

Institutions and the Arab Spring

Abstract

While predicting the timing of future revolts is impossible, the institution theory might provide a reasonable explanation of the recent Arab uprisings. The recent democratic surge in the Arab world is a seemingly positive thing. However, it will be argued that it might be difficult to build democracy without certain social and cultural fundamentals. The primary premise of Western democracy in general is equality among all citizens—regardless of origin, race, gender and religion. This cannot be established in a tribal society.

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1. Introduction

The recent uprisings in a number of Arab countries have come as a surprise to people all over the world because they were highly unanticipated. Predicting the timing of an uprising is impossible for a number of reasons. People rise against a dictatorial regime because of dissatisfaction with the functioning of the political and economic institutions. Even if one were able to measure the level of dissatisfaction, and even if dissatisfaction were the sole determinant of uprisings, it would still be impossible to predict the timing of rebellions or uprisings. A despot could continuously increase the penalties for participating in uprising against the regime until it becomes irrational to participate, regardless of the level of dissatisfaction. Thus, even if people were dissatisfied, they may not participate in an open revolt against the state.² Most Arabs have been totally unsatisfied with autocracies for decades, yet they could not successfully rise against them. Also, predicting such events requires a theory and data. We have neither a unified theory nor sufficient data.

Despite the difficulty of predicting future revolts, one could still provide some explanations for the recent Arab uprisings. To do so, I will briefly describe the evolution of the social and political orders in the modern Arab countries because they have bearings on current events, and use the institution theory (Coase, 1960, North and Thomas 1973, and Acemoglu *et al.* 2003, 2004) to explain recent events.

Political institutions—such as the form of government, democracy versus autocracy, and the extent of constraints on politicians—are essentially a set of rules for various human games. They are constraints made by people in a society to govern human interactions. They structure the social, economic, and political incentives in human exchange (North, 1990). It will be argued that the early political institutions in the Middle East were designed by colonial powers, and hence were not endogenous. That is, because the institutions were not homegrown they could not have survived the Arab culture, which is tribal and religious.

In the institution theory, the political institutions determine the *de jure* political power, which then chooses the economic institutions and eventually influences the distribution of wealth. Over time, dissatisfaction with the distribution of wealth leads to a conflict of interest among various tribes, religious groups, and individuals, and eventually to the growth of *de facto* political powers. These are the political powers that are not allocated any power by the existing laws. The equilibrium depends on the strength of these two political powers. In the Arab countries, the *de facto* political powers managed to overthrow the *de jure* colonial governments, and resulted in the direct military dictatorships between 1950-1970.

² The brutality of dictators like the military Juntas in South and Latin America, the Soviet Union, and the ex Eastern European countries are well known. For the brutality of Arab dictators see Makiya (1994, 1998). It is quite possible to imagine a nonlinear process, where there is a threshold beyond which people rise against the dictator regardless of the cost.

Today, foreign interventions and tribalism remain strong in the Arab world. In addition, natural resources remain in the hand of the state. These conditions are not conducive for establishing democracies that treat people of different origins, religious affiliations, and race equally.

The Arab revolutionaries today are the new *de facto* political powers. The changes they are making—the toppling of the dictators as the first major act—have been spurred by disagreements over the distribution of wealth and nature of the political institutions. The theory predicts that institutional changes are very slow, which is wholly consistent with the changes of the Arab political order we're observing.

Next, I will describe the historical evolution of the modern Arab social, political, and economic institutions, and provide some explanations for the recent Arab Spring. In section 3 I provide some final remarks.

2. The evolution of the Arab institutions

The Arabs who lived in the vast area from North Africa to the Gulf³ were part of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans sided with Germany against the Allies in the First World War. Britain convinced the Arabs, particularly the *Sharif* of Mecca, Hussein Bin Ali, and his sons to revolt against the Ottomans in 1916. The Hussein-McMahon Correspondence shows that the British promised Hussein an independent kingdom spanning the area between Egypt and Persia (except Kuwait, Aden, and the coast of Syria) as a reward for his support. The *Sharif* accepted the offer because he wanted to be a king. However, it is not entirely clear why the British solicited the Arabs to revolt.⁴

The power play between the British and French in the Middle East resulted in a number of outcomes. The British promise of an independent Arab kingdom never materialized. The British and the French divided Arabia amongst themselves, outlined in the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916.⁵ Hussein's tenure as governor of Hejaz (a region in current Saudi Arabia) was short lived. In 1925, the British switched their support to the Saud family (the current ruling family of Saudi Arabia) and the *Sharif* was exiled to Cyprus.⁶

The newly established Arab regimes were non-constitutional, and headed by British-selected monarchs that were originally tribal leaders. The political institutions that evolved did so under the strict control of the British. The new map of Arabia was eventually drawn with independent countries, with the sons of the *Sharif* of Mecca appointed as kings of Jordan, and Iraq.

³ Usually referred to as the Persian Gulf in Western maps, but for Arabs it is called the Arabian Gulf.

⁴ There could be a number of reasons for such an important decision, but one can speculate that the loss of the British at the battle of Gallipoli (1915) was a good reason. At least a 100,000 Australian and New Zealand (ANZAC) troops lost their lives in that military gamble. Had the Allies won the battle, the Arab revolt might have not been necessary.

⁵ To add insult to injury, the British promised the European Zionist Theodor Herzl a national home for Jews in Palestine, declared in the Balfour Declaration (1917).

⁶ There are different spelling of Hejaz in the literature such as Hijaz and Hedjaz.

The Arab governments were colonial designs, colonial ideas, or both.⁷ The autocratic Arab monarchs, consistent with the prediction of the institution theory, would not commit to political and economic institutions that were not self-serving. To that end, land was distributed primarily to tribal and religious leaders who were closely associated with the monarchs. The Arab people, in general, had no say in the set up of the new nations.

The institution theory also predicts that *de facto* political powers begin to form over time. *De facto* political powers are those who are not allocated powers by the existing political institutions, but they have different aspirations, ideas, and objectives. Economic conditions and resource distributions influence the formation of such political powers. And, if they disagree with the existing methods and outcomes of the distributions, they co-opt the military, hire mercenaries, or rebel to topple the regime.

In Iraq during the period from 1930 to the 1950s, for example, the *de facto* political powers were mainly communists and non-communist nationalists. Contemporaneously in Egypt there were *mainly* nationalists and Islamists. A small number of largely nationalist free officers threw out the monarchs in Egypt (1952). In Iraq the free officers were nationalists and communists. They brought down the monarchy in 1958. The same happened in Libya (1969), and in Yemen (1970), where military coups toppled the monarchies.

It is important to note that the free officers in Iraq were themselves tribal, belonging to certain tribes and religious groups. Egypt is not a tribal society *per se*, but the majority of the population is rural and with values very similar to the tribal values found in the Arabian Peninsula.⁸ The first military dictatorial powers were established in Iraq and Egypt. What is true about the tribal nature of Iraq, and to a lesser extent Egypt, is definitely true of Libya, Sudan, Jordan, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf States.

The Arab societies are largely and sufficiently tribal with strong religious values and sectarian divisions. Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia are not strictly tribal, but the divisions are regional and between the Arabs and Berbers.⁹ I would argue that these North African societies are *quasi* tribal.

⁷ Abdul Rahman Al Naqib Al Gillani, the Sharif of Baghdad and first British-appointed prime minister of Iraq, told Gertrude Bell, the British explorer who played a major role in the design of the Iraqi state, that he would refuse prime ministerial appointment. Instead, he said, he wanted to spend the rest of his life studying and thinking, and that being a politician would be against his religious beliefs. Similarly, Jaafar Al Askari, who was nominated to be the first minister of defense, told Bell that he wondered whether, in accepting, his patriotism would be tarnished because the Iraqi people considered the new government a 'British puppet'. The Iraqis, and most Arabs, had no experience with governance and did not know how to establish state institutions. Essentially, the British designed the institutions, and also appointed British advisers to run them alongside the Iraqi ministers, who not permitted to operate independently, see Ali Alwardi, (2007, volume 6, pp.32).

⁸ According to the CIA factbook, the urban population is 43.4 percent of the total. Biographer Robert Stephens says that Gamal Abdul Nassir, the leader of the Egyptian revolution, belonged to an Arab tribe from *Hijaz* (in Saudi Arabia), and that his family had tribal inclinations.

⁹ The Amazigh.

The other important political development after Egypt and Iraq is Syria. Faisal, the son of the *Sharif* Hussein of Mecca, declared himself king of Syria in 1920.¹⁰ However, his rule in Syria did not last long. The League of Nations put Syria under French mandate in 1920, and the French removed him from power. The country subsequently witnessed a number of battles and revolts between 1920 and 1927. A treaty of independence was negotiated with France in 1936 and Syria was finally declared a republic. Syria was then reoccupied by the British in 1941, and was not recognized as an independent republic until 1944. A series of military coups in Syria during the 1950s and 1960s also ended with the installation of a military dictatorship led by the Ba'ath Party in 1963 with Al Assaad as the sole ruler in 1970. The Al Assaad family belongs to a religious sect, a minority—along with a small number of Kurds, Christians, and Druze—in predominantly Sunni Arab Syria.

Lebanon, being geographically connected to Syria, had a unique French-made sectarian government reflecting the sectarian nature of the country. To-date, Jordan remained a non-constitutional monarchy ruled by the family of the *Sharif* of Mecca. The monarch, however, gained more autocratic powers over time.

In North Africa, Morocco has been a non-constitutional monarchy since 1955. There is a historical French and Spanish influence over Morocco. For example, the Treaty of Fez (1912) made the country a French protectorate. However, Spain remained a protecting power over parts of the Saharan. The royal family is both religious and tribal.

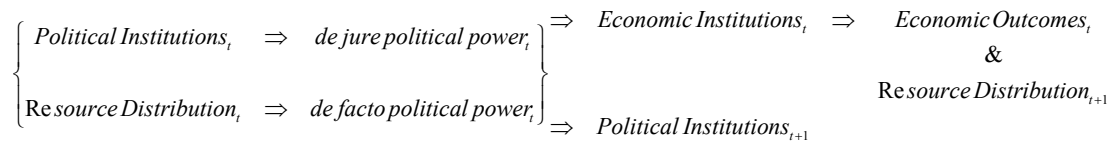
Algeria was also part of the Ottoman Empire. The French invaded and occupied Algeria in 1830. The Algerian resistance movement, the National Liberation Front, finally liberated the country in 1962. Since, the civilian government of the country, which is officially called the People's Democratic Republic, is controlled by the military in a way analogous to Turkey. This is a legacy of the liberation war where the political wing of the National Liberation Front was under the direct control of its military wing.

Libya is a vast region consisting of tribal and conservative Arabs and non-Arabs. It was under Ottoman rule until Italy occupied the region from 1911, although some parts were under British control while others were under the French. The Italians relinquished control in 1947. Between 1947 and 1969, the country was run by a conservative tribal monarchy. The recently deposed dictator, Mummar Ghaddafi, overthrew the monarchy in a military coup in 1969. Ghaddafi himself is a tribal man.

Tunisia, a small country also part of the Ottoman Empire, was a French protectorate until Habib Bourguiba led it to independence in 1956. It began as a constitutional republic, but soon after drifted into autocracy and finally into an iron fist dictatorship under Bin Ali, who was overthrown by the recent popular uprising.

The institution theory (Acemoglu *et al.* 2004) predicts:

¹⁰ There are perhaps different spellings of Faisal such as Feisal.



The arrows indicate the directional effect, e.g., political institutions at time t determine, or cause, the *de jure* political powers.

By the 1970s, the Arab countries were divided into non-constitutional autocratic monarchies and military dictatorships. All political developments in the Arab countries from 1952 were highly influenced by the Cold War. The military dictatorships chose socialist political and economic institutions, particularly after Egypt set the precedent in the 1960s. This choice explains the relatively poor economic outcomes over the era to-date. Interestingly, of the socialist military dictators, none were communists. The rulers were conservative tribesmen with religious and sectarian backgrounds.

There is no doubt that the dismal economic performance of the Arab countries is highly associated with the dictators' economic institution choices. Such economic conditions and resource distribution systems led to increasing opposition and the birth of today's new *de facto* political power. The institution theory predicts that when the political power invests in the head of the state, whether a monarch or a military dictator, economic inefficiencies and poverty result. Indeed up to the late 1980s, the Arab countries had centralized economies, which consisted mainly of state-owned enterprises, subsidized activities, and closed economies with severe capital controls. These directly led to lower incomes and increasing poverty in the civilian population. The head of states were committed to using their political powers for their own best interests; they controlled everything and decided to not benefit anyone outside their sphere of interest. Property rights and the presence of markets affected the incentive structures. Without property rights people had no incentive to invest in capital or adopt new technologies. Resource misallocation followed. Arab dictators confiscated lands, and ruined the intended re-distribution process.¹¹

However, much of the political and economic reforms in the early 1990s—especially in Egypt and Tunisia, Morocco, Jordan, Syria among others—did not resolve the economic problems. Poverty, stubbornly high average unemployment rates, corruption, nepotism, and cronyism swept the Arab world and added more to the widespread discontent with the political institutions.

Following Acemoglu *et al.* (2004) I use historical data constructed by Maddison to show that the choice of the economic institution, regardless of the form of the political system, may be the main reason for poverty. Here are two examples.

Figure 1 plots real GDP per person (income per person is a reasonable proxy measure of richness) for North and South Korea. It illustrates the effect of the choice of the economic institutions on the wellbeing of the people. After

¹¹ Robert Springborg (1977).

separation, North Korea chose communism with no property right laws while South Korea chose a market economy. The North, in fact, has all the natural resources of the Korean Peninsula, while the South has no natural resources.

Then I compare income per person in the Arab countries to income per person in South Korea over three periods, from 1955 to 2008. I choose South Korea because it was much poorer than almost all Arab countries in the 1950s and has no natural resources. However, it chose different economic institutions than all Arab countries. Its development strategy was based on free market institutions. Surely any other country's GDP per person might look relatively lower than South Korea because South Korea has been growing at spectacular rates, but the question is why the Arab countries could not do the same.

Table 1 shows how the Arabs were richer than South Korea in the 1950s, when they were still non-constitutional monarchies with economic institutions that were closer to a free market. Arab incomes declined over time until they reached a point beyond comparison. Today, South Korea is a first world country and the Arabs are probably worse off than most developing countries.¹²

As the theory predicts, economic institutions determine the economic outcomes, which affect the distribution of resources in the next period. This effectively creates the *de facto* political powers and the potential subsequent change.

In summary, the Arabs are tribal. Their earlier political institutions were designed by foreign colonial powers. Their choice of economic institutions and the distribution of wealth created a growing dissatisfaction among alienated groups, and bore the *de facto* political powers of the 1950s. Those powers undertook a number of military coups in many major Arab countries, and were highly influenced by the Cold War. Over the periods from 1950 to early 1980s, the now Arab republics enacted civil laws, increased *public* investments in human capital (especially in health and education), and increased the size of the middle-income class. However, since the majority of regimes were military dictatorships, they also chose socialist economic institutions and engaged in land expropriation,¹³ which distorted the natural incentive structure to invest in capital and work effort. As a result, the Arab republics exhibited widespread misallocation of resources and, eventually, reduced relative GDP per person.

Prosperous people are less likely to rebel compared to hungry, jobless, and oppressed people. The choice of economic institutions is crucial for determining the dynamic path of any country, regardless of its political institutions. China has communist political institutions, but chose free market economic institutions; North Korea and Cuba are committed to communism. The Chinese are clearly better off. Chile was a right-wing military dictatorship under Pinochet, but chose free market institutions. Chileans are better off than all Arabs, who have lived under dictators for decades.

¹² I was born in the Arab world 1955, left it in 1984, and returned in 2008. Hence, the choice of the dates in table 1.

¹³ The politically motivated and forceful confiscation and redistribution of private property.

During the 1970s the communists were largely defeated (imprisoned or physically eliminated) across the Middle East, except in South Yemen.¹⁴ The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 also contributed to the demise of communism in the Arab countries. After the Camp David Agreement, Egypt changed directions and aligned itself with the West. A few Arab countries followed. The Americans financially pampered Iraq during the war with Iran, which lasted eight years. Syria, and to a large extent Algeria, remained distanced from the West for longer. In general, the Arab dictators and autocrats received direct support from the West, especially the United States, and were rewarded for their stance against communism, making peace with Israel, or their stance against the Mullahs in Iran.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the Islamist political movement went underground. However, the elimination of leftists and secular opposition political powers in the Arab countries, in general, allowed the Islamists to rise as the only opposition political power today. Some of the Islamists were encouraged and financially supported by Iran following the Islamic revolution of 1979. The wars in Afghanistan also created strong Islamic movements. The organization and arming of Islamic groups to fight the Soviet Union by the Americans in the late 1970s contributed to the rise of political Islam. Today, most organized political groups in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Jordan, and Syria are Islamic. The Islamists demonstrated they could easily win elections anywhere. For example, Algerian Islamic groups won the election in that country in the early 1990s and Hamas took over in occupied Palestine. Today, The Muslim Brotherhood in particular is strong in Egypt. The Islamists are the strongest in Tunisia. Syria's demonstrators are largely backed up by the Brotherhood. And, surely, the Libyan new leadership will also be dominantly Islamist. Iraq is run by an Islamic political elite, which came to power via Western-style elections. The success or failure of the potentially Islamic regimes will very much depend on the choice of the economic institutions they establish.

The most two influential economic arguments for democracy and prosperity are Friedman's (1962) and Sen's (1990). It is difficult to know whether democracy is a prerequisite for a successful capitalist market, economic development, and prosperity. We are awaiting the Chinese experience to deliver the data to answer this vital question. China is not a democracy and the Chinese are not free, yet they are the second largest market economy in the world.

Elbadawi and Makdisi (2011) provide statistical evidence that oil and external conflict were the main reasons for the lack of democracy in the Arab countries. Indeed, oil wealth represents a very powerful tool to maintain autocracy in Arab countries, and is inconsistent with democracy (Razzak, 2006). The dictator uses oil wealth to build institutions that support his rule, such as the military and secret police.

¹⁴ After the end of the Ottomans Yemen was a monarchy between 1918 and 1962. The monarchs were tribal. In 1962 Yemen became a republic, but only in the North. The government was a military dictatorship. Britain established a protectorate in South Yemen, which was a strategic location for the British since the 19th century. Britain withdrew its forces in 1962, hence South Yemen. In 1970 South Yemen was run by a communist government. The North and South Yemen united again in 1990

External conflict is the Arab – Israeli conflict. It is, however, unclear why Egypt remained a dictatorship 30 years after signing a peace treaty with Israel. Also unclear is how a country with no apparent external conflict, such as Tunisia, remained a dictatorship for nearly half a century.

I would add that tribalism is the main impediment to democracy. I do not have empirical evidence, so my argument is about internal inconsistency. I use democracy in a general term here even though there are different types of democracy (e.g., Switzerland *cf.* the United States). Under democratic systems people, regardless of their origins, religious affiliations, gender and race, are considered equal and treated as such. In a tribal society, however, people cannot be equal by definition. Kinship is paramount in determining social hierarchies. Evolution of Arab societies did not resolve the problems and tribal values persist. These values have transferred to the modern cities. Instead of kinship, there is a neighborhood effect, where the next-door neighbor is more important than the man in the next suburb. Thus, the institutions built by the dictators, who were tribal themselves, were inherently tribal.

The reasons behind the recent Arab Spring 2011 are similar to reasons of the earlier coups d'état: discontent with the management of the country, distribution of wealth, widespread corruption, theft, nepotism, and a lack of freedom, amongst myriad other reasons. Today's revolutionaries are the *de facto* political powers who decided to change the political institutions and rewrite the rules of exchange. However, the method of change has been different. Rather than military-led coups, like those of the 1950s and 1960s, the use of the Internet to mobilize civilians was a spectacular success in Tunisia and Egypt. And it is being used widely in Syria, Bahrain, and the other Arab countries.

While this technological progress has, without a doubt, been instrumental; it is not the primary tool of the Arab Spring. Instead, foreign intervention, which still exists in most Arab countries, was responsible for the collapse of certain dictators. Close observation of the events reveals that collapse only became imminent when the United States (and also all the members of the Security Council) made it clear it no longer supported the regimes. When it did not, the regime stayed intact regardless of the widespread use of the Internet and social media outlets, Bahrain and Syria are good example, where there is no international consensus about the situation. Social media and Internet use by the Syrians and Libyans have not been as effective as in Tunisia and Egypt. It ignited the uprisings, but did not bring down the regimes as rapidly. In Libya, direct foreign military intervention was needed.

3. Final remarks

Although the changes expected by the Arab Spring are seemingly positive and necessary for the future, there are a few issues worth noting. Foreign intervention is still evident in the Middle East, thus genuine changes are not entirely home grown, and do not necessarily benefit the Arab people. Foreign powers have always been interested in the Middle East, where policies, solutions, and institutions were based on their interests rather than those of the Arab people. It has been argued, for example, that Winston Churchill's policies in the Middle East

such as the establishment of Iraq and Jordan, favoring the Saud family over the Sharif of Mecca, his position regarding the Kurds in Northern Iraq, Aden etc. were entirely driven by his desire to cut costs rather than anything else (Catherwood, 2004).

As predicted by the theory, changes to political and economic institutions will require time to implement. The tribal and religious nature of Arab society is inconsistent with Western democracy and the separation of religion and state may not be possible. Under democracy all citizens are equal, but in a tribal society kinship dominates. Having oil wealth (i.e., economic resources) in the hand of the state is not conducive to democracy. Tribalism, religious-sectarian divides, and dictatorships have been the unholy trinity responsible for the lack of democracy and progress.

There is no evidence that tribalism, regionalism, and religious-sectarian divides will not continue in the future. Every institution, e.g., the army, the police, the justice system, in the region is influenced by tribal values because the society itself is tribal.

And there is no reason whatsoever to believe that oil-rich Arab states will give up total and direct control over oil revenues, and use them to bolster their own political control. Iraq is a clear example of a supposedly democratic system, where elected officials have failed to deliver the minimum for their own citizens over a period of nearly nine years. The Gulf oil-rich countries have total and direct control over oil wealth, but they perused a relatively fair distribution of wealth. That is a major reason for not having full grown de facto political powers, in general.

The two major revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt are now at critical stages because there are conflicts of interest between the various participants. The conflicting political powers are haggling to rewrite the rules of the game to maximize their own gains, and they seem unable to solve their *collective action problem*, i.e., to ensure that they could work together for the benefit of the country. Free riding is prevalent, which is very common in tribal societies. The future remains totally uncertain.

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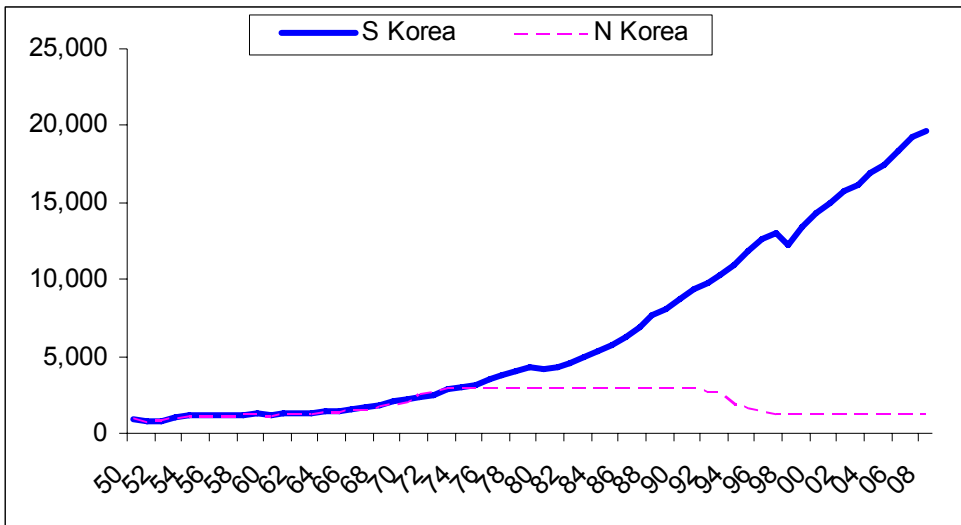
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Figure 1: Real GDP Per Person



**Table 1: Declining Relative GDP per person
(Korea=100)**

Country	1955	1984	2008
Bahrain	215.4	84.8	37.5
Iraq	196.6	76.9	5.30
Jordan	139.0	88.7	29.0
Kuwait	2759.7	167.9	65.7
Lebanon	246.9	58.9	22.7
Oman	65.6	111.2	42.5
S Arabia	250.0	190.8	43.0
Qatar	2663.9	237.6	88.2
Syria	260	114.3	42.6
UAE	1684	375.1	79.5
Yemen	80.6	45.1	13.7
Algeria	123.6	62.6	17.9
Egypt	75.7	44.5	18.9
Libya	95.3	81.8	15.2
Morocco	126.9	42.7	17.6
Tunisia	99.6	57.1	31.1

Source: Maddison <http://www.ggd.net/MADDISON/oriindex.htm>

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