

POLITICAL ECONOMY OF STATE COLLAPSE AND THE CHALLENGE OF LEGITIMACY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Abstract: Several state failures that have created significant problems for stability and governance have made the Middle East a focal point of geopolitical complexity. Examining the relationship between political economy and the serious legitimacy problem that follows state collapse, this study explores the complex dynamics of state collapse. This study shows that social divisions and historical grievances not only intensify state failure but also function as catalysts in many situations, impeding the establishment of legitimate governing systems in the Middle East. This study used an ex-post facto research design, a documentary data-gathering method, and identity politics theory as the foundation for its theoretical framework. The data were analyzed using content and qualitative analyses. To establish legitimate governance structures, we recommend effective cooperation between regional and international actors in promoting sustainable economic development, facilitating political dialog, promoting good governance, rebuilding institutions, and restoring the rule of law.

Keywords: Ethnic/Sectarian Divisions, Historical Grievances, Legitimacy Governance, Middle East, and State Collapse

1.1 Introduction

The Middle East, a region historically characterized by geopolitical significance, cultural diversity, and economic complexities, has been marred by a recurring phenomenon: state collapse (Yergin, 2007). The intricate interplay between the political economy of state failure and the ensuing challenge of legitimacy has generated profound implications for governance structures in countries comprising this volatile region (Fawcett & Haddad, eds., 2019). The Middle East, for the purpose of this study, encompasses countries such as Bahrain, Cyprus, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Yemen, and others in the surrounding vicinity (Anderson 2011). A complicated and multidimensional topic, the political economics of state collapse and the legitimacy crisis in the Middle East have attracted considerable attention because of the region's protracted conflicts, shoddy governance systems, and intricate socioeconomic dynamics.

Essentially, the Middle East is vital for comprehending the interconnected dimensions of global politics, economics, and culture. The region's geopolitical significance and rich history contribute to its relevance in various academic disciplines and policy arenas (Anderson, 2011).

State collapse refers to the breakdown or failure of effective governance institutions, resulting in a loss of territorial control, political fragmentation, and the erosion of public services (Bush, 2017). In the Middle East, state collapse has been particularly pronounced in countries such as Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen. These countries have experienced prolonged conflicts, leading to the fragmentation of political power, the rise of non-state actors, and the breakdown of essential services, including security, healthcare, education, and infrastructure (Amnesty International, 2015).

State collapse in the Middle East is often linked to various factors, including prolonged internal conflicts, external interventions, economic crises or mismanagement, and weak governance structures. These factors have contributed to political instability, the fragmentation of political power, and the breakdown of essential state services (Acharya, 2016). This multifaceted phenomenon necessitates a nuanced understanding of economic mismanagement, corruption, and external dependencies as contributing factors. Collier and Hoeffler (2004) provide a foundational framework for examining the economic dimensions of state vulnerability. The perspectives of North and Weingast (1989) and others support this viewpoint by highlighting the importance of inclusive institutions in the process of establishing a state (state-building) and the difficulties that arise when they cannot be found.

However, the complexities of state collapse in the Middle East extend beyond economic considerations, intertwining with historical grievances deeply embedded in the social fabric of the region. This study attempts to understand the historical origins of state collapse and the manner in which unresolved conflicts lead to governance failures. It draws on Tilly's (1992) examination of contentious politics and Rousseau's (1762) social contract theory. Furthermore, the theory of the clash of civilizations by Huntington (1996) is used to contextualize the role of identity politics and historical narratives in perpetuating societal divisions and increasing state fragility.

The aftermath of state collapse poses a critical challenge to the re-establishment of governance structures that command legitimacy. This dimension is explored through the lens of political sociology, with Weber's (1922) conceptualization of authority and legitimacy providing a framework for understanding the complexities of post-collapse governance. Fukuyama's (2011) insights into political order and decay further contribute to the analysis of the challenges inherent in rebuilding states among historical grievances and social fractures.

The challenge of legitimacy arises in the context of state collapse, as the absence of a stable and recognized government creates a power vacuum and a lack of recognized authority, leading to political fragmentation as various factions and non-state actors compete to establish their legitimacy (Bush, 2017; Hinnebusch, 2016). This void often leads to power struggles as different factions and actors seek to fill the political vacuum. In some cases, non-state actors such as militias or extremist groups may gain control, further complicating the situation (Chesterman & Chandrasekaran, 2016). The absence of a stable and legitimate government hampers efforts to restore stability, deliver essential services, and address the root causes of conflict (Leenders & Kruijt, 2017; O'Leary, 2017). This hinders state-building efforts and undermines the prospects for stability, peace, and effective governance (Matuszak, 2016; Dorraj & Heydari, 2019).

The political economy dimension of state collapse in the Middle East is characterized by various factors. One critical element is resource dependency, with many countries in the region heavily reliant on oil revenues. The decline in oil prices, economic mismanagement, and corruption has contributed to the erosion of state institutions, economic crises, the weakening of the social contract, and subsequent political instability (Oxford Research Group, 2017; Nathan & Scobell, 2012). Additionally, social and sectarian divisions have played a significant role in the collapse of states. Deep-seated grievances, cultural differences, and historical animosities have fueled conflicts and hindered efforts at national reconciliation and state building (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004).

By synthesizing these theoretical frameworks, this study aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of the political economy of state collapse in the Middle East and the subsequent challenge to legitimacy. Through this exploration, the study endeavors to provide insights pertinent to addressing the root causes of instability and fostering sustainable governance structures in the diverse countries that make up the Middle East. As scholars and policymakers grapple with the intricate dynamics of state collapse, it becomes imperative to examine the multifaceted factors that contribute to the erosion of governance in the Middle East. This research seeks to explore not only the economic underpinnings of state collapse but also the role of historical grievances and social divisions, which often serve as catalysts for instability.

Against this backdrop, this study provides avenues for exploring the underlying causes, consequences, and potential solutions related to the political economy of state collapse and the challenge of legitimacy in the Middle East. It also investigates and analyzes how historical grievances and social divisions contribute to state collapse and hinder efforts to establish stable and legitimate governance systems by delving into the sociopolitical dynamics and underlying factors that perpetuate instability and hinder the establishment of effective governance in the Middle East.

1.2 Economic Inequality and Ethnic/Sectarian Divisions in the Middle East: A Critical Review

In the Middle East, economic inequality and sectarian and ethnic divides have long been key issues affecting political and socioeconomic stability. This review critically evaluates the body of research on the connection between regional ethnic and sectarian divisions and economic inequality. This study seeks to clarify the intricate dynamics at play in these related problems while considering plausible causative pathways and their effects on social cohesiveness, development, and stability in the area.

Numerous studies have highlighted significant levels of economic inequality in the Middle East. According to the World Inequality Lab, the region experiences significant disparities in income distribution (Moshrit, 2022). This imbalance is attributed to various factors, including rentier economies, resource allocation, and corruption. The concentration of wealth in the hands of elites further intensifies economic inequality. Other studies have also established a link between economic inequality and ethnic divisions in the Middle East. Laitin and Fearon (2002) argue that ethnic divisions intensify when resources, power, and economic opportunities are unevenly distributed, leading to grievances and conflicts. Shahbaz et al. (2019) further suggested that economic inequality aggravates ethno-political conflicts, representing a barrier to social and political integration. Significant disparities in wealth and income distribution can lead to social unrest, discontent, and feelings of marginalization among various segments of society. When economic inequality is pervasive and not adequately addressed by the state, it can fuel grievances, social divisions, and ultimately undermine the legitimacy of the government.

Economic inequality also intersects with sectarian divisions in the Middle East. The Middle East is characterized by diverse ethnic and religious groups, and historical grievances or ongoing conflicts rooted in these divisions contribute to state collapse and hinder the establishment of legitimate governance structures (Fenton, 2011). Rabasa et al. (2007) observed that economic disparities contribute to increasing sectarian tensions, with marginalized communities turning toward sectarian identification for protection or resources. Drawing on historical and contemporary cases, Haykel et al. (2016) highlight how socioeconomic disparities fuel sectarianism in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Deep-rooted tensions between different groups can lead to social fragmentation, violence, and political instability, making creating inclusive governance systems that account for various identities challenging.

The Middle East has a complex mosaic of ethnic and sectarian groups. These divisions have deep historical roots and often lead to regional tensions and conflicts. The Arab-Israeli conflict, the Kurdish question, and the Sunni-Shiite divisions are good examples. Several key factors contribute to the exacerbation of economic inequality and ethnic and sectarian divisions in the Middle East. Weak governance, corruption, rentier economies, and resource dependency are often cited as primary factors (Ross, 2004; Luciani, 2014). These factors perpetuate inequality by enabling political elites to monopolize resources while neglecting marginalized communities.

This review reveals the extant literature on the impact of the political economy of state collapse and the challenge of legitimacy in the Middle East. Bush (2017) discusses the causes, consequences, and responses to state fragility in the region, while Chesterman and Chandrasekaran (2016) explore the complexities of state failure, sovereignty, and effectiveness. Leenders and Kruijt (2017) shed light on the complex political economy of armed politics in the Middle East, emphasizing the challenges of establishing legitimate governance structures. Additionally, O'Leary (2017) discusses the fragmented politics of urbanism and its impact on the challenges of governance and legitimacy in the Middle East.

To that extent, the interplay between economic inequality and ethnic and sectarian divisions provides valuable insights into the dynamics of state collapse and the erosion of legitimacy in the Middle East. Understanding how these variables interact with political economy factors can help elucidate the complexities of the region's challenges in establishing stable and legitimate governance structures.

In general, most of these studies have focused primarily on the causes and complexities of state failure in the Middle East, with little emphasis on historical grievances and social divisions as catalysts for state collapse and hindering efforts to establish legitimate governance structures in the Middle East. To this end, this study addresses the identified gaps in extant literature.

1.3 Methodology

This study was anchored on the pragmatic prism of identity politics theory to explore how identities, such as ethnicity, religion, or tribal affiliations, shape political behavior, mobilization, and conflicts within a society. This study focuses on the significance of historical grievances and social divisions in influencing political dynamics and has particular relevance in analyzing how these factors exacerbate state collapse and hinder the establishment of legitimate governance structures in the Middle East.

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative elements to capture the complexity of the phenomena under investigation. The qualitative component involves an in-depth examination of historical case studies, drawing on archival sources, scholarly literature, and official documents

to trace the evolution of state collapse in specific Middle Eastern countries. This historical analysis employs process tracing to identify causal mechanisms and pathways leading to state failure.

Complementing the historical inquiry, the quantitative component involves the collection and analysis of socioeconomic and political data from a broad range of Middle Eastern countries. This cross-country comparative analysis identifies patterns, correlations, and statistical relationships among economic indicators, historical grievances, social divisions, and the propensity for state collapse. Thematic content analysis was performed to distill key patterns and recurrent themes from the qualitative narratives.

In synthesizing the findings, the study not only contributed to academic discourse but also informed policymakers and practitioners working toward sustainable governance structures in the Middle East. The integrated research design, which combines historical analysis, quantitative assessments, and qualitative insights, allows for a comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between political economy, historical grievances, social divisions, state collapse, and the challenge of legitimacy in the Middle East.

1.4 Identity Politics and the Impact of Historical Grievances and Social Divisions on State Collapse in the Middle East

This study was anchored on the pragmatic prism of identity politics theory. This study focuses on the significance of historical grievances and social divisions in influencing political dynamics and has particular relevance in analyzing how these factors exacerbate state collapse and hinder the establishment of legitimate governance structures in the Middle East.

Identity politics theory recognizes the influence of historical grievances on political behavior and dynamics. These grievances often stem from past injustices, conflicts, or colonial legacies. This study considers how historical injustices, such as colonialism, authoritarianism, or intergroup conflicts, contribute to the formation and persistence of identity-based grievances. As highlighted by Acharya (2014), historical grievances can shape collective memories and narratives, contributing to the mobilization of identity-based political movements and conflicts. In the Middle East, historical experiences, including issues related to borders, colonialism, and sectarian tensions, have created deep-seated grievances that influence political behaviour and state dynamics. For example, the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict has created long-standing grievances, influencing political mobilization and hindering efforts to establish legitimate governance structures (Said, 1994; Center for Preventive Action, 2023).

The theory of identity politics acknowledges the impact of social divisions based on identity markers such as ethnicity or religion. This study explores how these divisions shape collective identities, create competition for resources and power, and potentially lead to social and political fragmentation within a society. Barkey and Parikh (1991) highlight how polarization and societal divides fuel conflict and lead to the collapse of states. Religious and ethnic differences have been linked to hostilities and the dissolution of states in the Middle East, where they have also significantly shaped political processes. Social divisions, particularly ethnic and religious divisions, have played a significant role in intensifying state collapse and hindering governance structures in the Middle East. Sectarian divisions in Iraq, for instance, have fueled conflicts and contributed to the fragmentation of the state, making it difficult to establish stable governance (Hashemi & Postel, 2017).

This study explores how historical grievances and social divisions can lead to identity-based mobilization, political movements, and conflicts. These mobilizations can intensify tensions, hinder efforts toward establishing inclusive governance structures, and contribute to state collapse. For example, Kuru (2018)

examines how identity politics in the Middle East, particularly in the context of Islamism, has contributed to political mobilization and conflicts. The Arab Spring uprisings were driven, in part, by grievances related to authoritarianism, corruption, and economic inequality, as well as identity-based factors such as religious and ethnic disparities (Hafez, 2013).

Identity politics emphasizes the role of socio-cultural, religious, and historical identities in shaping individuals' political behavior and societal dynamics. In the context of the Middle East, historical grievances and social divisions rooted in ethnic, sectarian, or tribal identities have been significant drivers of conflicts and state collapse. This theory asserts that when historical grievances and social divisions are deeply entrenched, they can lead to political mobilization along identity lines and intensify conflicts. These dynamics can fragment societies, disrupt state institutions, and hinder the establishment of legitimate and inclusive governance structures.

By applying the theory of identity politics, we analyze the complex interplay between historical grievances, social divisions, and state collapse, as well as the challenges in establishing legitimate governance structures in the Middle East. It allows for a deeper understanding of how identity-based grievances and divisions impact political behaviour, mobilization, and state dynamics in the region and how they intersect with political and economic factors in the region's political economy.

1.5 Economic Inequality as a Driver of Ethnic Divisions in Middle East

The intricate and multidimensional relationship between economic disparity and ethnic divisions in the Middle East greatly influences the dynamics of the region. The Middle East's economic inequality is a complex problem with many underlying causes that affect the stability and growth of the region.

In many Middle Eastern countries, there are stark economic disparities between different ethnic or sectarian groups. Economic inequality often results in certain ethnic groups having unequal access to resources such as land, jobs, and educational opportunities. This unequal distribution fosters resentment and grievances among marginalized ethnic groups (Lall, & Al Balushi 2011). Moreover, economic inequality can intensify competition for limited resources, such as access to jobs, education, housing, and health care. This competition can create further divisions between ethnic and sectarian groups, leading to tensions and conflicts (Fenton, 2011).

Furthermore, when economic inequality is coupled with political exclusion and discrimination, it can further polarize societies and lead to social unrest or even violence (Reilly, 2001; Beinin, 2001). Discrimination in employment and access to services is a good example of ethnic divisions as a driver of economic inequality in the Middle East. Posusney and Angrist (2005) maintained that in regions with strong ethnic divisions, some ethnic groups may face discrimination in employment and access to public services, hindering their economic prospects.

Certain groups may have historically held more power and wealth, while others have been marginalized and excluded from economic opportunities (Satyanath, Voigtländer, & Voth 2017). When economically disadvantaged ethnic communities perceive that they are systematically excluded from economic opportunities, it can lead to feelings of marginalization and alienation. Marginalized groups that feel left behind economically may resort to collective action or even radicalization as a means of seeking redress and recognition (Lust-Okar, 2005). These sentiments can then be exploited by political or ethnic leaders for their agendas (Hamzawy, 2007). This unequal distribution of resources has deepened social divisions and created a sense of grievance and resentment among marginalized communities. The Middle East is known for its vast reserves of oil and natural

resources. However, the benefits of these resources are not equally distributed, leading to significant economic disparities within and among countries. This is often referred to as the "resource curse." (Ross 2012).

Hanieh (2018) examines the relationship between economic inequality and sectarian divisions in Gulf countries, highlighting how economic policies contribute to the formation of sectarian identity and reinforce existing inequalities. Matar and Skinner (2017) explore the dynamics between economic inequality and sectarian divisions in Syria, particularly in the context of the civil war, and how these factors contribute to social unrest and conflict.

Nayak (2019) focuses on Bahrain and examines the intertwining of class, sectarianism, and economic inequality in the context of the Bahraini revolution. Ali and Shehata (2020) investigated the relationship between ethno-sectarian divisions and economic inequality in Iraq. This study examines how historical legacies, natural resource revenues, and political regimes have shaped economic inequality and its impact on social divisions. Lust (2009), while emphasizing the nexus between economic inequality and ethnic divisions, dwells on its impact on state stability. The combination of economic inequality and ethnic divisions can weaken state institutions, making it difficult for governments to effectively address these challenges.

Huntington (1996) emphasized the clash of civilizations and the tragedy of great power politics, highlighting the role of historical animosities and power struggles in shaping the Middle East's political dynamics.

In summary, the relationship between economic inequality and ethnic divisions in the Middle East is a vicious cycle in which each intensifies the others. Economic disparities can lead to ethnic tensions, and ethnic divisions can perpetuate economic inequality. These factors interact and intersect in complex ways, making the Middle East a region marked by multifaceted challenges. Addressing this nexus between economic inequalities and managing ethnic and sectarian divisions requires comprehensive approaches that focus on economic development, promotion of social cohesion, building more inclusive and equitable societies, and conflict resolution, taking into account the specific ethnic and cultural dynamics of the region.

1.6 Historical grievances and social divisions intensify state collapse and hinder efforts to establish legitimate governance structures in the Middle East.

Historical grievances in the Middle East, such as colonial intervention and the creation of artificial borders, have fueled conflicts and divisions among different ethnic and religious groups (Gelvin, 2015). This includes the arbitrary drawing of borders, often ignoring existing ethnic and religious affiliations, which has led to internal tensions and conflicts and hindered governance efforts in the Middle East (Gelvin, 2008). These complaints stem from the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which split the area into several nations without considering pre-existing racial and religious affinities. For example, long-standing disputes between the Shia majority and the Sunni Arab minority can be partly blamed for Iraq's state collapse following the 2003 US-led war. These complaints have their roots in historical occurrences, including the marginalization of Sunnis during Saddam Hussein's leadership and the sectarian character of post-Saddam governance, as well as British colonial dominance (Tripp, 2007).

Social and sectarian divisions based on ethnicity, religion, and sectarianism have played a significant role in state collapse in the Middle East. In other words, ethnic and sectarian divisions have significantly contributed to shaping the dynamics of the Middle East, often contributing to conflicts and instability. These divisions often result in exclusionary and discriminatory policies and power struggles, further fueling internal conflicts and making it difficult to establish stable, legitimate, and inclusive governance structures (Heydemann, 2016;

Schetter, 2015). An example of social divisions hindering efforts to establish governance structures is the ongoing civil war in Syria, which is rooted in social divisions, particularly between the Alawite-dominated regime of Bashar al-Assad and various opposition groups representing different religious and ethnic communities (Lynch, 2017).

The Kurdish population spans multiple countries in the Middle East and has long sought autonomy or independence. This has been a source of tension and conflict (McDowall, 2004). The region is home to a significant Sunni-Shia divide, which has fueled sectarian tensions and conflicts. For instance, the Syrian civil war and the Yemeni conflict have sectarian dimensions (Gause 2010). Farsoun and Shams (2004) assert that various ethnic minorities face discrimination and marginalization in several Middle Eastern countries, contributing to ethnic tensions and conflicts.

Historical grievances and social divisions complicate the establishment of legitimate governance structures by undermining trust, perpetuating exclusion, and fueling intergroup tensions (Beblawi, 2013). This hampers the establishment of legitimate and inclusive governance structures (Heydemann, 2016b). For instance, in post-Qaddafi Libya, historical grievances between different tribal and ethnic groups, coupled with social divisions, have resulted in factionalism and hindered the creation of an effective and centralized authority (Lacher, 2015). The table below shows how historical grievances and social divisions intensify state collapse and hinder efforts to establish legitimate governance structures in the Middle East.

Table 1 Factors that intensify State Collapse and Heavier Legitimate Governance in the Middle East

Aspect	Explanation	Case Study	Implications	Sources
Historical Grievances	Historical grievances stem from unresolved conflicts, territorial disputes, perceived injustices, colonial intervention, and arbitrary borders that result in conflicts and divisions among ethnic and religious groups.	The Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 divided the region without considering pre-existing affiliations. Lebanese Civil War: Sectarian tensions fueled by historical power imbalances and resource distribution.	Historical grievances contribute to governance challenges by perpetuating cycles of violence and political instability	Gelvin, (2015); Tripp, (2007) Huntington (1996), Collier and Hoeffler (2004), Tilly (1992).
Social Divisions	Social divisions based on ethnicity, religion, and sectarianism have played a significant role in state collapse in the Middle East.	The ongoing civil war in Syria between the Alawite-dominated regime of Bashar al-Assad and various opposition groups representing different religious and ethnic communities. Post-Saddam Iraq: Social divisions between the	Social divisions intensify economic disparities, conflict, and power struggles, hindering the establishment of stable and inclusive governance structures and	(Heydemann, 2016; Lynch, 2017) Huntington (1996) and Varshney (2002) North and Weingast (1989)

		Sunni and Shia populations hindered the establishment of a stable governance structure.	economic institutions necessary for state building.	Tripp (2007)
Hindering Governance Structures	Historical grievances and social divisions complicate the establishment of legitimate governance structures by undermining trust, perpetuating exclusion, and fueling intergroup tensions.	In post-Qaddafi Libya, historical grievances between different tribal and ethnic groups, coupled with social divisions, have resulted in factionalism and hindered the creation of an effective and centralized authority.	The intersection of historical grievances and social divisions creates a reinforcing cycle that intensifies conflicts and hinders state-building efforts.	(Beblawi, 2013; Lacher, 2015) Fukuyama (2011) Fearon and Laitin (2003)

Source: Compiled by the authors from different sources

Table 1 summarizes the key points related to historical grievances and social divisions that exacerbate state collapse and hinder efforts to establish legitimate governance structures in the Middle East. Some of the case studies considered include the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, which divided the region without considering pre-existing affiliations; the ongoing civil war in Syria between the Alawite-dominated regime of Bashar al-Assad and various opposition groups representing different religious and ethnic communities; and post-Qaddafi Libya. Historical grievances between different tribal and ethnic groups, coupled with social divisions, have resulted in factionalism and hindered the creation of effective and centralized authority. Overcoming historical grievances and social divisions in the Middle East requires comprehensive strategies. Inclusive institutions are crucial in fostering legitimacy.

The table below shows the aspects, evidence, and affected countries in the Middle East, with an emphasis on economic inequality, ethnic divisions, sectarian divisions, state policies, regional crises, corruption, and state collapse.

Table 2 Evidence of state collapse and challenges to legitimacy in the Middle East

Aspect	Evidence and the Context	Countries Affected	Sources
Economic Inequality	Protests and complaints have been stoked by economic inequalities. The lack of economic possibilities and high youth unemployment have made people dissatisfied with governments. Inequality worsens when corruption is pervasive.	Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt, Tunisia, Iran, etc.	Moshrif, (2022); Brookings Institution (2021)
Ethnic Divisions	The Middle East is known for its multitude of ethnic groups. Conflicts have been exacerbated by ethnic tensions as different groups have demanded independence or autonomy. Kurdish ambitions in Syria and Iraq are two prominent examples.	Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Turkey, Iran, etc.	Chatham House Report (2019)
Sectarian Divisions	Sectarian tensions, particularly between Sunni and Shia Muslims, have played a significant role in these	Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, Lebanon, etc.	Middle East Institute (2019).

	conflicts. Sectarian divides have intensified violence in Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain.		International Crisis Group. (2020).
State Policies	State policies have contributed to these challenges, including discriminatory policies, political repression, and mismanagement of resources.	Syria, Yemen, and Iraq	Heydemann (2016); World Bank. (2019)
Regional Crises	Regional crises, such as conflicts in neighboring countries and power struggles, often spill over and intensify instability within countries.	Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and Iraq	Fawcett (2019); Gause (2019)
Corruption	Corruption is a pervasive issue in the Middle East, with corrupt practices affecting resource distribution and worsening economic inequality.	Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and Iraq	Transparency International. (2022). Kaufmann, Kraay, and Mastruzzi (2011)
State Collapse	Multiple countries in the Middle East have experienced state collapse or significant challenges to legitimacy due to the factors mentioned. The Arab Spring uprisings, conflicts in Syria and Yemen, and the rise of non-state actors in Iraq indicate these challenges	Syria, Yemen, Egypt, Morocco, Libya, Bahrain, Tunisia, and Iraq	United Nations. (2017)

Source: Author’s compilation from various independent sources

The above table provides a tabular presentation of evidence related to state collapse and challenges of legitimacy in the Middle East, with special emphasis on economic inequality, ethnic divisions, sectarian divisions, state policies, regional crises, and corruption. This is an overview of the various factors contributing to state collapse and challenges to legitimacy in the Middle East. It is important to note that the examples provided are not exhaustive; however, they offer a starting point for understanding the evidence of economic inequality, ethnic divisions, and sectarian divisions affecting state collapse and challenges to legitimacy in the Middle East.

1.7 Findings and Discussion

Economic inequality is a pervasive issue, with significant disparities in income and access to resources. Rapid economic growth combined with income inequality has led to social and political unrest and dissatisfaction in the region, contributing to state collapse. The affected countries are Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt, Tunisia, Iran, Yemen, etc. (Campante & Chor 2012).

High youth unemployment rates intensify economic inequality and lead to social unrest. Many Middle Eastern countries struggle to create sufficient job opportunities for their growing youth populations (Moshrif, 2022). Corruption is a widespread issue in the region, with powerful elites siphoning off resources for personal gain. This further widens the gap between the rich and the poor (Kaufmann, Kraay, & Mastruzzi 2011). The issue of social unrest in the Middle East is attributed to economic inequality. Economic inequality has been the driving force behind various protests and uprisings in the Middle East, such as the Arab Spring. Dissatisfaction with economic disparities has fueled calls for political change (Cammett & Luong 2014).

The Middle East is ethnically diverse, and ethnic tensions have led to conflict and separatist movements. Ethnic divisions have fueled conflicts and hindered governance efforts in the Middle East, leading to state collapse and

challenges to legitimacy. Kurdish aspirations have resulted in regional disputes. Other countries that have been affected include Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, Sudan, Yemen, Libya, and Iran (Chourou&Abdennadher 2020). Ethnic divisions have led to economic fragmentation, where different ethnic groups control separate economic enclaves. This has resulted in unequal economic development and growth, as resources and opportunities are concentrated within specific ethnic communities (World Bank 2005). The interplay between economic inequality and ethnic divisions contributes to conflicts and security challenges. These conflicts have further intensified economic disparities and perpetuated divisions. Ethnic divisions have been intensified by conflicts over the control of valuable economic resources, such as oil or land. These conflicts have severe economic and security consequences (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004).

Conflicts and power struggles have resulted from sectarian divisions, which have also significantly contributed to state breakdown and governance issues in the Middle East. Conflicts have been greatly impacted by sectarian tensions, especially those between Sunni and Shia Muslims, which have an impact on regional dynamics and state stability. Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Iran are among the nations impacted (Hashemi & Postel 2017b).

State policies have contributed to these challenges, including discriminatory policies, political repression, and mismanagement of resources, which have affected countries such as Syria, Yemen, and Iraq. Regional crises, such as conflicts in neighboring countries and power struggles, often spill over and intensify instability within countries. Political factors such as authoritarianism and corruption are pervasive issues in the Middle East, with corrupt practices affecting resource distribution and worsening economic inequality (Heydemann, 2016b).

Multiple countries in the Middle East have faced challenges due to these factors. The Arab Spring uprisings, Syrian and Yemeni conflicts, and issues in Lebanon and Iraq reflect these challenges (United Nations 2017). Finally, this analysis provides a qualitative overview of these factors in the Middle East.

1.8 Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The complex interplay of historical grievances and social divisions in the Middle East has been a significant factor in intensifying state collapse and impeding the establishment of legitimate governance structures. Political landscapes in the region are still shaped by long-standing grievances stemming from its complex history, which is characterized by unresolved conflict, territorial disputes, identity politics, colonial legacies, sectarian conflicts, and geopolitical rivalries.

Social divisions along ethnic, religious, and cultural lines have further fragmented societies, hindering the development of inclusive and effective governance. These factors, when left unaddressed, create fertile ground for state collapse and hinder the development of effective governance. The intersection of historical animosities and social divisions often results in reinforcing cycles, perpetuating instability, and impeding progress.

Efforts to build legitimate governance structures must recognize and address deep-seated historical and social challenges. A holistic approach that considers the nuances of identity, historical narratives, and economic disparities is essential for sustainable and inclusive governance in the Middle East. Policy recommendations should be tailored to the unique context of each country in the Middle East, recognizing the diversity of challenges and opportunities within the region. By prioritizing inclusivity, diplomacy, and socioeconomic development, policymakers can work toward building resilient governance structures that promote stability and legitimacy in the Middle East.

In addition, conflict resolution and reconciliation, inclusive governance and power-sharing mechanisms, economic development and social programmes, education and cultural understanding, international cooperation, conflict prevention strategies, civil society engagement and rule of law and justice reform are key to establishing legitimate governance structures in the Middle East.

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