

Political Stability vs. Development; An Impossible Equation in the Arab World: A Reading of the Case of Syria

(Translated)

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In the Arab world, it has long been promoted that political stability is a prerequisite for economic development, and that any political openness could lead to chaos and hinder growth. The dichotomy of political stability versus development has become one of the most prevalent themes in Arab political discourse since the post-independence era. The notion that development can only be achieved under political stability has been widely propagated, and this stability has often been understood as security control in favor of rulers generally aligned with Western powers, and as the absence of conflict, instead of stability based on legitimacy and institutions.

However, it is noteworthy that many countries that have enjoyed long periods of political stability have failed to achieve sustainable economic development, and countries that have undergone political transformations have been unable to maintain economic stability. This raises a central question about the nature of the relationship between stability and development: Is it a conditional relationship? A harmoniously interactive one? Or even a contradictory one? And specifically, what is this relationship like in the Arab context?

To understand this issue, we turn to the field of political economy where the literature indicates a relationship between political stability and economic growth. However, this relationship is not linear but depends on several variables, including: the type of political system, the nature and orientation of the ruler, and the economic structure, whether externally dependent or productive, as well as the presence or absence of accountability and transparency institutions. The absence of these institutions leads to what is called superficial stability which does not translate into development. Instead, it produces institutional corruption and imbalances in resource distribution.

In the Arab context, we are often faced with forced stability that merely postpones crises rather than preventing them.

Some examples of this can be cited:

Egypt: Despite presenting a model over the past decade that prioritizes security and stability above all else, even through coercive measures based on an iron fist approach, this has failed to achieve any real development. Instead, public debt has increased, purchasing power has declined, and the gap between social classes has widened, with the middle class almost completely eroded, leaving society divided between extreme poverty and excessive wealth.

The Gulf States have achieved high levels of relative stability and economic development based on oil revenues, not on political or economic participation. This makes this stability conditional on financial capacity, oil, rather than on institutions and vulnerable to disruption with any decline in resources.

Algeria is experiencing a state of stagnant stability; there is a superficial political stability without real development, which led to social tension that partially erupted in the popular movement of 2019. The country remains on the verge of a new explosion, as this stability only postpones the crisis without offering a fundamental solution.

In Arab discourse, political stability is not typically defined as the rule of law, the peaceful transfer of power, or strong and independent institutions. Instead, it is reduced to a single

meaning: the absence of change in any form, whether through protests or political processes, and the suppression of competition and dissenting voices. Thus, stability in Arab countries becomes a forced stability based on repression, rather than social cohesion, and state institutions transform from serving the public good into instruments of surveillance, plunder, and oppression for the benefit of the ruling elite.

In this context, development remains a postponed, stalled project, used as both a promise and a threat; it is said to come after complete stability, after the elimination of chaos, after silencing critical voices, and so on and so forth... without ever actually arriving.

From this, we conclude that stability imposed by force does not produce strong, efficient institutions, but rather establishes networks of loyalty and corruption. In the absence of accountability and transparency, the country's resources become spoils for the ruling elite, supported by external powers. Therefore, in Arab countries, a form of stability without change and development without participation is imposed, based largely on an externally dependent economy, needing raw materials, aid, remittances and international loans, and so on.

When examining the experiences of the Arab Spring, some see them as confirmation that change leads to chaos. However, a closer look reveals that the upheaval was the result of a long accumulation of a lack of development and justice. Moreover, the countries that reverted to their previous state of stability without genuine change have experienced the same crises again, but in a more severe form, as in the cases of Egypt and Tunisia. Stability that is not based on legitimacy is fragile, temporary, and prone to collapse.

The case of Syria: Before 2011, Syria was internationally classified as a politically stable country due to its tight security control. There was no political competition because of the repression associated with a deeply entrenched security apparatus that maintained its power through force, not popular consent. Hafez al-Assad established this system upon assuming power and built an economy based on crony capitalism. The middle class was replaced by a class connected to the regime, and poverty and repression expanded to the benefit of the ruling class and its allies.

After 2011, stability collapsed, the illusion was shattered, and the situation exploded, as there were no effective social institutions or a genuine developmental economy. The absence of legitimacy and the monopolization of the economy were among the main causes of the upheaval, transforming the country into a battleground. In political science, forced stability crumbles at the first shock, and without foreign support, the regime would not have lasted. With the destruction of infrastructure and the plundering of resources, the economy collapsed and society disintegrated, yet the repressive regime remained in power, sustained by foreign support and funding.

On December 8, 2024, Bashar al-Assad's regime fell after 14 years of war, and a transitional period began under the leadership of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, with al-Jolani subsequently appointed as interim president. However, the current reality reveals a reproduction of the previous regime's political and economic logic, with changes only in the elites and rhetoric, not in the fundamental nature of governance.

Among the most prominent manifestations of the repetition of the previous regime's structure are:

- The concentration of decision-making in the hands of one person, or a small circle, the marginalization of institutions, and the absence of the separation of powers.
- The centralization of political and security decision-making, and its influence by external sources, similar to the previous Syrian situation.

- Legitimacy based on the logic of “whoever liberates decides,” just as it was previously “whoever protects decides”! In both cases, legitimacy is built on fear.

- The rejection of multi-party politics and the reproduction of fear of political participation.

- The reproduction of a crony capitalist economy, monopolies, and corruption.

- The absence of a clear economic and development vision, with everything being dictated by external forces using new local tools, and merely managing the crisis.

To be fair, **there are differences worth mentioning, not as justification but as explanation:**

- The country is currently ruled by a government in a devastated, fragmented state, lacking real resources and facing diverse external loyalties.

- There is not yet the kind of widespread, systematic repression seen previously, but there is increasing security pressure, and the fear is that it will escalate into a Sunni-vs-Sunni conflict, separate from the smaller ethnic groups that have come under foreign protection.

- The discourse of transitional justice and the constitution remain more theoretical than practical, although some aspects have been implemented, primarily to the benefit of the smaller ethnic groups due to foreign pressure.

A new form of tyranny has begun to emerge in the name of stability and preventing chaos, and it is more dangerous than the old tyranny because it breeds deep disappointment among the people of the revolution, destroys its last remaining moral capital, and sows the seeds of a future explosion.

Therefore, it becomes clear that the fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime did not automatically lead to the dismantling of the logic of governance. Instead, the same model remained, albeit with a change in faces. Stability that is not based on a fundamental change in the structure of the system remains fragile and susceptible to reversal regardless of the revolutionary or transitional slogans it adopts.

The future of the region will not be determined by the authorities' ability to impose order, but instead by their ability to break this model and build a system based on independence, legitimacy, and participation, one that rejects foreign allegiances, and whose foundation is based on principles capable of confronting challenges.

The people of Syria remain the decisive factor in this conflict, a fact that international powers fear, and, therefore, they are working to weaken them. However, the people of Syria long for justice, dignity, and freedom, and see their salvation in returning to the ruling governance of the Shariah Law of Allah (swt), as reflected in their chants and protests. Despite attempts at media censorship, the nature of the people of ash-Sham remains deeply yearning for a return to an Islamic way of life.

The challenges we face today are to distinguish Haq (truth) from baatil (falsehood), so that the decisive struggle can begin between the people of truth, who seek to fulfill the glad tidings of the Messenger of Allah (saw) regarding the return of the Khilafah Rashidah (Rightly Guided Caliphate) on the Method of Prophethood, and pure falsehood, which has been exposed and unveiled by these trials. Thus, the promise of Allah (swt) will be fulfilled: **وَعَدَ اللَّهُ**

الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مِنْكُمْ وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ لَيَسْتَخْلِفَنَّهُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ...﴿
Allah has promised those of you who believe and do good that He will certainly make them successors to authority in the land” [TMQ Surah An-Nur:55].