudgments of colonialism as well as the geopolitical of the cold war era still float on this modern political structure. Knowledge of these historic strands is bottomless for becoming acquainted with the context that gave rise to various troubles in the current times, pointed to effective strategies for the establishment of lasting peace and stability of the region.

### Key Factors Contributing to Instability

#### Sectarian Divisions

The sectarian divisions within the Islamic world, especially between the Sunni and Shiite Muslims, which can be traced back to the initial stages of Islam are marked by their long history. That rift came to be after the demise of Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century, and from that arose espoused significantly different views on who the real authority is within the Muslim community (Madelung, 1997). Sunni Muslims, which constitute more than 80% in the world, believe that elections after the Prophet's death resulted in the legitimizing of those caliphs to lead their Muslim community. Another important event is that some Shi'a Muslims argue that the prophet's household should have received immediate leadership, through Ali in particular who was a cousin and a son-in-law of the Prophet and his descendants (Ahmed, 2016). The theological differences have not only rimmed religious celebrations but also which has political structures within the Muslim-led nations also influenced power dynamics.

The politicization of sectarianism by politicians with access to societal aspects of life has further aggravated the gap between various ethnic groups, corroding political stability across the Islamic nations. The phrase sectarian rhetoric is exploited in the society as a powerful tool, which is utilized in mobilization of supporters, crease the differences and also give legitimacy

to violent acts. Thus, in the end, the conflict is usually inevitable. On the other side, regional players are gamblers that they are using those divisions for geopolitical purposes, worsening already existing fault lines and accelerating proxy wars in the region (Hamid, 2019). The instrumentalization of sectarian consciousness for political objectives proves to be the primary essence of political power which is considered as the most difficult to decipher within the Islamic ecosystem. By these sectarian divides elimination and bringing the conflicting communities to the dialogue table followed by the reconciliation efforts would definitely be among the most fundamental measures to be taken in order to enhance peace, stability, and unity within the region.

### **Authoritarian Rule**

The rule of authoritarianism over the Islamic world shades long, with many nations failing to have the democratic institutions and the fair elections (Freedom House, 2023). Such governments usually do not think of democratization but rather loyalty with the regime as being most important. Dissidents can be silenced only by suppression of freedom of speech or terminance of gathering together in a physical place or by tortures and prisons (Lynch, 2010). On the other hand the usage of such tactics is sometime not effective and does produce resentment and support social instigations. The absence of legitimate outlets through which sharing grievances and taking part in political affairs can be made, results into a tense situation where the grudges that are bottled up can culminate into protests, uprisings and violence (Gibson, 2002). Also, such regimes typically focus on the interests of a specific elite group disregarding investment in social and economic programs that may benefit ordinary people. In effect, this economic discontent does not only promote division from the main society but also destabilization of the entire country. To get a detailed and clear picture of authoritarianism as

a main factor of political instability in Islamic countries, one has to know in a detail its proliferation and the negative effect it has on political participation.

### **Economic Inequality**

The Economy of the Islamic world is stricken with huge degree of inequality both inside and between the countries (World Bank, 2022). Some Muslim-majority states are endowed with giant wealth accounts but there are others that are deprived of resources and can hardly find decent jobs in these countries. There are gaps in the apparently powerful countries in the wealth of a small group of elites, who own everything, while a significant part of the population is unemployed or in a state of underemployment, which can hardly afford to meet their needs (Birdsall & Laniado, 2015). That is the reason why the rich both in the social standing and monetary stay far back and the poor lives uncertainty as to what they eat and where they are going. When the basic needs such as the food, shelter, and healthcare of an individual are not addressed, dissatisfaction may start as demonstrations and go to the level of violence. In addition to this, scarceness of resources, like water, or arable land will contribute to the escalation of problems and this will make it hard for a country to remain stable (Homer-Dixon, 1991). No doubt, rising above these economic injustices and striving for inclusive growth concept is the key principle for accomplishing stable and in more sense better future in the Islamic world.

### **Additional Contributing Factors**

Besides the internal factors, the external influences also play a credible role in political instability in the Islamic region of the world. Foreign interventions take many forms, such as military interventions or economic manipulation, and all of these often disturb political

stability in regions an increase the number of conflicts (Shahin, 2005). Although such interventions are invariably influenced by existent strategic interests of external actors, they often result in imposition of regimes which are not based on the authentic local aspirations and needs. Besides, the proliferation of weapons which is not avoiding the global arms trading is involved in the intensification of violence and instability (Ghanem, 2011). The weapons are now not exclusive to arms but anyone whether the groups, the local communities, or individuals who wish to control the area or rule it can acquire these weapons. This makes it easy for the conflicts to escalate and in the end, efforts towards peace and stability become futile.

Consequently, a new extremist ideologies and radical groups have certainly encountered the policy of Islamic world as this was one of the major issues (Sageman, 2004). Such organizations assume the application of pre-existing unrest and socio-agitation in order to enroll their followers while intending to spread violence through these regions (mostly the unstable ones). What leads to harm is that when some peoples and communities are radicalized tensions in between and among them rise, the security is compromised, and peaceful outcomes fail to be reached. Alongside that, ISIS or other groups able to take advantages of the borderless or security

gaps in the war zones, to have a foothold there, which not only destabilize the region but threaten to the global security as well. In such circumstance where the internal issues of Islamic countries are not isolated doing about factors like foreign interference in their politics and expansionism within the region is very important to guarantee welfare, peace, and development.

## Beyond Sect and State: Reinterpreting Political Islam

Attainment of stability in the Islamic world includes a thorough evaluation on the proximity between Islamic principles with modern democratic set up faced with many issues (Ahmed (2016). The focal point of the debate lies in the implementation of Islamic ideas of authority, such as the imposition of a purely divine sovereignty, alongside the democratic ideals centered around values like solidarity and consultation (Esposito, 2002). Finding the right balance for this diversity of whole can involve reasoning with several problems such as; the implementation of Sharia law in a secular state, or the protection of the minority rights. This requires of the rise of reform movements with the purpose of revising the old principles so that they could match the democratic fervor (Brown, 2017). Although not as pervasive as Al-Azhar, the Ikhwan movement has also emphasized the need for *ijtihad*, or independent reasoning, to enable interpretation of Islamic teachings to their contemporary context. Additionally, education becomes the key vehicle that propagates critical thinking and civic engagement (Yusuf, 2006). Annealing understanding, learning to analyze information critically, appreciating different opinions, and participation as a citizen in the political process are the key elements for achieving this aim in the Islamic world. Via dialog and reconsideration of Islamic political thinking, there are real chances for the resolving of the issue of believers and the governance with the targets of stability, and fairness through the making of a better future.

## Conclusion

The political instability in the Islamic world is a very complex issue, brought forth by deep-rooted causes. This paper has reviewed many different contributions; it is not enough to privilege stories that attribute the singular cause to a religion or sectarian rift. The historical



constraints of colonialism, authoritarianism, and enormous economic inequalities can be blamed for the weakening of social bonds and conflicts within and between countries. In addition, external interventions and the global arms trade remain knottier to untie the issue. Moreover, further emergence of extreme views, and what makes it more difficult to conciliate Islamic principles with modern statehood, contributes to the intricacy of the situation. Knowing that there are multiple causes of insecurity that cover a wide spectrum can lead to stability in the Islamic world. We should not only get rid of stereotypical thinking but also understand the region as a multicultural and dynamic entity, where coexisting factors may have shaped the historical and economic situation. A strategy towards a stable future includes raising awareness and growth of the dialogue combined with the aims of reform movements in Islam so that they interpret their religion similar to democratic values. Moreover, it will be useful to invest in the growth of education which will build critical thinking and democratic skills, strengthening people and enabling them to be a constructive actor in the democracy building process. The Islamic world will be able to pave the way to its future peace and prosperity by an experienced approach dedicated to dialogue, reform, and education which are the tools for finding solutions for all of these challenges.

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