Islamism and Political Institutions of the Middle East

Abstract

The article discusses the prospects of development of political regimes in the Middle East under conditions of growing instability and trend of a political Islamization. The author estimates the institutional dimension of the existing regimes and tries to consider the transformation experience of the Middle East and the Maghreb countries through the prism of contemporary theories of democratization and political stability.

Key words: Islam, political regime, the Middle East, political stability, democratization.

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Conflicts, intermittently occurring with the states in the Middle East through more than half a century of their independent existence, prove that the region still faces a significant number of large-scale, though not always obvious challenges. One of these problems is remaining of the archaic systems of social fault lines — ethnic, religious, confessional within the states. The Syrian events, actual disappearance of Iraq from the political map of the world, the Lebanese crisis, ISIS, accumulated tension and threats which sooner or later will lead to a complete reconfiguration of the region (with an unknown level of control and, consequently, an equally uncertain outcome), or to the awareness that only the sustainable and stable institutions can guarantee the existing boundaries.

Manual mode of management

The retrospective analysis of the development of political regimes in the Middle East during the last decades shows that the key features of almost all of them are their undemocratic character and evident weakness of state institutes in comparison with the potential of clan or any other informal power. According to estimates of the Bertelsmann Foundation for 2014 in the Middle East and North Africa, Turkey was the only country successfully implemented democratic transformation — all the rest, in the best case, realized the scenario of limited transformation (or 'anocracy', in terms of the Polity IV index). Almost all key countries in the region showed the same low levels of democratization, political participation and «stateship», understood as the institutional dimension of the quality of political and administrative management.

Seven countries of the region are monarchies (mostly, absolute). Syrian President

Bashar al-Assad came to power in fact, by inheritance, as the head of the Alawite elite in predominantly Sunni country; Lebanon has been under the political control of Syria for a long time; the overthrown Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, in fact, came to power during the military coup, — and we still have not mentioned contemporary Iraq or Yemen. In Saudi Arabia, living under the Sharia law, Riyadh dinasty has granted women suffrage only this year (and only at the municipal level). Researchers noted the low level of political participation in the region, the weakness of the electoral system and a considerable lurch to authoritarian (or, as already mentioned, anocratic) governing. Yes, in the 1990s, on the wave of global democratization, the pen-etration of new political standards into the Middle East had increased, yet even partial modernization was used by traditional elites to build informal (shadow) transactions and maintain current patron-client relations. Parliamentarism in the regional countries was (and remains, for the most part) symbolic and quite conventional: the Baath party until 2002 controlled the Syrian succession, Jordan multiparty system not older than the heir of the king Abdullah, in Bahrain and Kuwait which still remain the only members of the GCC with elected parliaments, any political parties are banned. Thus, the languages of the various authors who call the regional parliamentary structures «facade» or «incomplete» are more than appropriate.

Stability of democratic institutions (according to BTI)

	2006	2010	2014
Jordan (blue)	2,0	2,0	2,0
UAE (red)	2,0	2,5	2,0
Syria (green)	1,0	2,0	1,0
Saudi Arabia (purple)	1,0	1,0	1,0
Turkey (for comparison):	8,0	8,0	8,0
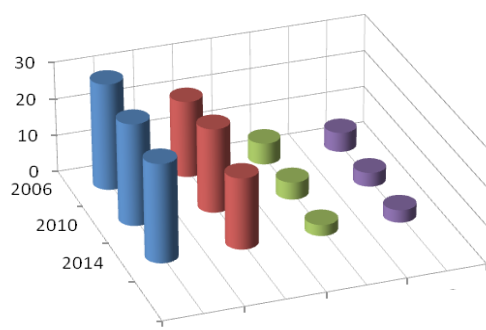
Voting rights and accountability (according to WGI)

	2006	2010	2014
Jordan	28,8	27,5	26,6
UAE	20,7	22,7	19,2
Syria	5,8	4,7	3
Saudi Arabia	5,3	3,8	3,4
Turkey (for comparison):	44,7	44,5	37,9

However, the «Arab spring» and the end of 1980s, and other events have repeatedly shown that the effectiveness of manual control can be observed only in the situation of extremely favorable external environment, the formation of which in the region of the Middle East is an absolute rarity. The shortage of public socialization, the growth of property stratification, the expansion of the informal (shadow) sector in the economy, washing out from the formal economy much-needed resources for development — all this only exacerbated the negative consequences of discrimination against different groups of the population and outright tyranny in political life. Inefficient (in terms of the actual lack of stable institutions) state regulation could not cope with the external and accidental shocks: in the conditions of the global crisis the Middle East countries sharply reduced GDP growth, increased unemployment, and the mechanisms of state expenditure in countries of the region amounting one third of GDP, ceased to be effective.

Thus, manual control, in some situations allowing to minimize potential conflicts within the political system and form very peculiar in the current environment mode of «Personal Union», shows a striking inefficiency and inability to form stable environment for national development in long-term measurement. The only basis for the stability of such systems can be, as Dowding & Kimber noted, external support — and mainly this feature, as the example of the Bahraini dynasty of al-Kalifa shows, can re-legitimize the regime even in a situation of social disorder.

Short term promises and long-term misconceptions

For a long time it was believed that the traditional Middle East threat of radical Islamism can be resisted only by local authoritarianism, strong enough to nip in the bud a potential «ISIS». However, this view was subjected to a serious revision due to at least two circumstances: first, after several decades, the benefit from the support of the authoritarian regimes of Gaddafi or Mubarak started to be unassured, and, secondly, the autocracies were able to smooth the manifestations of the internal conflicts of governed societies, but did not ensure their full surpass. However, the logic, according to which the democratization of the region will ensure the transition of unstable states to Islamist regimes, is still quite popular, and disadvantages of the authoritarian suppression of such a trend are sometimes settled throughout discussion of a «national leader». It still hides the third factor that continues to influence the Middle East political process: the authoritarian regimes based on suppression and the system of sanctions shaped the present explosive situation. A short-term «stabilization» turned into a large-scale escalation of the social crisis — remarkable example of that could be fully observed in Egypt.

Undoubtedly, the popularity of religious movements (Muslim brotherhood, Traditionalist Salafi, etc.) in the regional countries' forces to accept Islamization as a serious risk. However, the example of countries such as Turkey, Morocco, Lebanon or Jordan (with all the differences in their historical path), suggests that it is impossible to exaggerate Islamist threat, describing of it as some kind of a «general rule». Meanwhile, exactly this circumstance was most solid basis for consolidation of autocracies in the region — most of them have only increased the ranks of the informal supporters and sympathizers of religious forces, who were emphasized its «democratic» nature by populist slogans and opposition to severe repressive policy of the state regimes of Syria or Egypt. Non-institutionalized (due to authoritarization) regimes began to collapse under the influence of socio-economic factors; the crisis of legitimacy of the incumbents handed carte blanche to scattered non-system challengers, among whom the Islamists constituted a significant share. In other words, in some states of the

Middle East rigid and repressive autocracies were created sufficiently, but this success had meant extremely vulnerable regimes which were truly «weak» from the point of view of state building. We can suggest that similar systems confirm the hypothesis of Robert Kaplan implies that within system without strong institutions democratization may well lead to a surge of social discord and violence. Without necessary regulatory order, rule of law and legal guarantees democratic transition only worsens economic reality and badly affects political dynamics.

From this point of view, the proposal to divide «fragile», or «soft» states of the Middle East on ethnic and religious fragments, each of which must be provided with independence or at least wide autonomy within the Federal structure, seems rather strange (despite possible popularity among people and even researchers). First, it is enough just to look at the ethnic and religious map of the region, to see how difficult it is to hold a coherent demarcation and to set any new boundaries. Kurds, Druze, Yazidis, Alawites — how could claims of all these parties be satisfied within only one part of a complex and promiscuous region? Second, any transformation of the existing territorial lines and, especially, separation of the several groups (like Kurds or Iraqi Shia) will lead to a dramatic surge of separatism and irredentism even in a relatively stable countries (e. g., Jordan or Turkey). Therefore, the region will become less (not more) stable; it is necessary to remember what kind of political regimes can take root in the alleged states: Islamism rarely feels reverence to national boundaries or any rights of nations to self-determination.

Can democratic regime exist without being accompanied by Islamization — and can it stabilize multi-component societies of the Middle East? In virtue of the subjunctive mood it is difficult to give a definite positive answer to the question, however, the Moroccan multi-party system, religious consociationalism of Lebanon and the stability of the Turkish institutions at least do not lead us to the opposite conclusion. Controlled transfor-

mation of political systems from authoritarian to democratic sample seems quite attainable, especially if the political elite express willingness to such a script (perhaps under the influence of external factors).

Even before the events of the «Arab spring», the government of Jordan, for example, doubled women's quota in Parliament (to 12 seats), and another dozen seats were distributed among the representatives of ethnic and religious minorities (Christians, Circassians). After unrest in the region, king Abdullah II made additional changes in 2013 when the Parliament received the right to appoint the Prime Minister. According to the World Bank estimates (WGI methodology), Jordan demonstrates a relatively high level of governmental effectiveness and maintenance of law and order, despite all the problems with the Palestinian community and the Islamic Action Front.

Despite all the problems of modern Lebanon, it also tested ideas opposing the rhetoric of the «iron law of Islamization»: the current Constitution was adopted in 1926, the main ideas of consociational «confessionalism» (the National Pact) was developed in 1943, while the political struggle in the country is exercised not only in the latent sector but in the public space between the influential «March» coalition (Pro-Syrian «March 8 coalition» and the anti-Syrian «March 14 coalition»). Syrian crisis and the events of the «Arab spring» had an indisputable negative effect on the political system of Lebanon, increasing traditional regional contradictions, but the Lebanon institutes passed through a series of civil wars and still continue to support the government in the conditions of extremely unfavorable foreign environment: the situation extremely atypical for the Middle East.

Despite the fact that the Turkish example may seem too remote to the realities of the modern Middle East because of the reduced role of Islam in political life of the country, it should not deceive; in the period of Hosni Mubarak presidency in Egypt Islamic fundamentalism was suppressed not as intensely as in the Republic of Turkey with Mustafa Ke-

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mal, but still significantly, and nevertheless, raised its head a few decades later. In other respects Turkish parliamentarism and other institutions (including the Constitution of 1982), despite a series of revolutions, showed significant sustainability: the party structure restored even after the official ban, and the army, did not transform into the junta, acting as the guarantor of the secular character of the Turkish state. Today 98 % of the population are Muslims and the Party of Justice and Development, which is the reincarnation of the banned Refah (Welfare Party), has to appeal to centrist rhetoric and face a rather high (10 %) selective barrier; the oppositional Republican People's Party shows quite serious results in the elections (25 % in the elections in June 2015) as well as the Peoples' Democratic Party (13,1 %).

The Moroccan experience is also quite demonstrative: in contrast to the revolutionary ferment of Egypt and Tunisia, local Islamists, gradually gaining political weight (13 % of the votes in the elections 2002 and 23 % in the elections of 2011), took a reformist rather than a radical position. As it was pointed by Mohammed Masbah, the slogan of the Moroccan Party of Justice and Development actually became the phrase: «Participation, not domi-

nation» the result of which were widespread practices of coalition, non-party appointments in the government and quite a flexible system of interaction with the civil society.

In other words, democratization does not necessarily exacerbates the escalation of the social crisis phenomena: the parliamentary-republican pattern of Turkey and the Alawite and Hashemite constitutional-monarchist scenario show that new institutional solutions are possible in the region. Probably, the agreement on Syria reached at the end of October by the working meeting participants in Vienna, can also be the argument in favor of managed transformation: we are not talking about a full-fledged military intervention and the complete dismantling of the existing system, but about the external mandate to resolve the present crisis. Of course, any political reforms (reforms, not revolution or breaking the status quo) in the region are impossible without external support and external legitimation. However, this condition should be complemented by internal factors such as prepared bureaucratic stratum, army structures, parliamentarism, and of course, cultural mechanisms allowing not oppressing the followers of Islam, to prevent the domination of the religious factor in politics.

Institutional trap: networks against structures

There is a subtle point in the question of institutional support of relatively new statehood in the Middle East and Maghreb: according to some researchers, Islamic network structures can and should play the role of binding institutions. In fact, the ideology of such movements as the «Muslim brotherhood», «Hezbollah» or Jamat-e-Islami, not to mention ISIS[1] is based on this point; and that is why the desire to give the green light to «political Islam» is no less dangerous than the belief that only an authoritarian leader can oppose it.

In its contemporary version «political Islam» is no longer a socially progressive phe-

nomenon, which it, apparently, could be at the dawn of its formation within clan and tribal relations of the medieval Middle East. «Ennahda» («revival»), as some of its adherents name current Renaissance of Islam, is based essentially on large-scale social deprivation, the shocks of the new information environment, demographic issues and the economic crisis; no wonder the events of the «Arab spring», caused mostly by these factors are described by supporters of «Ennahda» as the emergence of a new type of social identity. Undoubtedly, the Islamic associations, groups and networks are quite capable and powerful institutions; however, their objectives seem conservative, archaic, fundamentalist and promoting large-scale regression of the Middle Eastern societies. Alas, «political

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[1] Most of these organizations are declared terrorist and banned in Russia.

Islam» fighting for democratic regime is an oxymoron today, because the only democracy existing for it is the «democracy» of Islamism.

However, this does not mean that Islam and Muslim groups should somehow be prosecuted and suppressed. In fact the task is, in accordance with the settings of laicism and Kemalism to create a situation in which Muslims will not need to have separate political representation, based on bizarre religious separation. Holding to such a republican ideal (with the concept of «division of spheres of identity») seems to be quite an acceptable output: the Islamic tradition in the sphere of a family, private life, etc. will surely be saved, but the exit of such a traditional identity to the electoral plane will be blocked: and not only through regulatory restrictions (although they should be), but to a greater degree, through significant freedom in worship.

Summarizing, we can state that after implementation of contemporary Islamic structures into the political space, they may represent well-functioning institution, but the target of these structures will lead to unreserved obsolescence and archaization of political participation. Consolidation of traditional identity in the electoral space will prevent progress and modernisation and will leave region in conditions of permanent crisis. Probably, such a «freezing» will forever transform the Middle East and the Maghreb into a «gunpowder keg», tending to loud and dramatic explosion.

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