Introduction

Governance Challenges in the Face of Transformation

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The Middle East has undergone significant social, economic and political changes in the last two decades. Some of these changes have been manifestly evident—for example, increasing contestation over gender relations and religiosity; privatization, public sector reforms, and property rights reforms; and (re)-invigoration of political parties, associational life and more competitive elections. Others have been more subtle but no less significant. All have reshaped the lives of citizens, altered state-society relations, and redefined the nature of state authority. Although largely beyond the scope of the present collection of articles, the last two decades have also brought important changes in inter-state relations within the Middle East and between the region and the rest of the world.

The articles in this special issue are drawn from papers presented at two workshops in which participants from Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and the United States gathered to take stock of these changes and, more importantly, to examine the implications of these changes for governance. 1 We considered

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how societal transformation has led to the emergence of new social forces, changed the importance of others, and, consequently, altered relationships among various social and political actors and fostered new coalitions. Given the role that governance plays in fostering economic and social development—a fact now well-recognized globally—it is important to uncover whether, when and how reforms have altered state-society relations. Understanding the resulting transformations is essential for scholars and policymakers in developing better theories of change and designing more appropriate reforms across institutions and sectors.

Mapping Change

Through case studies from across the Middle East, the articles in this issue demonstrate the complexity of the recent transformations. They view these as the cumulative result of intricately interrelated political, economic and social changes (rather than simply additive effects of discrete reforms). Thus, economic crises fostered economic reform, but also political and social change in response; social changes—including increased urbanization and demographic shifts—created economic and political pressures (e.g., on welfare regimes) as well as the impetus for further changes in the policy landscape (e.g., rise of welfare NGOs); and political changes have both resulted from and created catalysts for transformation in all three spheres. Moreover, the impact of change is more ambiguous than analysts and policymakers often recognize. Seemingly significant and often-touted reforms, such as the withdrawal of direct state welfare provision, privatization of state enterprises, and expanding freedom for civic organization, frequently represent a less fundamental disruption in the underlying power structure and beneficiary groups than often believed. At the same time, however, these changes can provide space for new actors, coalitions, and demands to be raised. These papers suggest a contradiction: reforms (and effects of reforms) have been both less disruptive than imagined and more significant than is generally recognized.

Economic Change

In the last two decades, the Middle East and North Africa generally turned to neoliberal economic reforms, with flexibilization, privatization and targeted social assistance becoming the hallmarks of new policies with a variety of effects on different social groups. Eder, Moghadam and Saif and Choucair explore the impact of these changes on labor and business elites.