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Federalism and Decentralization in the Contemporary Middle East and North Africa. A Rejoinder

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this short essay is to offer a rejoinder to the comments offered by Nickson Oira in his review of our book *Federalism and Decentralization in the Contemporary Middle East and North Africa*

Keywords

Federalism, Decentralization, Middle East, North Africa



The literature We were delighted to read Oira’s positive review of our volume. We found particularly gratifying his opening observation that the book moves beyond the comparative federalism literature’s prevailing focus on Western cases, since one of our primary goals was to bring attention to the understudied experience with federalism and decentralization in the Middle East and North Africa and, more generally, in the global South. But while we are grateful for the attention Oira gave the volume, we feel obliged to respond to a couple of his critical reflections and to make a few additions to his summary of the book.

First, Oira suggests the volume might have been improved had we done more to crystallize the experience described in the cases we cover into generalized lessons that might be applied elsewhere. But, as we explained in our conclusion, our decision not to fashion prescriptions from the MENA region’s experience was intentional. In light of the short track record of federalism and decentralization in most of the countries we surveyed, we felt it was too early to derive generalized recommendations from it. That view is fortified by the strikingly inconclusive character of data about the merits of decentralization even in thoroughly studied contexts (Smoke 2015).

That said, we did undertake, in our synthetic conclusion, to highlight the common history that informs attitudes across the MENA region toward federalism and decentralization – a history shared to some extent by other regions still struggling to overcome their colonial past. We also undertook to distill the MENA region’s experience by developing a new typology of the motivations driving decentralization, moving beyond Alfred Stepan’s oft-cited distinction between “coming together” and “holding together” federations. As we point out, decentralization has been pursued ‘as both a bulwark against authoritarianism and as a strategy for consolidating it; as vehicle for the emancipation of long-oppressed identity groups and as a dangerous diversion from meaningful self-determination; as a platform for managing governance in circumstances of state collapse and as a framework for reconstituting the state following conflict’ (Bâli & Dajani 2023). In relation to each of these types, we highlight some of the distinctive patterns our cases reveal. As we explain, variables such as which institutions are leading decentralization, the degree to which the process is inclusive, and the pacing of decentralizing reforms have been particularly significant. Even so, we resisted the temptation to offer the kind of ‘facile institutional recommendations’ (Erk 2014: 539) that too often guide policy in this realm.



Second, while we agree with Oira that ‘federalism and decentralization can still function within an authoritarian environment,’ our cases sound a note of caution. The experience in Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, Syria, and Tunisia suggests that decentralizing initiatives should not be assumed to promote democratization or otherwise to counter authoritarian rule. In fact, one pattern we observed in many of the countries in the region is that the combination of deconcentration and symbolic political decentralization (for example, in the form of elections for local councils that have no meaningful authority) can serve to consolidate an authoritarian government’s control over a country’s periphery rather than challenging it. This track record should alert foreign donors to the danger of reflexively supporting decentralizing initiatives in the hope that they will enhance democratic governance.

Finally, while Oira’s review offers readers a valuable summary of our book, it may be useful to highlight some of the distinctive contributions it makes to the literature. First, as the collective product of scholars and policy analysts with deep (and mostly insider) knowledge of the countries they are writing about and perspectives shaped by a variety of disciplines (including law, politics, sociology, and urban planning), it offers a textured portrait of the law and politics of decentralization during a period of sweeping transition in the MENA region. Our cases analyze the actors and power dynamics driving institutional reform efforts, highlighting obstacles (from an entrenched central government bureaucracy in Tunisia to counterproductive donor policies in Syria to intergovernmental competition in Iraq) that have received little attention elsewhere. They also bring to the surface numerous parallels between disparate experiences (e.g., between the Oslo process in Israel-Palestine and advanced regionalization in Morocco-Western Sahara; and between de facto governance in Libya, Syria, and Yemen) that can inform comparative analysis in the future. Second, it reveals a paradox in the region’s attitudes toward the idea of decentralized government: while ‘decentralization’ has been widely embraced as a cure-all for challenges to governance, any mention of federalism tends to provoke suspicion and even consternation. In addition to explaining this paradox through reference to the region’s history, we point to the irony it presents, for while federalism is politically incendiary, we believe it has greater potential as a framework for managing diversity in the region than other forms of decentralization do as a means toward governance reform. Finally, following a decade during which the uprisings, counter-revolutions, and other conflicts in the region have produced cynicism about its prospects for political change, the book recounts experiments with decentralized



government, including ‘democratic confederalism’ in Rojava, that offer fresh solutions to the challenges presented by the nation-state.

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