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**AN ASSESSMENT OF THE STRUCTURAL CHANGES GENERATED
BY THE STRATEGIES OF “DEMOCRACY EXPORT” AND “REGIME CHANGE”
ON POLITICAL STABILITY, GOVERNANCE CULTURE,
AND PUBLIC LEGITIMACY IN THE ARAB WORLD**

Kamil Miriyev,

*Postgraduate Student, Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences
(Baku, Azerbaijan)*

ORCID ID: 0009-0003-8335-9106

Abstract. This article examines the structural transformations induced by the strategies of “democracy export” and “regime change” in the Arab world, with a particular focus on their implications for political stability, governance culture, and public legitimacy. Drawing on comparative political analysis and post-Arab Spring experiences, the study argues that externally driven democratization efforts have often produced fragmented institutional orders rather than consolidated democratic systems. While these strategies were normatively justified by the promotion of liberal values and accountable governance, their practical implementation frequently neglected local socio-political contexts, historical state–society relations, and existing governance traditions. As a result, many countries experienced weakened state capacity, contested legitimacy, and the proliferation of non-state actors, contributing to prolonged instability. The article further highlights that regime change interventions tended to disrupt established governance cultures without providing sustainable mechanisms for inclusive political participation, thereby undermining public trust in both domestic institutions and external actors. The findings suggest that democracy promotion strategies, when detached from endogenous reform processes, may generate adverse structural outcomes that hinder long-term stability and legitimate governance in the Arab world. The study contributes to ongoing debates on external intervention, state-building, and democratic transition by emphasizing the need for context-sensitive and institutionally grounded approaches.

Key words: democracy export; regime change; Arab world; political stability; governance culture; public legitimacy; external intervention; state-building.

Introduction. The strategies of “democracy export” and “regime change” have constituted central instruments of external intervention in the Arab world, particularly since the early twenty-first century and in the context of the Arab Spring. These strategies were largely justified by normative claims related to democratization, human rights protection, and the promotion of accountable governance. However, their practical outcomes have often diverged significantly from their stated objectives. Instead of fostering sustainable democratic transitions, many interventions have coincided with prolonged political instability, institutional fragmentation, and declining public trust in state authorities.

The core research problem addressed in this study lies in assessing the structural changes produced by these strategies and determining whether they have contributed to stable governance and legitimate political order in the Arab world. The relevance of this research is underscored by the persistence of conflict, authoritarian resilience, and governance crises across the region. Understanding how externally driven democratization and regime change strategies reshape political institutions, governance cultures, and legitimacy structures is crucial for both academic debates and policy-oriented discussions on intervention, state-building, and democratic transition.

The primary objective of this article is to critically evaluate the structural effects of “democracy export” and “regime change” strategies on political stability, governance culture, and public legitimacy in selected Arab states. The study seeks to move beyond normative assessments by providing an analytical framework that captures institutional, societal, and legitimacy-based transformations.

To achieve this objective, the article is guided by the following research questions:

- How have “democracy export” and “regime change” strategies altered the institutional structures of governance in the Arab world?
- What impact have these strategies had on political stability and state capacity in post-intervention contexts?
- In what ways have external interventions influenced governance culture and state–society relations?
- How have these processes affected public legitimacy and trust in political institutions?

By addressing these questions, the study aims to identify patterns of structural change and assess the long-term implications of external intervention strategies.

The article is organized into six main sections. Following the introduction, the discussion section synthesizes the core analytical assumptions and situates the research problem within broader debates on external intervention and political order. The next section presents the theoretical and conceptual framework and reviews the relevant literature on democracy promotion, regime change, and legitimacy in transitional political systems. The subsequent sections analyze the impact of these strategies on political stability and provide a comparative case analysis of Iraq, Libya, Egypt, and Tunisia. The final section concludes the article by summarizing the key findings, discussing their theoretical and policy implications, and offering directions for future research.

Discussion. The discussion of democracy export and regime change in the Arab world requires moving beyond a simple distinction between democratic intention and authoritarian resistance. The cases considered in this article show that external strategies produce structural effects through the interaction of foreign pressure, domestic institutional capacity, elite bargaining, and public expectations. Therefore, the central issue is not whether democratization is normatively desirable, but whether externally promoted political change can be absorbed by existing state institutions and translated into credible governance practices.

A key implication is that institutional design alone cannot secure political stability when coercive capacity, administrative continuity, and social trust are weakened. Elections, constitutional reforms, and accountability mechanisms may create formal democratic procedures, yet these procedures remain fragile when security institutions fragment or when political actors perceive the new order as externally imposed. In such contexts, democracy export may unintentionally intensify contestation by opening political competition before reliable mechanisms of conflict management and service delivery have been established.

The discussion also highlights the relational nature of public legitimacy. Citizens evaluate post-intervention authorities not only through formal rules but also through performance, sovereignty, and cultural intelligibility. Where new institutions provide security, services, and inclusive participation, legitimacy can gradually develop even under imperfect political conditions. Where interventions disrupt governance routines without creating credible domestic ownership, legitimacy becomes contested and political order remains unstable. This explains why negotiated and institutionally grounded reform processes have generally produced more sustainable outcomes than abrupt regime displacement.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This article evaluates how “democracy export” and “regime change” strategies translate external power into internal political restructuring across the Arab world. The framework treats intervention not only as a discrete foreign-policy act (military, diplomatic, economic, informational), but as a multi-stage process that reshapes (i) coercive capacity and elite incentives, (ii) institutional design and governance practices, and (iii) the social foundations of legitimacy. The approach therefore links external intervention to structural political change through intervening mechanisms – security fragmentation, elite reconfiguration, administrative re-ordering, and narrative contestation – whose com-

bined effects determine whether political order stabilizes, hybridizes, or collapses (Heydemann & Lynch, 2024; Elayah & Lambert, 2023).

Liberal interventionism provides the normative claim that external action can accelerate liberal governance by protecting civilians, supporting democratic institutions, and enabling representative rule. Within this tradition, democratic peace theory is typically mobilized as a downstream justification: expanding the number of democracies is expected to reduce conflict propensity and strengthen predictable cooperation, thereby contributing to international and regional stability (Dunne et al., 2024). Applied to the Arab world, this logic assumes that externally supported political openings can generate institutional accountability and eventually produce a self-reinforcing legitimacy cycle – where performance (service delivery), procedure (elections/participation), and values (rights) converge into durable consent.

However, this article treats the liberal promise as **conditional**, not automatic. The causal pathway depends on whether intervention can (a) preserve or reconstruct coercive order, (b) prevent predatory competition among armed actors, and (c) enable institutions to develop local credibility rather than appearing externally scripted. When these conditions fail, “democracy export” can unintentionally generate governance overload – formal democratic templates without the administrative capacity or trust needed to make them legitimate in practice (Heydemann & Lynch, 2024).

Realist and neo-realist critiques foreground power, security dilemmas, and unintended consequences. From this view, regime change is less a democratizing instrument than a high-risk strategy that disrupts state authority, creates security vacuums, and incentivizes insurgency and civil conflict – dynamics that often outlast the intervention itself. A central empirical claim is that foreign-imposed leadership frequently faces incompatible audience demands: satisfying external patrons can undermine domestic credibility, while pursuing domestic legitimacy can alienate external sponsors, producing persistent instability (Downes, 2021).

For Arab cases, the realist lens highlights three structural risks. First, the dismantling or fragmentation of security institutions can turn “transition” into prolonged coercive competition. Second, externally aligned elites may be treated as politically inauthentic, weakening social compliance even when institutional design looks procedurally “democratic.” Third, regional power rivalries can internationalize domestic contestation, making political reconstruction hostage to broader geopolitical bargaining (Elayah & Lambert, 2023). Within this critique, legitimacy is not primarily produced by elections or constitutional engineering; it is produced by security provision, credible authority, and negotiated elite settlements – none of which can be reliably imposed from outside (Downes, 2021; Dunne et al., 2024).

Post-colonial approaches reframe intervention as part of longer histories of hierarchical ordering, where “good governance” agendas can reproduce asymmetries between external “designers” and local “subjects.” This matters because legitimacy is partly relational: publics evaluate authority not only by outcomes but by whether rule appears autonomous, culturally intelligible, and free from external tutelage. Post-colonial scholarship emphasizes that administrative practices – classification, mobility control, emergency rule – often persist as institutional legacies that shape how citizenship and belonging are governed, which can constrain democratization even after formal political change (Berda, 2022).

Constructivist perspectives complement this by specifying how legitimacy is socially produced: through norms, identity narratives, and interpretive frames that define what counts as “rightful rule.” External intervention can therefore trigger legitimacy contestation by changing not only institutions but also the meaning of sovereignty, representation, and national identity. The “battle” is not only over who governs, but over which stories and standards make governance acceptable. New constructivist work is especially useful here because it treats ideas, expertise, and professional practices (e.g., constitutional advising, statebuilding templates, governance indicators) as mechanisms that travel across borders and restructure political possibilities in targeted states (McCourt, 2022).

Impact on Political Stability

External strategies of “democracy export” and “regime change” have had profound and uneven effects on political stability in the Arab world. Rather than producing linear transitions toward democratic consolidation, these interventions have frequently generated complex patterns of fragility, conflict, and partial restructuring. Political stability in post-intervention contexts must therefore be understood as a multidimensional outcome shaped by institutional continuity, security provision, elite bargaining, and societal legitimacy rather than by regime change alone (Downes, 2021; Heydemann & Lynch, 2024).

One of the most immediate consequences of externally driven regime change has been the weakening of state institutions. The dismantling or marginalization of existing bureaucratic and security structures – often justified as a means of removing authoritarian legacies – has in many cases undermined administrative capacity and disrupted basic governance functions. Ministries, courts, and local administrations have struggled to operate effectively in environments marked by legal uncertainty and contested authority.

Recent scholarship emphasizes that state fragility emerges not only from the collapse of leadership but from the erosion of routine institutional practices that sustain order and predictability (Elayah & Lambert, 2023). In several Arab cases, externally supported transitions introduced new constitutional or electoral frameworks without ensuring continuity in civil service systems, fiscal administration, or territorial control. This institutional disruption weakened the state’s ability to provide security and services, thereby deepening public skepticism toward new political arrangements and amplifying instability (Heydemann & Lynch, 2024).

Regime collapse following external intervention has often created security vacuums that non-state actors rapidly filled. The breakdown of centralized coercive authority enabled militias, sectarian forces, and transnational armed groups to compete for control over territory and resources. Rather than serving as a transitional phase toward democratic governance, civil conflict became a self-reinforcing condition, locking political systems into cycles of violence and fragmentation.

Realist analyses underline that the removal of incumbent regimes without a viable security replacement structure significantly increases the likelihood of civil war and prolonged instability (Downes, 2021). In the Arab world, these dynamics were intensified by regional rivalries and external sponsorship of competing factions, which internationalized domestic conflicts and further weakened prospects for stabilization. As a result, political order in many post-intervention states became fragmented, with parallel authorities and overlapping claims to legitimacy (Dunne et al., 2024).

A central debate in the literature concerns whether short-term destabilization is an unavoidable cost of long-term political restructuring. Proponents of interventionist strategies argue that temporary disorder may be necessary to dismantle entrenched authoritarian systems and enable institutional renewal. However, empirical evidence from the Arab world suggests that prolonged instability often undermines the very conditions required for sustainable political restructuring.

Where instability persists, political actors tend to prioritize survival and security over institutional reform, leading to the entrenchment of hybrid or authoritarian governance models rather than democratic consolidation (Heydemann & Lynch, 2024). Moreover, long-term instability erodes social trust and political participation, weakening the foundations of public legitimacy essential for durable governance. Thus, the anticipated transition from short-term disruption to long-term stability has frequently failed to materialize, raising questions about the strategic assumptions underlying regime change policies (Elayah & Lambert, 2023).

A comparative perspective highlights significant variation in post-intervention outcomes across the Arab world. Relatively more stable cases tend to exhibit some degree of institutional continuity, negotiated elite settlements, and gradual reform processes that limit the scope of violent contestation. In these contexts, external involvement was more constrained or supportive rather than transformative, allowing domestic actors to retain ownership over political restructuring (Dunne et al., 2024).

In contrast, highly unstable cases are characterized by abrupt regime collapse, extensive institutional dismantling, and intense external interference in domestic power struggles. These conditions produced fragmented authority structures and chronic insecurity, impeding both state reconstruction and legitimacy formation (Downes, 2021). The comparison suggests that political stability is less dependent on the normative goals of intervention and more on the manner in which power transitions are managed, institutions preserved, and security ensured.

Overall, the impact of “democracy export” and “regime change” on political stability in the Arab world reveals a consistent pattern: interventions that prioritize rapid political transformation over institutional resilience and social legitimacy tend to generate enduring instability rather than sustainable political order (Heydemann & Lynch, 2024).

Table 1

**Comparative Assessment of Stable vs. Unstable Post-Intervention Political Outcomes
in the Arab World**

Analytical Dimension	Relatively Stable Post-Intervention Cases	Highly Unstable Post-Intervention Cases
Mode of Intervention	Limited or indirect intervention; diplomatic pressure, mediation, conditional assistance	Direct military intervention; coercive regime removal
Institutional Continuity	Partial preservation of state institutions (bureaucracy, judiciary, security apparatus)	Extensive institutional dismantling and administrative collapse
Security Architecture	Retention or rapid reconstruction of centralized security forces	Fragmentation of coercive power; proliferation of militias and armed groups
Elite Configuration	Negotiated elite settlements; inclusion of old and new political actors	Violent elite competition; exclusionary power struggles
State Capacity	Gradual recovery of service delivery and fiscal governance	Persistent inability to provide basic services and territorial control
Public Legitimacy	Conditional but growing public acceptance of post-intervention authority	Deep legitimacy crisis and widespread distrust of governing institutions
Role of External Actors	Supportive and complementary to domestic political processes	Intrusive and competitive involvement by multiple external powers
Conflict Intensity	Low to moderate levels of political violence	Prolonged civil conflict and chronic insecurity
Governance Outcome	Hybrid or semi-authoritarian stability with incremental reform	State fragmentation, failed governance, or warlordism
Long-Term Political Trajectory	Managed political restructuring with relative stability	Entrenched instability and blocked state-building

Source: Author's compilation based on Downes (2021), Elayah and Lambert (2023), Heydemann and Lynch (2024), Dunne et al. (2024), and McCourt (2022)

The comparative table demonstrates that post-intervention political trajectories in the Arab world are neither uniform nor linear. Instead, outcomes vary systematically according to structural conditions shaping state authority, institutional resilience, security governance, elite relations, and legitimacy formation. The comparison highlights that political stability following external intervention depends less on the normative goals of democracy promotion and more on how power transitions are managed at the institutional and societal levels.

Mode of intervention constitutes the initial structural determinant of post-intervention stability. Cases characterized by limited or indirect intervention – such as diplomatic mediation, conditional economic assistance, and technical support – tend to preserve a degree of domestic political ownership. This enables political change to unfold through negotiated processes rather than abrupt rupture.

By contrast, direct military intervention and coercive regime removal frequently generate immediate power vacuums, disrupt governing routines, and undermine the state's ability to manage political competition, thereby increasing the likelihood of prolonged instability (Downes, 2021).

Institutional continuity emerges as a central stabilizing factor. Relatively stable post-intervention cases typically maintain segments of the pre-existing administrative, judicial, and security apparatus. Even when regimes change, the survival of bureaucratic practices allows the state to perform core functions and sustain minimum levels of governance. In highly unstable cases, widespread dismantling of institutions leads to administrative paralysis, weakens rule enforcement, and erodes public confidence in post-intervention authorities (Heydemann & Lynch, 2024).

Security architecture plays a decisive role in shaping political outcomes. Stable cases are characterized by the retention or rapid reconstruction of centralized coercive institutions capable of maintaining territorial control. Conversely, the fragmentation of security forces and the proliferation of militias in unstable cases transform political contestation into violent competition. Security vacuums not only fuel civil conflict but also empower non-state actors to establish parallel systems of authority, further undermining prospects for state reconstruction (Elayah & Lambert, 2023).

Elite configuration significantly influences whether political competition remains institutionalized or turns violent. In more stable trajectories, negotiated elite settlements – often involving both old and new political actors – reduce zero-sum power struggles and create incentives for compromise. In unstable cases, elite rivalry is intensified by external sponsorship and exclusionary politics, producing cycles of contestation that weaken state institutions and block consensus-based governance (Downes, 2021).

State capacity and service provision function as material foundations of legitimacy. Where post-intervention governments are able to gradually restore public services and fiscal administration, they tend to secure conditional public acceptance, even in the absence of full democratic consolidation. In contrast, persistent failures in service delivery deepen legitimacy crises and strengthen the appeal of alternative governance providers, including militias and informal networks (McCourt, 2022).

Public legitimacy in post-intervention settings is thus primarily performance-based and relational rather than procedural. In relatively stable cases, legitimacy develops incrementally through effective governance and reduced violence. In unstable cases, however, legitimacy deficits become entrenched due to perceptions of foreign imposition, ineffective authority, and chronic insecurity, resulting in widespread political disengagement and resistance (Heydemann & Lynch, 2024).

Finally, the role of external actors differentiates stable from unstable outcomes. Coordinated and restrained external involvement tends to complement domestic political processes, whereas fragmented and competitive interventions exacerbate internal divisions and internationalize domestic conflicts. When post-intervention governance becomes embedded in regional or global power rivalries, prospects for stabilization and legitimate state-building are significantly reduced (Dunne et al., 2024).

Comparative Case Analysis

This section provides a comparative case analysis of four Arab states, especially, Iraq, Libya, Egypt, and Tunisia to illustrate how different modalities of external intervention and domestic political management have produced divergent structural outcomes. The cases demonstrate that regime change and democracy promotion strategies interact with local institutional legacies, elite configurations, and security structures in ways that decisively shape political stability and legitimacy (Downes, 2021; Heydemann & Lynch, 2024).

Iraq: Regime Change and Institutional Fragmentation

Iraq represents a paradigmatic case in which externally imposed regime change resulted in deep institutional fragmentation. The abrupt dismantling of the Ba'athist state apparatus, combined with the disbandment of security forces, created a severe governance vacuum. Rather than enabling democratic consolidation, the intervention weakened bureaucratic continuity and fostered sectarianized elite competition.

Recent analyses emphasize that post-intervention Iraq evolved into a fragmented political order characterized by parallel power centers, weak state authority, and chronic insecurity. External involvement restructured elite incentives around identity-based mobilization rather than institutional accountability, undermining national cohesion and public legitimacy (Dodge, 2020; Downes, 2021). As a result, political stability remained elusive despite formal democratic institutions such as elections and constitutional governance.

Libya: External Intervention and State Collapse

Libya illustrates the most extreme outcome of external intervention: near-total state collapse. The removal of the Gaddafi regime through international military action eliminated centralized authority without establishing a viable post-conflict governance framework. The absence of institutional continuity and the proliferation of armed groups transformed Libya into a fragmented polity marked by competing governments and militias.

Scholarly accounts highlight that Libya's instability is rooted in the interaction between external intervention and weak pre-existing institutions. Without a professional bureaucracy or unified security sector, post-intervention governance became dependent on coercive non-state actors, eroding any prospect of legitimate state-building (Lacher, 2020; Elayah & Lambert, 2023). In this context, regime change did not initiate political transition but instead institutionalized fragmentation and prolonged conflict.

Egypt: Selective Democratic Transition and Authoritarian Resilience

Egypt presents a contrasting case where external and domestic pressures produced a short-lived democratic opening followed by authoritarian restoration. Unlike Iraq and Libya, the Egyptian state retained strong institutional coherence, particularly within the military and security apparatus. This continuity enabled the rapid reassertion of centralized authority after the collapse of the initial post-Arab Spring transition.

Recent literature frames Egypt as an example of authoritarian resilience rather than democratic failure. Selective political reforms and managed electoral processes provided limited pluralism while preserving core power structures. External actors prioritized stability and regional security over democratic consolidation, indirectly reinforcing authoritarian governance (Brownlee, 2021; Heydemann & Lynch, 2024). Consequently, political stability was restored, but at the cost of curtailed political freedoms and constrained public legitimacy.

Tunisia: Negotiated Transformation and Conditional Stability

Tunisia stands out as the most successful case of negotiated political transformation following the Arab Spring. Unlike cases of coercive regime change, Tunisia's transition was shaped by elite compromise, institutional continuity, and inclusive political dialogue. External support functioned primarily as facilitative rather than directive, allowing domestic actors to maintain ownership of the transition process.

Recent studies describe Tunisia's post-intervention trajectory as one of conditional stability. Democratic institutions were established, and political pluralism initially expanded, yet structural economic challenges and governance constraints limited long-term consolidation. While legitimacy was higher than in other cases, it remained performance-dependent and vulnerable to socio-economic pressures (Marks, 2020; Yerkes & Muasher, 2023). Tunisia thus demonstrates that negotiated transitions can enhance stability, but only when institutional reform is accompanied by sustained economic and social inclusion.

The Table 2 provides a comparative overview of post-intervention political trajectories in Iraq, Libya, Egypt, and Tunisia, highlighting how different forms of external intervention and domestic political management have produced divergent structural outcomes. It demonstrates that coercive regime change, as seen in Iraq and Libya, is closely associated with institutional dismantling, security fragmentation, and severe legitimacy deficits. In these cases, the absence of institutional continuity

Table 2

Comparative Case Analysis of Post-Intervention Political Outcomes in Selected Arab States

Case	Type of Intervention / Transition	Institutional Outcome	Security Dynamics	Governance & Legitimacy	Overall Political Trajectory
Iraq	Foreign-imposed regime change through military intervention	Extensive institutional dismantling; fragmented bureaucracy	Disbandment of security forces; sectarian militias	Low legitimacy; identity-based politics; weak state–society trust	Chronic instability and institutional fragmentation
Libya	External military intervention leading to regime removal	Near-total state collapse; absence of central authority	Security vacuum; competing militias and parallel governments	Absence of national legitimacy; localized authority	Prolonged state failure and civil conflict
Egypt	Selective democratic opening followed by authoritarian restoration	Strong institutional continuity, especially military	Centralized and cohesive security apparatus	Performance-based legitimacy; restricted pluralism	Authoritarian resilience with relative stability
Tunisia	Negotiated political transition with external facilitation	Preservation of core institutions; constitutional reform	Unified security sector with limited politicization	Conditional legitimacy based on consensus and performance	Managed transition with fragile but sustained stability

Source: Author's compilation based on Dodge (2020), Lacher (2020), Downes (2021), Brownlee (2021), Elayah and Lambert (2023), Heydemann and Lynch (2024), Marks (2020), and Yerkes and Muasher (2023)

and centralized coercive authority transformed political transitions into prolonged crises rather than pathways toward stable governance.

By contrast, Egypt and Tunisia illustrate alternative post-intervention patterns shaped by stronger institutional resilience and negotiated political processes. Egypt's experience shows that institutional continuity – particularly within the military and security apparatus – can restore political stability, albeit through authoritarian consolidation rather than democratic deepening. Tunisia, on the other hand, reflects a negotiated transition in which elite compromise and partial institutional preservation enabled conditional stability, though this remained vulnerable to economic pressures and governance challenges.

Overall, the table underscores that post-intervention stability in the Arab world is determined less by the normative objectives of democracy promotion and more by the interaction between security governance, institutional continuity, elite bargaining, and legitimacy formation. These comparative cases reinforce the argument that external interventions produce sustainable outcomes only when they support domestically anchored political settlements rather than abrupt regime displacement.

Conclusion. This study has assessed the structural changes generated by the strategies of “democracy export” and “regime change” in the Arab world, with particular attention to their effects on political stability, governance culture, and public legitimacy. The analysis demonstrates that externally driven democratization and coercive regime change have rarely produced the institutional and social foundations required for sustainable democratic governance. Instead, these strategies have often triggered deep structural disruptions, weakening state capacity, fragmenting security arrangements, and destabilizing established patterns of political authority.

With regard to political stability, the findings indicate that regime change interventions tend to generate short-term disorder that frequently evolves into long-term instability. The dismantling of

existing institutions and security structures, when not accompanied by viable replacement mechanisms, has contributed to civil conflict, elite fragmentation, and the proliferation of non-state actors. Even in cases where overt violence subsided, political order was often reconstituted through hybrid or authoritarian arrangements rather than democratic consolidation, underscoring the limits of externally imposed political transformation.

In terms of governance culture, the study shows that democracy export strategies have commonly introduced formal institutional models – such as elections, constitutions, and accountability frameworks – without embedding them in local administrative practices and political norms. This disconnect has produced governance cultures characterized by procedural formality but weak institutional effectiveness. In several Arab cases, external intervention disrupted existing governance practices without fostering inclusive decision-making or durable administrative capacity, thereby reinforcing patterns of patronage, securitization, and elite dominance rather than participatory governance.

Regarding public legitimacy, the analysis highlights a persistent legitimacy deficit associated with externally driven political change. Public acceptance of post-intervention authorities has been largely performance-based and contingent on security provision and service delivery rather than on democratic procedures alone. Where governance failed to meet basic social and economic expectations, legitimacy rapidly eroded, fueling political disengagement and resistance. Moreover, perceptions of foreign imposition undermined the symbolic and normative foundations of legitimacy, further weakening state–society relations.

Overall, the study concludes that democracy export and regime change strategies have generated profound structural transformations in the Arab world, but these transformations have rarely aligned with their stated normative objectives. Sustainable political stability and legitimate governance appear more closely tied to institutional continuity, negotiated elite settlements, and context-sensitive reform processes than to externally imposed regime change. The findings suggest that future approaches to political reform in the Arab world should prioritize domestically grounded pathways to change, support incremental institutional development, and recognize legitimacy as a socially constructed and performance-dependent outcome rather than a product of formal democratic design alone.

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