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## Public Administration in the Middle East and North Africa

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### ABSTRACT

This article highlights the objective of the special issue which is to understand the status of public administration in six profiled countries – Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Turkey – in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The special issue explores public administration as a concept—the diversity of guiding general principles that determines how governments administer the affairs of state in the context of their governance frameworks—and as praxis—the diversity of public administration structures, procedures and practice, and reform initiatives. It is evident that the countries profiled have adopted a mode of public administration and governance that mirrors its history, and its cultural, geo-political, socio-economic, and conflictive environments. In this context, the editors hope that the articles presented in this special issue will contribute to advancing the public administration literature in MENA.

### KEYWORDS

Public administration;  
Governance; Reform; Middle  
East; North Africa

### Introduction

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is a diverse region whose development potential has yet to be fully realized. These countries benefit from a privileged geographic location situated at the crossroads of Europe, Africa, and Asia; a young and increasingly educated population; and great potential in sectors, such as renewable energies, manufacturing, tourism, and business development services. Over the past decades, MENA countries have implemented reforms to increase economic openness, diversification and private sector development (OECD).<sup>1</sup>



MENA region is in turmoil. Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen are in civil war, causing untold damage to human lives and physical infrastructure. Fifteen million people have fled their homes, many to fragile or economically strapped countries, such as Jordan, Lebanon, Djibouti, and Tunisia, giving rise to the biggest refugee crisis since World War II. On a positive note, political developments in Tunisia, Morocco, and Jordan indicate that citizens are increasingly engaging in policy-making (World Bank).<sup>2</sup>

As the MENA region<sup>3</sup> negotiates a challenging politico-economic transitional period, the questions related

to the state's relationship with civil society and with the marketplace, the public–private sector boundary, and administrative reform have become more pressing than ever before. Many Arab countries have Western style administrative institutions that do not always sit comfortably with non-Western cultural patterns, social structures, and individual behaviors. The values of transparency, fairness, accountability, and responsibility are now being increasingly demanded, raising expectations that will inevitably change the relationship between citizens and public institutions.

This Special Issue profiles six countries in the region—Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Turkey. The theoretical paradigm that informs this Special Issue is that provided by Ali's State Transition Curve taxonomy of states in terms of their effective governance capacity. This is articulated in the lead paper. It is useful to begin by categorizing the each of them according to Ali's taxonomy of states in terms of their effective governance capacity:

- Vibrant states: UAE and Turkey
- Decayed states: Egypt and Jordan
- Fragile state: Lebanon

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<sup>1</sup>Retrieved from: <http://www.oecd.org/mena/>.

<sup>2</sup>Retrieved from: <http://www.worldbank.org/en/region/mena/overview>.

<sup>3</sup>Its geographic fringe is Turkey (to the north), Sudan and Somalia (to the south), Morocco and Western Sahara (to the west), and the Arabian Sea (to the east).

- Failed state: Libya

The Special Issue's focus on the administration of the affairs of state—the conditions required for effective governance, understood as orderly rule and collective action—not on the political processes—domestic and geo-political—that establish the affairs of state that are to be administered. So, it explores:

- public administration as a concept—the diversity of guiding general principles that determines how governments administer state affairs;
- public administration as praxis—the diversity of public administration structures, procedures and practice;
- public sector reform—the diversity of public service delivery mechanisms (marketization, commercialization, privatization, and contracting out); and
- administrative reforms—bureaucratic structural change and procedural reform (with regard to corruption, personnel administration, and budgeting and financial management) and e-government.

It is very evident that each country profiled has adopted an approach to public administration that reflects its history, and its cultural, geo-political, socio-economic, and conflictive environments. In each country profile the following thematic threads are developed.

### **The state–civil society relationship**

The nature of relations between the state and the civil society is important for better governance capacity and promoting democratic practices in the MENA region, including public participation to public affairs. It is clearly stated by all contributors to this Special Issue that an organized civil society positively contributes to the achievement of administrative objectives. In Egypt, Barsoum considers these objectives are “to address problems of poverty and access to services”. In Lebanon, Haase considers they are “provide a variety of goods and services and work to protect family and communal interests, deliver social services”, in UAE “in developmental and humanitarian activities”. In Turkey, Üstüner and Yavuz consider they are “to partner with the government to develop projects and provide particular public services”.

The effectiveness of civil society associations role and contribution is certainly dependent on the decentralization of the governance practices so as to facilitate greater individual participation, greater ease of organizing, more open communication channels with public administration, and the expanding of the nature and

the scope of freedoms given to them. These, and similar issues, are regulated by various laws in the concerned countries, albeit as a continuing process (for example in Egypt, from 2002 onwards), or as very old regulations (for example 1909 law on associations in Lebanon).

Despite the due importance given to the presence of solid civil society–state relationship and given the abundance of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in most of the countries, there is the inherent problem because of the strong state traditions and the relatively high centralization tendencies, both of which generally hinder functioning of NGOs as means to promote democracy. The extreme cases in this respect are Jordan and Libya. Jreisat states that in Jordan, the main influences from the civil society come from “circles with tribal or clan foundations seeking to perpetuate their special advantages and benefits from the system”. In other countries, direct control and supervision of the state over NGOs is evident, although to varying degree. This reduces their capacity to promote public participation to administrative affairs.

### **The state–marketplace relationship**

The nature of relations between the state and market relationship is an equally important governance relationship. Almost all of the countries included in this Special Issue display an ongoing transformation from state-centric to neoliberal market-based economies. This process is generally problematic due to local differences of economic, social, political, and cultural social conditions, which need to be well managed. Privatization is widespread, the conspicuous exception being in the UAE, where, as Sarker and Athmay report, “privatization is not a serious issue on the agenda”. So, governments implementing necessitates, among other things, states pursuing economic rationality on the basis of protecting the public privatization and other forms of free-market policies must ensure, ideally, that competition and contestation rules apply. This interests and advances public accountability. Otherwise, in the presence of complained political and bureaucratic pathologies (like clientelism, patronage and nepotism) efforts aimed at creating free-market conditions based on fair competition are likely to fail.

### **Public accountability**

Üstüner and Yavuz state that “participation, transparency and accountability are three interrelated pillars of good governance process”. Public accountability necessitates both the necessary legal-structural arrangements and their effective implementation. In terms of legal-structural

arrangements, most of the countries included in this Special Issue have taken steps towards achieving this aim. In Egypt, Barsoum considers that the Central Agency for Organization and Administration (CAOA), the Ministry of Planning, Monitoring and Administrative Reform (MPMAR), and the Accountability State Authority (ASA) function together for this purpose. In Lebanon, according to Haase, “for the last twenty-five years, the Office of the Minister of State for Administrative Reform (OMSAR) has supported the improvement of transparency and accountability”. In UAE, Sarker and Athmay consider that the new human resource law provides the framework for accountability of public employees, carding to while in Turkey, the Right to Information Law aims to improve transparency and accountability together with regulations on ethic codes for public officials including the accountability principle. In Jordan, Jreisat argues that constitutional formation in respect to accountability also exist albeit in a “vague” form.

The implementation of accountability, national experiences would suggest, is, generally speaking, still a work-in-progress, a road ahead. Central state traditions, inadequate transparency measures, inadequate willingness and determination from the citizens, political control over bureaucratic structures, inadequate information channels and objective performance and implementation measurements seem to be common problems hindering public accountability in the MENA region countries included in this Special Issue. However, there is also hope for the future. The comments by Haase in relation to the Lebanon has a wider resonance, the “...public is increasingly frustrated by the limitations of their administrative and political institutions.... The existence of such pressure may encourage the Lebanese government to improve accountability”. This indicates the importance of demands from the citizens on transparency and accountability especially in the presence of strong statist traditions where just like similar freedoms and control and participatory mechanism are given by the states from above, rather than as consequences of demands and pressures from the civil society.

### Ethics and corruption

The modern public administration and management faces ethical challenges such as corruption and bribery that transcend state boundaries, causing challenges, such as threatening peace, economic development, environmental sustainability, and human rights (Yoder & Cooper, 2013). Several of the countries profiled in this Special Issue provided evidences and examples of

various moral and institutional mechanics that have been put forward to combat corruption so as to ensure effective and efficient delivery of public services. In Turkey, Üstüner and Yavuz note that the ethical regulation of public administration began with the endorsement of a number of international agreements and conventions, including the Council of European Civil Law Convention on Corruption, the Council of European Criminal Law Convention on Corruption, and the United Nations Convention against Corruption. In addition, in 2004, the Turkish Parliament enacted a law establishing the Board of Ethics, the legal foundation of ethical regulation of public administration. The structural-legal arrangements and sanctions proved to be limited in combating corruption as Turkey is gradually sliding its position between 2010 and 2015 in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI). As a result, to make public officials aware of the damaging consequences of the violation of ethical behavior on society, the Turkish Government assigned the Board of Ethics to provide trainings with an aim to infusing moral values, such as altruism, compassion, integrity, and being just.

Sarker and Athmay paint a picture of the UAE federal government's role in the promotion of ethical behavior by its employees. It believes that the appropriate use of the core values, such as excellence, integrity, honesty, neutrality, transparency, fairness, and equality, helps the public officials to improve their relationship with the community by efficient delivery of public services. In return, the UAE federal government continues to fulfill its obligations and commitments towards the employees and provide the needed support and services to employees to maintain ethical and professional standards in delivering public service. The symbiotic relationship between the government and public officials along with the rigorous implementation of the relevant rules and sanctions are found helpful to curve corruption, which has essentially reflected in Transparency International's CPI, which ranks the UAE 23rd in the world, one of the cleanest countries in the Middle East and Arab world.

Jreisat observes that corruption in Jordan is a product of culture—what he calls “additional cultural norms”. The private networks that glue people together stem from traditional tribal customs, which allow people in positions to bestow *wasta*<sup>4</sup> for their friends, relatives and clan members. Although training and education proved to be useful in changing corrupt behavior, the education system, particularly at the

<sup>4</sup>Nepotism, in Arabic الواسطة (alwasita).

tertiary level, stands as a barrier as it allegedly fails to prepare the graduates with value laden ethical behavior and other civic norms. A combination of ethics reform including essential factors of culture and education, as well as curbing corruption through legal, procedural, and regulatory measures may improve the operation of the Jordanian public administration.

The status of ethics in public administration in Egypt is very similar to that in Jordan. As both operate through the *wasta* culture. Barsoum notes that the state corruption in Egypt was the subject of citizens' scrutiny during the 2011 uprising but remains shelved thereafter. This encourages the further institutionalization of corruption. In spite of the presence of institutional tools and mechanisms, Egypt continues to be, according to the 2015 CPI, one of the most corrupt countries in the world, with a score of 36/100. To improve the situation, as suggested by OECD, it is essential to reinforce, among other things, the culture of integrity in the civil service and to adopt and meticulous implementation of code of conduct for the civil servants.

Haase draws a complex picture of Lebanon in the context of ethics of public administration. The core of Lebanese public administration is sectarian politics, which brings vices of governance including nepotism, patronage and corruption. As most of the Lebanese neither trust their government nor the public bureaucracy, it is merely impossible to implement the laws and regulations related to anti-corruption and bribery. In addition, adequate measures have not been taken to make people aware about the consequences of corruption in their everyday life.

Sawani describes the negative consequences that Libyan public administration is experiencing due to wide spread corruption, which is not unexpected from a country in transition. In spite of the existence of institutions and mechanisms to fight corruption, it goes largely unchecked, vitiating the public life of people.

### Politico-administrative reform

Public governance reform (re-constitution) is, universally, a key policy aspiration. The driver is, to varying extents, to create a more effective and responsive politico-administrative structure and processes, so as to be better able to attract investment, to foster economic growth, to create jobs, and to improve public satisfaction by addressing citizens' rising expectations. Yet, such reform has, generally, proved difficult to achieve, because it threatens powerful elites or collides with the existing large and complex bureaucracies or with long dominant socio-cultural traditions.

In all countries profiled, the public sector is the dominant governance force, albeit to vary degrees. It is large (perhaps bloated), highly complex (certainly multi-layered), highly formalized (inevitably rule-driven work processes and discipline), and highly centralized (inevitably with hierarchical command-and-control administrative process). Public bureaucracies are certainly the employer of preference—because they offer secure jobs on conditions superior to those offered in other sectors—or employer of last resort—in the absence of vibrant private sectors. Turkey stands out as the obvious exception, as only about 11% of all employees are in the public sector. So, public sector jobs are highly prized. This explains the widespread excessive reliance on patronage in recruitment for public positions—the widespread prevalence of nepotism. All this, constrains any downsizing reform of the public sector, makes problematic any serious bureaucratic reform, and gives rise to protracted and contentious change processes for any civil service reform, however modest.

Governmental budgeting processes remain centralized and concentrated. Governments generally prefer to retain the traditional incremental line-item approach to budgeting, because political stability requires a strong patron-client structure, which is contingent upon budget processes guaranteeing benefits for particular social groups.

This is not to suggest that public sector reform has not been sought. Barsoum details the many transitions initiated in Egypt towards public administration reform “with the objective of having a more effective and responsive administrative structure”. However, she concludes: “Many of these transitions remain incomplete, despite their strong presence in official statements and state documents”. Jreisat's detailed analysis of reform in Jordan leads him to conclude: “While administrative reform has been a common cry in Jordan, it has not been easy to break out of the traditional political and administrative patterns that guide actions and influence public policy making”. He illustrates this with the fate of a budget reform envisioned in 1999—the introduction of a performance-based budget system. Ten years later it became clear to him that “the political leadership never intended to loosen its grip on budget decision-making, particularly”. Haase pessimistically sums up the prospects for public sector reform in Lebanon:

In recent years, Lebanon and international donors have worked to improve transparency, promote modern management techniques, and encourage the use of information technology throughout the public sector. Despite these efforts, Lebanon's public institutions

remain constrained by the centralization of power, corruption, outdated bureaucratic structures, and deficiencies in administrative knowledge.

Finally, Sawani depressingly describes the political tensions in a war-torn Libya and its dismal prospects for achieving even a consensus on politico-administrative reform. He concludes:

Libya is currently dominated—and its resources are squandered by—a multitude of non-state actors. This has had the effect of bringing the state to near collapse. The most substantial power currently lies outside the formal system. This has only helped to create an atmosphere of irresponsibility, corruption, a lack of accountability, and to waste much needed resources needed for reconstruction and development. Graft and rent seeking by politicians and officials at all levels, has reduced the ability of citizens to hold the government to account, aided and abetted by successor governments over many decades not seeing the need to tax the population to keep functioning.

Of the countries included in this Special Issue, both Turkey and the UAE have embraced administrative, fiscal, and service delivery reform. Of note for Turkey was the public budgeting and financial management reforms initiated in 2006. This necessitated, according to Üstüner and Yavuz, balanced public budgets, budget allocations in accord with strategic policy priorities and with the efficient and effective provision of public services.

The UAE has undoubtedly been the most adventurous and successful in terms of implementing reforms. Sarker and Athmay judge the following recent developments to be most noteworthy:

- Ministries accorded significant decentralized authority.
- The gradual empowerment of the legislature to review public administration.
- The adoption of managerialist principles of the New Public Management to improve the delivery of public services.
- The introduction of user fees for public services.
- The introduction of performance-based budgeting.

## E-governance and e-government

There has been a growing evidence how Information and Communication Technology (ICT) transformed the operation of public administration to achieve efficiency and economy in service delivery in both developed and developing countries (Bhuiyan, 2011). Countries profiled in this Special Issue have also provided evidence that e-governance gleans benefits for

their overall development. In the case of Turkey, Üstüner and Yavuz indicate that one of the key objectives of the advent of ICT-related applications was political, meeting the criteria for becoming an EU member. This prompted the Turkish Government in the initiation of e-Transformation Turkey Project in 2003, to reexamine and revise the policies, laws, and regulations regarding ICT as per EU acquires, enhancing transparency and accountability in public administration through the augmented use of ICT, and coordinating public IT projects to avoid overlapping investments. Over the years Turkey has made a good progress due to the implementation of many ICT-related policies and programs. In spite of the increase of number of users on the e-government portal, over 14 million as of early 2016, the e-government adoption to citizens and public organizations remain largely weak due to problems such as implementation incompetency, bureaucratic resistance, lack of financial resources, and lack of technical expertise.

Sarker and Athmay documented the rapid progress in implementing e-government initiatives in the UAE. This includes an e-government portal for each emirate, the existence of a unified federal portal with little interaction between government agencies and the implementation of the E-Government Transformation Strategic Framework of 2011. The performance of UAE in delivering services through online is remarkable. As per 2014 UN survey, UAE has maintained its 12th position globally and the third position in Asia on online service delivery, which testifies UAE's ability in delivering e-services and placing various data and information, such as policies, laws, regulations, reports, and downloadable databases, which are considered necessary for ensuring the country's e-governance.

Barsoum portrays the current state of e-Government in Egypt. This reveals that the Egyptian government fares relatively well in terms of the development of e-government during the pre-2011 era. As a result, Egypt's portal for e-governmental services, the *Bawaba*, has provided over 200 services since 2004. It also allows people to interact directly with the various government entities through the *Bawaba*. However, both the quality and quantity of delivering online services have dropped following the 2011 revolution and subsequent political events as the center of attention shifted from delivering online services to building a just society, a "new" Egypt (Bhuiyan, 2015).

Haase sketches a mixed image about the overall status of Lebanon's e-government. Although it scores quite poor in the 2014 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNEDSA) in terms of

E-Government Development Index, the Lebanese Government continues to improve the e-government capacity of its public agencies. Several programs, as Haase notes, have been adopted by public agencies, such as the National Archives and the OMSAR to digitize government documents, to create online information portals, to increase the public's ability to access client oriented services through the internet. Lebanon's achievement in E-participation is also quite weak. The 2014 UNEDSA survey further revealed that Lebanon demonstrated little to no involvement in e-consultation and e-decision-making activities, making the path to achieving e-government thorny.

Jreisat draws the conclusion that in Jordan "...communication information technology (CIT), opened new channels for exchange of information on a variety of policy concerns". It can be classified as a country with an "emerging presence" of e-service delivery. It is ranked 79th on the global E-Government Development Index, and 71st on the global E-participation Index (UNDESA, 2014).

Sawani draws a pessimistic image of the current status of e-governance in Libya. Understandably, the popular uprising and associated political events have slowed down the progress of e-government in Libya. Although the Arab Spring had increased the usage of Internet services and social media, no substantive initiative has been adopted by the post-Gaddafi government. Sawani describes that the e-government development, if any, really took place during the Gaddafi regime, particularly in 2008 and afterwards. The e-government development in Libya still remains at the rudimentary stage.

## Conclusion

That dysfunctional public administration and poor governance go hand in hand is uncontroversial (World Bank, 2000); but is good governance conditional upon having strong state administration?

Certainly, a set of strong state institutions can deliver public policy outcomes and public services beneficial to a society, but it can also be oppressive, leading to a diminution in the quality of societal governance. The issues are the appropriate governance roles of the state, the marketplace and civil society (Dixon, 2003). How this balance is determined profoundly affects the nature of societal governance and public administration. This Special Issue explores the nature and future of societal governance and public administration in selected countries in the MENA region.

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