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Creating a State Capacity Index Using the Arab⁽¹⁾ Opinion Index

Dana El Kurd⁽²⁾

State capacity is an ambiguous concept; the literature is often at odds as to what constitutes state capacity, how to operationalize it, and how to measure it. Nevertheless, it is important for us to attempt this endeavor given the importance of state capacity, and its effect on a number of political and social dynamics. With the proliferation of quality surveys in the Arab world in recent years, we also have an unprecedented opportunity to examine state capacity in a new light, according to citizen perceptions in addition to material measures. Thus, in this paper, we will examine variations of state capacity measurements using the Arab Opinion Index data. We will begin by reviewing the literature on measurement of state capacity. Then we will deduce the most relevant aspects for an assessment of Arab states. Finally we will present preliminary findings, and outline prospects for future research.

Arab

Public Opinion

Citizen Perceptions

State Capacity

Coercive Capacity

Infrastructural Capacity

Defining State Capacity

Scholars have often debated what can be included in the definition of state capacity. Many definitions were informed by particular cases or regions, and did not always travel outside particular bounds. We will review some competing definitions here.

In his seminal book, *Strong Societies and Weak States*, Joel Migdal defined a strong state as one which has the monopoly over the collective use of violence across the state's boundaries. He went on to define "capacity" as the ability to deliver services to the population and the centrality of the state in the population's day-to-day "strategies of survival." Later research took on those insights and attempted to deduce particular aspects. For

example, in Soifer's (2012) assessment of state capacity in Latin America, he breaks down state capacity into three components: coercive capacity, infrastructural capacity, and extractive capacity. Coercive capacity is in line with Migdal's definition on the monopoly of the use of violence. Infrastructural power is defined as the ability of the state to implement logistically political decisions. Finally, extractive capacity entails the ability to tax the population effectively within the state's boundaries. Alternatively, infrastructural mechanisms of state control have also been defined as the mechanisms by which the state "coerces rivals, registers citizens, extracts revenues, and cultivates dependence" (Slater & Fenner 2011).

Measuring State Capacity

Using these concepts and categories, researchers have been able to measure and operationalize state

capacity across a number of regions. Each region has particular issues with state capacity, as well as

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varying historical trajectories. As such, each regional assessment emphasizes a particular category of state capacity over others. Most state capacity research focuses on material manifestations of state capacity, such as military capacity and quality of institutions. Research on the operationalization of state capacity finds that the “most theoretically and empirically justified” measurements of state capacity are survey measures capturing bureaucratic quality and taxation capacity (Hendrix 2010).

The public perception of state capacity has also been extensively assessed. Not only are survey measures capturing bureaucratic quality justified empirically and theoretically, but researchers have also found ways to assess other aspects of state capacity using public opinion polling. For example, in one assessment of the Americas Barometer, researchers utilized the same three categories of state capacity outlined in Soifer (2012). They utilized three questions to capture each category of state capacity. Specifically, to capture coercive capacity, they used a survey question related to crime. To capture infrastructural capacity, they utilized a question related to whether the respondent had an official ID (as a manifestation of the state’s power). Finally, to assess extractive capacity, the researchers utilized a survey question on how often people paid sales tax.

Another assessment of the Americas Barometer focused on local versus national perceptions of state capacity. Both were taken as manifestations of the ability of the state to ensure citizen safety and the rule of law. They differentiated at the national and local level in order to analyze “the consequences that experiences with and fear of crime can have for evaluations of the government’s domestic security performance”. To ascertain state capacity at the local level, they asked questions on satisfaction with the police as well as perceptions of police response time. At the national level, they asked questions related to trust in the judicial system and whether respondents perceived the regime as having a positive effect on security.

In regions in which these characteristics are mostly missing, or where data is sparse, researchers utilize more minimalistic definitions of state capacity. For instance, in assessments of African state capacity, researchers have relied solely on taxation compliance as a proxy for state capacity. Other variations of state capacity are mostly irrelevant in the African context, which struggles with weak state contexts. Similarly in the Arab world, extractive capacity is not always very relevant, given that a large chunk of Arab countries do not rely on taxation at all (i.e. the resource wealthy states). As such, state capacity measures should vary according to regional differences.

Gauging State Capacity in the Arab World

Specifically, if we want to gauge state capacity in the Arab world, a focus on coercive and infrastructural capacity is a more useful operationalization than extractive capacity in most cases. The Arab Opinion Index contains a number of questions that measure particular manifestations of coercive capacity. By combining these questions, we can create a “Coercive Capacity Index” for further data analysis.

In particular, we combined five questions related to coercive capacity. These were:

1. The level of security in your current place of residence (neighborhood, area of residence, safety level in the country of study).
2. The level of safety in the country of study.
3. How confident are you in the following institutions - Public Security (Police)

4. Fighting crime.
5. State authority extends to all regions and territory (country of study) and can enforce and enforce law throughout the country

We combined these 5 questions into a single index, and tested the internal consistency of this index using the Cronbach’s Alpha measure. A score above a 0.6 is considered somewhat acceptable, and this particular battery of questions received a 0.66. The index measures perceptions of the state’s coercive capacity based on the five questions previously noted. The score ranges from 1 to 4 with 1 being the best perception and 4 being the worst. Results averages for perceptions of the state’s coercive capacity across countries in the Arab world can be found in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Perceptions of the State’s Coercive Capacity

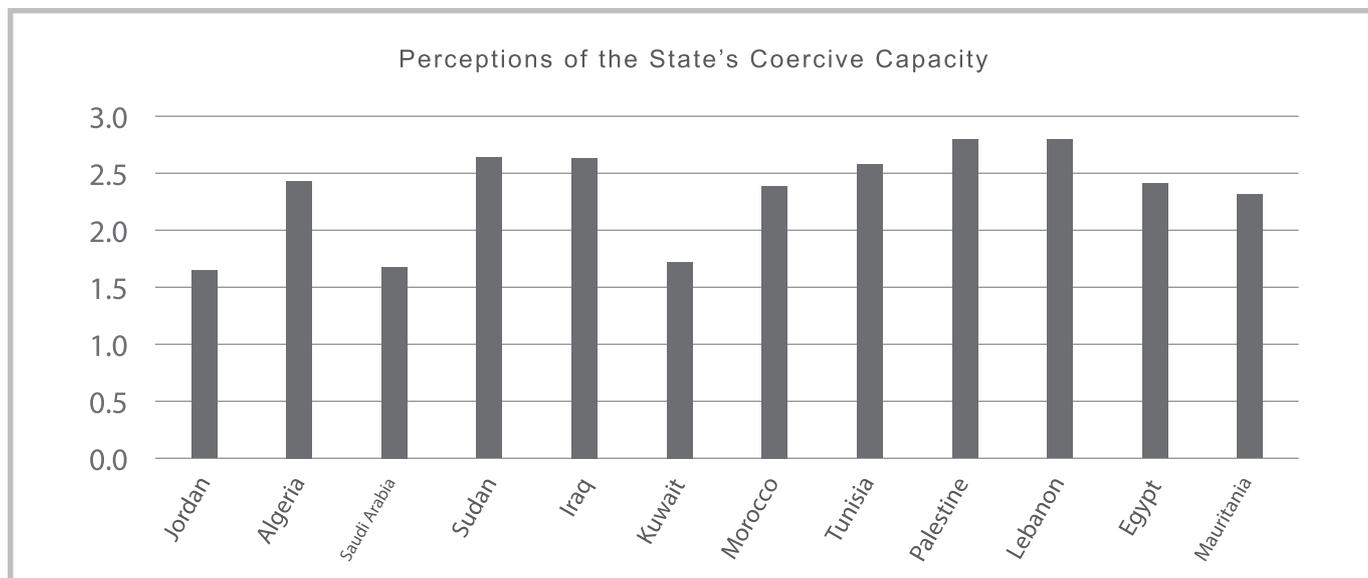


Figure 1 shows perceptions of state capacity, specifically with regards to the state’s coercive capacity. Unsurprisingly, countries such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have a perception of greater state coercive capacity, whereas countries such as Lebanon and Iraq have a perception of lower state capacity.

The same exercise can be conducted regarding the concept of infrastructural capacity. In this case, the following questions were used to create the infrastructural capacity index:

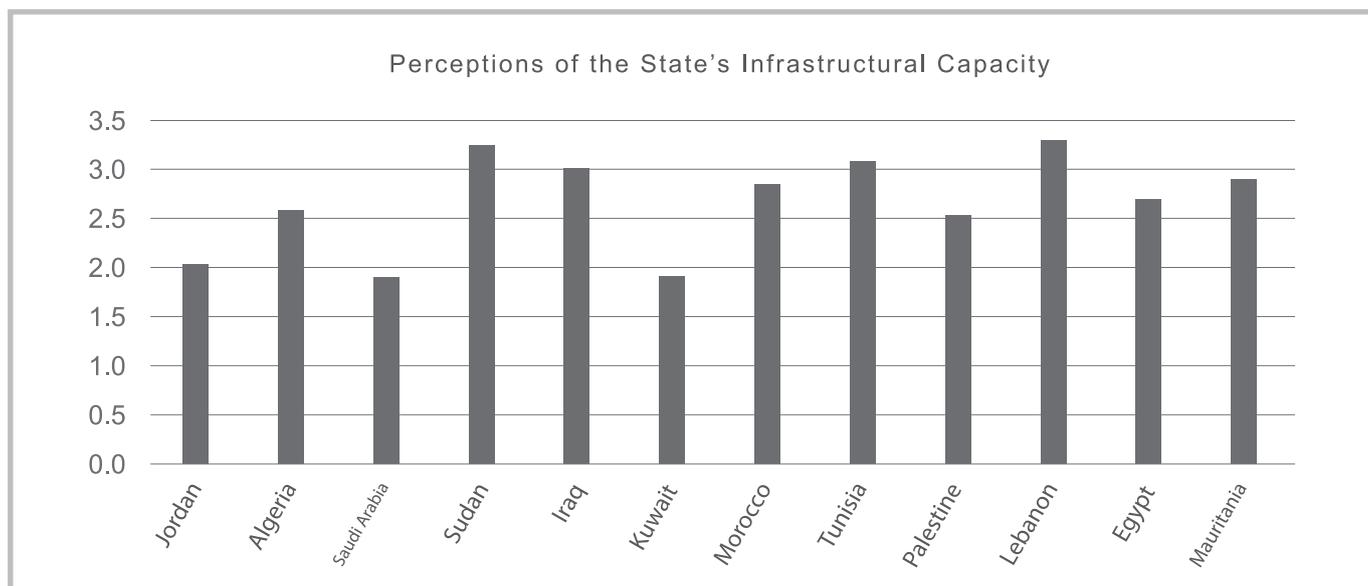
These days how do you assess the performance of the government in terms of:

1. Improving government health services
2. Availability of Water

3. Providing sanitation services
4. Improving the level of public school education
5. Provide electricity coverage for all areas

The Cronbach’s Alpha score for this index was an improved 0.74, meaning the scale has an acceptable level of internal consistency. The index measures perceptions of the state’s infrastructural capacity based on the five questions previously noted. The score ranges from 1 to 4 with 1 being the best perception and 4 being the worst. Results averages for perceptions of the state’s coercive capacity across countries in the Arab world can be found in Figure 2 below:

Figure 2: Perceptions of the State’s Infrastructural Capacity



Again, results are unsurprising: Countries with higher levels of wealth and less challenges to state authority feature the lowest dissatisfaction with the state's infrastructural capacity. Countries with internal

conflict and weak governments - such as Lebanon, Sudan, and Iraq - have the highest dissatisfaction with the state's infrastructural capacity.

Utility of the State Capacity Measure

These measures are very useful in increasing our understanding of particular trends; for instance, perhaps state capacity (or lack thereof) plays a role in determining support for democracy. Similarly,

perceptions of state capacity may have an effect on opinions related to current events, such as the Arab Spring protests. Regression analysis of these examples can be found below:

Table 1: Perception of State Incapacity and its Effects on Democracy, Arab Spring

	Model 1: Democracy	Model 2: Arab Spring
Perception of State Incapacity	0.181*** (0.200)	0.064*** (0.200)
Economy	-0.093*** (0.017)	0.145*** (0.017)
Employment	0.024*** (0.008)	0.045*** (0.007)
Age	-0.007*** (0.000)	0.009*** (0.000)
Gender	0.071** (0.028)	0.103*** (0.028)
Education	-0.065*** (0.005)	-0.024*** (0.004)
N (total)	18,311	18,311
LR chi2(6)	351.48	357.71
Prob > chi2	0.000	0.000

As we can see from the regression analysis, perception of state incapacity has a negative effect on support of democracy (Model 1) or support of the Arab Spring (Model 2). This is the case even when accounting for important individual attributes/demographics, such as employment status, age, and education levels. Perception of state incapacity is still statistically significant and negative, implying that the perception of a weak state may have profound effects on whether

people support regime change or democratization efforts. Controlling for country-specific effects does not change these results; the state capacity variable is still negative and highly statistically significant. This means perception of state incapacity has a negative effect on both perception of democracy as well as support of the Arab Spring movements, regardless of country. Results of these regressions can be found in table 2 below:

Table 2: Perception of State Weakness and its Effect, Controlling for Country-Specific Effects

	Model 1: Democracy	Model 2: Arab Spring
Perception of State Incapacity	0.395*** (0.023)	0.053** (0.022)
Country		
Algeria	0.038 (0.067)	-0.926*** (0.064)
Saudi Arabia	0.886*** (0.068)	-1.482*** (0.068)
Sudan	0.107 (0.069)	-1.596*** (0.067)
Iraq	0.157** (0.067)	-1.128*** (0.064)
Kuwait	0.592*** (0.072)	-2.233*** (0.072)
Morocco	0.136** (0.066)	-1.424*** (0.065)
Tunisia	-1.157*** (0.071)	-1.034*** (0.066)
Palestine	0.059 (0.066)	-1.038*** (0.064)
Lebanon	-1.462*** (0.074)	-0.338*** (0.066)
Egypt	0.601*** (0.060)	-1.822*** (0.058)
Mauritania	-0.952*** (0.074)	-1.185*** (0.068)
Economy	-0.015 (0.018)	0.065*** (0.017)
Employment	0.012 (0.008)	0.018** (0.008)
Age	0.0003 (0.001)	0.005*** (0.001)
Gender	0.098** (0.028)	0.129*** (0.028)
Education	-0.039*** (0.005)	-0.030*** (0.005)
N (total)	18,311	18,311
LR chi2(17)	2337.82	2201.32
Prob > chi2	0.000	0.000

Conclusion

State incapacity, and perceptions of state weakness, can thus play an important role in a number of relationships. Without the inclusion of state capacity, we may come to incomplete conclusions as to what causes a number of political phenomena, including anti-democratic sentiment as the example above shows.

Further research should be conducted to fine-tune these measures, and create a holistic index encompassing the major aspects of state capacity highlighted in the literature. These measures should have a higher cronbach's alpha score than current measures, in order to improve accuracy of the results. Moreover, perceptions of state incapacity should be coupled with more material/concrete measures of state capacity, perhaps in coordination with other databases. For instance, the World Bank database features both "downstream" and "upstream" measures of state capacity, which include measures related to infrastructure and services as well as the efficacy of national policy. Combining both perception measures as well as concrete measures not only shows us the differences between the two, but can also provide the most comprehensive state capacity measure in the literature thus far. All in all, perception of state capacity is an important variable that should be considered when assessing significant political phenomena, particularly in the Arab world.

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