

Is There an Arab Exceptionalism When It Comes to Conflict?

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Countries in political transition are often at higher risk of conflict, yet transition processes also offer great opportunities. The recent changes experienced by many Arab countries following the Arab Awakening raises the question on how best to accommodate such political transition while reducing the risk of civil war. Revising some previous literature on the Arab-specific determinants of conflicts, our results suggest that the Collier and Hoeffler (2004) conventional framework on the economics of conflict is too limited to shed light on major conflict dynamics in the region. In particular, economic growth does not seem to automatically reduce the risk of conflicts, like in other regions. Stated differently, there is an Arab Exceptionalism that deserves to be further explained. This is not necessarily surprising given the disconnect between standard economic indicators and alternative social indicators, described in the recent IFPRI Food Policy Report (Breisinger et al. 2012). Based on such premises and rejecting other possible explanations for this Arab Exceptionalism, our econometric analysis suggests that major conflicts are strongly related to worsened food security, in particular for net importers, who are vulnerable to volatile international food prices. We also found a strong correlation between oil dependency and the risk of conflict, which points to the unsustainable nature of the rent redistribution system in major oil-exporter countries. We also confirm that the democratic transition period, while welcome, is a particularly risky time in terms of conflict. Finally, given these preliminary results, we discuss how best to understand the dynamics of violence in the Arab world in current and future research projects.