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WEAPONS OF DISCONTENT?
**Sketching a research agenda on social accountability
in the Arab Middle East and North Africa**

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Abstract

Put simply, accountability is about saying what you do and doing what you say. This paper explores the concept of social accountability (SA), which we understand here as any citizen-led action beyond elections that aims to enhance the accountability of state actors. We approach SA in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region from a perspective that blends development studies with comparative politics and Middle East studies. First, we trace the notion of accountability as a governance concept. Secondly, we discuss dominant theories on SA as a mechanism to improve public service delivery. Thirdly, we identify three main categories of social accountability initiatives (SAI's) and summarize their respective strengths and weaknesses. We then observe how the scholarly literature on SA has largely bypassed the MENA region. We argue that this neglect is underserved and surprising, given the many initiatives that emerged across the region during the decade following the 2011 uprisings. In the final part of the paper, we propose three thematic axes that form a future research agenda which we hope is relevant for researchers based in the region as well as for (international, regional and national) policy makers and practitioners.

Keywords

Weapons of discontent?[1]
Sketching a research agenda on social accountability in the Arab Middle East and North Africa

1   Introduction

Ten years ago, the notion of accountability seemed so unattainable that a Tunisian street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in protest at the harassment, humiliation and confiscation of his wares by local authorities. His act of exasperation – staged in a modest Mediterranean town in December 2010 – proved the catalyst for Tunisia's so-called Jasmine revolution, triggering subsequent uprisings across the Middle East that became known as the Arab Spring (Bayat, 2017).

One common thread running through this wave of revolts was a surge in calls to challenge existing ruling regimes, often by targeting political elites or state institutions. These various forms of collective action were underpinned and propelled by wide discontent regarding an uneven distribution of civic, political and social rights of citizenship between different groups and societal classes. Citizens united to claim a greater level of justice and freedom as well as accountable governance.

While there is now a substantial body of literature on the underlying causes of these uprisings, and valuable studies are emerging on the main actors and their practices, the struggle for improved accountability has remained under-researched. To some extent, the lack of scholarly interest can be explained by the fact that key Arab regimes have responded with counter-revolutionary tactics in order to suppress demands for social change (Bulliet, 2015; Hinnebusch, 2016; Stacher, 2020). The fact is, however, that even in such authoritarian states, citizens have experimented with mechanisms to apply political pressure on incumbents and with attempts to foster public scrutiny notwithstanding the threat of violent repression.

Thus, over the past decade, many societies across MENA (the Middle East and North African region) have witnessed the creation of new 'participatory' institutions (e.g. participatory urban planning systems, municipal service centres, and consultative committees for gender equity and equal

opportunities in Morocco and Tunisia); increased decentralization to municipal level; and the establishment or strengthening of economic and social councils or ombudsman offices. Similarly, international donors have scaled up their work on social accountability initiatives, including community score cards in the education field in Egypt and Morocco, health (Egypt) and water (Yemen). Elsewhere, participatory and gender-responsive budgeting initiatives have been launched.

In short, even though social accountability initiatives have 'conquered' the region – albeit often at limited scales – scholars have largely focused on (authoritarian) regime resilience and thereby ignored innovative tools in citizen-led democratization efforts. This neglect is all the more striking given the agreement among analysts that many of the root causes of the 2011 uprisings have not disappeared. On the contrary, some of the collisions that erupted in 2011 have resurfaced or given rise to renewed forms of popular protest in 2019, from Sudan to Algeria.

In order to fill this gap in our knowledge, we find it relevant and timely to propose a research agenda on which we invite feedback and suggestions from our colleagues both in academia and the world of policy making and donors. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, we review different conceptual understandings of accountability, before zooming in on social accountability (SA) in particular. We then review the literature on SA in the MENA region and identify and discuss three (inter-related) thematic axes of a future research agenda. In the conclusion, we briefly summarize the main contours of our research agenda on SA in the MENA region, and reflect on our own positionality.

2   Oversight, accountability, social accountability

The most recent mutation of accountability – i.e. the principle of answerability and punishability – into social accountability as a governance concept has been driven by the recognition that institutional protocols can fail to provide responsible governance on country-wide scales. Institutional arrangements – such as oversight of the legislative and/or judicial branch over the executive branch – are themselves the outcomes of centuries of citizens' attempts to hold rulers accountable for their decisions by prioritizing the rule of law above the 'rule of men'.

Traditionally, political scientists approached the study of accountability as the analysis of citizens holding government responsible during elections. Citizens are theorized to express a retrospective judgement at the ballot by either punishing or rewarding executive representatives on their performance (Maravall, 2007). This delegated chain of authority so typical of representative democracies – from voting citizens via chosen politicians to executive policy makers managing service delivery – has been labelled the 'long route of accountability' (World Bank, 2003).

The ensuing shift in the study of accountability came early in the new millennium, at the impetus of experts who hailed the concept of the 'short route of accountability' as a way of combating corruption, clientelism and state capture (Ackerman, 2005). Strengthening the direct links between citizens and service providers was thought to empower the former while fostering transparency and participation. Thus, the notion of democratic oversight came to include the idea that citizens can act as principal agents of improved governance – especially if local participatory mechanisms can be devised to increase the information that enables them to demand entitlements.

Yet, neither the ability of short routes to supplement longer routes of accountability nor the existence of horizontal accountability (whereby branches or agencies of the state control each other), nor the availability of vertical accountability mechanisms (institutionalized occasions on which citizens provide feedback to representatives, e.g. elections or referenda) have, by themselves, led to improved democratic governance. In any polity, the size or complexity of the bureaucracy can present overwhelming obstacles to (congressional) oversight attempting to guarantee conscientious behaviour by executive office holders. Moreover, for direct accountability to function, other factors (such as principled public servants, politically engaged citizens and dense civil-society networks) need to prevail (Bauhr and Grimes, 2014). By contrast, where corruption is rife, self-interested individuals may derail even well-conceived oversight procedures.

It is no coincidence, then, that the notion of accountability is a central concept for democratization theorists, who have defined its scope as being much broader than procedural elections. Schedler, for one, suggests that accountability has three main features: information, justification, and punishment or compensation (Schedler, 1999 cited in Diamond and Morlino, 2004: 25). From this perspective, it should not surprise that, in her exploration

of authoritarianism as democracy's polar opposite, Glasius (2018: 525) defines authoritarianism as those practices that sabotage the very notion of accountability.

Because of the difficulty of enshrining institutional oversight as a safeguard for accountable governance on a large scale, and given the global persistence of corruption and authoritarianism, social accountability initiatives (SAI) have gained traction over the past few decades – especially in settings marked by weak or imperfect state capacity. Such civic-engagement initiatives intend to bolster citizens and local communities in acting as instigators of state responsiveness (Hyden and Samuel, 2011).

Today, even though scholars acknowledge that all circulating definitions of SA have conceptual flaws – which, moreover, complicate attempts to measure the impact of such initiatives – there is agreement that social accountability is an 'evolving umbrella category that includes: citizen monitoring and oversight of public and/or private sector performance, user-centered public information access/dissemination systems, public complaint and grievance redress mechanisms, as well as citizen participation in actual resource allocation decision-making, such as participatory budgeting' (Fox, 2015: 346). In short, SA encompasses any citizen-led action beyond elections that aims to enhance the accountability of state actors. However, the sheer diversity of these action formats explains why conceptualizing SA has proven such an arduous task.

3   Social accountability: a theoretical synopsis

The surge of social accountability in reaction to the deficit of traditional public service and goods delivery has been so spectacular that scholars have struggled to keep track of the phenomenon. As a result, 'practice in the SA field continues to race ahead of empirical research, and relevant theory lags even further behind' (Fox, 2015: 346). To complicate matters further, the heterogeneity of SA mechanisms has been matched by the diversity of its observers: not only have social scientists, lawyers and economists picked up SA, so too have education specialists and health professionals. In addition to scholars, policy makers (politicians, experts, public managers and international donors as well as civil-society organizations [CSOs]) have contributed to the debate.

One actor, the World Bank, has stood out in terms of knowledge production on SA, and extant scholarship widely credits the organization with the global spread of the concept. Building on this lead, the United Nations provided a major boost by including the concept in its Sustainable Development Goals in 2015. Goal 16 calls for building 'effective, *accountable* and inclusive institutions', thus increasing funds earmarked for SA initiatives. Nowadays, the World Bank continues to provide scholars and practitioners with leading expertise in the field and hosts the Global Partnership for Social Accountability (GPSA)[2] – even though some scholars have adopted a critical stance towards the international promotion of a reform agenda advocating SA as a governance tool (Gaventa and McGee 2013; Joshi and McCluskey 2018; Rodan and Hughes 2012). We will turn to some of this criticism below.

A useful way to start thinking about SA in conceptual terms is by distinguishing between upward and downward accountability (Hickey and King, 2016). Basically, the former corresponds to bottom-up initiatives by non-state actors (i.e. citizens, local communities or CSOs) whereas the latter denotes top-down mechanisms (e.g. anti-corruption bureaus, open budgeting, legislative oversight, capacity building, grievance-redress mechanisms, and legal or fiscal public-sector reform). Development economists sometimes speak of the demand side and supply side of accountable governance in order to indicate this same division. However, such reliance on market metaphors also suggests an 'invisible hand' that will, somehow, regulate demand and supply in governance – and this has proven unrealistic (Fox, 2015). Instead, the most

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[2] This initiative was launched in 2012 to foster 'constructive engagement between governments and civil society in order to create an enabling environment in which citizen feedback is used to solve fundamental problems in service delivery and to strengthen the performance of public institutions'. The GPSA makes funding available to CSOs only in countries where governments have consented to 'opt-in'. As of February 2021, this covered 54 countries across all continents, including five countries that are part of MENA (Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia and Yemen). The GPSA is supporting over 30 projects in 25 countries (including one on education in Morocco and two on health and education in Tunisia). See https://www.thegpsa.org.

effective SA initiatives are those that integrate elements of both the demand and supply sides in their project design (Hickey and King, 2016: 1226).

The distinction operated by Hickey and King not only highlights a difference in SA interventions depending on the kind of actors involved, it also helps to set apart initiatives that are arguably predominantly technical in nature from others that are more eminently political. On one hand, there are SA interventions driven by external actors (CSOs, international donors) who projectize communities' involvement in monitoring activities, such as public expenditure tracking surveys or citizen report cards. These are what Joshi and Houtzager (2012) have labelled 'widgets'. This type of SA is often marked by top-down logic. To this first category, which those authors believe is too technical and depoliticized, they oppose SA initiatives labelled 'watchdogs', which focus on active political engagement by local social forces rooted in a specific context. In this configuration, social actors confront the state as part of a long-term pattern shaped by past exchanges and current imperatives. These authors maintain that widgets create conceptual as well as empirical problems in terms of impact evaluation. In particular, they advocate a more dynamic view by examining 'social accountability actions as one part of a broader and longer process of engagement between collective actors and the state' (Joshi and Houtzager, 2012: 155) because they believe '[it] is those very political processes that lie at the heart of successful accountability actions from below' (Joshi and Houtzager, 2012: 152). Recently, in SA theory and practice, there has been a clear trend 'away from a narrow technical blueprint approach towards a more context-sensitive, politically "savvy" approach but it is unclear whether this "watchdog approach" has already trickled down to the reality on the ground' (Kuppens, 2016: 23).

The question of which SA strategies yield the best results has become a leading theme throughout the literature (Smith and Benavot, 2019; Yang and Pandey, 2011). Not all scholars agree that increased emphasis on context and dynamics from below are salutary. In fact, there is emerging consensus that those initiatives which combine bottom-up forms of accountability with reforms that strengthen the responsiveness of public-sector officials tend to work best. In this vein, Fox (2015) pleads for a shift away from tactical towards strategic SA approaches. This is more than a semantic shift. Tactical approaches are bounded interventions, focusing mostly on local arenas on the assumption that access to information alone will thrust collective action into triggering improved public-sector performance. By contrast, strategic approaches deploy multiple tactics, encourage enabling environments for accountability and coordinate citizen voice initiatives with governmental reforms bolstering pro-accountability coalitions that bridge the state–society divide through iterative, often contested processes (Fox, 2015: 352).

Trajectories of social change like these are the desired outcome of most SA initiatives. Such improved levels of governance and development amount to what some have called 'new social contracts'. These authors emphasize that

> social accountability is more likely to emerge when the political settlement […] becomes more inclusive of broader social groups. At this stage, it becomes

possible to discuss state-society relations in terms of a 'social contract' which refers both to the legitimacy of political rule, including the capacity of citizens to hold rulers to account, and to the pursuit of social justice as a fundamental principle of government (Hickey and King, 2016: 1233).

Indeed, it seems 'likely that citizen-led forms of accountability will emerge as citizens come to see the goods that are distributed to them through various social protection instruments as entitlements rather than as a form of patronage' (Hickey and King, 2016: 1236).

It is important to acknowledge here the extent to which Hickey and King incorporate insights from authors discussed above. Like Fox, they recognize that successful SA initiatives 'are as likely to require demand- as well as supply-led sources of power' (Hickey and King, 2016: 1235). Yet, at the same time, like Joshi and Houtzager, they point out that few SA studies have 'paid any in-depth attention to the role of context and politics in shaping their success' (Hickey and King, 2016: 1237). To unpack this further and to better understand some pitfalls threatening the success of SA mechanisms, it is helpful to categorize SA initiatives into three recurrent fields of activity.

4 Social accountability: tools and traps

Roughly speaking, SA initiatives fall under one of the following categories: 1) transparency; 2) advocacy; or 3) participatory governance.

Transparency initiatives range from formal oversight bodies or right-to-information legislation to ombuds(wo)men and citizen report cards. They aim to increase citizen access to information as a way to reduce corruption and other abuses of power. Lately, however, scholars have started to question the conviction that transparency automatically induces good governance. Empirical testing of this supposedly causal relationship by Bauhr and Grimes (2014, 2017) suggests that public exposure of endemic corruption may in fact erode institutional confidence and demobilize the demos rather than enhance pressures for accountability. Although there are reasons to assume that transparency can breed indignation and willingness to act 'among citizens already highly interested and involved in political matters […], our analysis suggests that this effect is not universal. Especially in settings in which corruption is the modus operandi, transparency may instead give rise to resignation and a withdrawal from political life' (Bauhr and Grimes, 2014: 309). This insight undermines the assumption that citizens will act as principal agents of public indignation or that they will press for reform when provided with access to potentially explosive information. Instead, it suggests that information alone is not enough; for SA initiatives and transparency reforms to be effective, they need to be accompanied by other institutional arrangements that encourage fellow citizens to hold office holders accountable.

Advocacy initiatives focus on informal pressures used by citizens to claim public goods and services. They usually adopt a more confrontational approach as they tend to address contentious actions by public bodies or state employees. Such initiatives range from popular protest and demonstrations to civil disobedience or public-interest litigation. The success of these tools often depends on context-based factors such as the capacity and commitment of CSOs to engage with both civil and political society, the interests of power holders involved, the levels of inequality between citizens and the character of state–citizen relations (Hickey and King, 2016: 1227–8). In assessing these contextual factors, the authors suggest the existence of two different types of context: one that is favourable for the effective implementation of SA, i.e. a situation in which civil society has capacity and the government is willing to engage, and a contrasting type of context in which this willingness is much weaker and where the absence of a legal framework and/or political system facilitating access to information makes for a much less favourable setting for successful experiments with SA.

This finding shows that the attitude of incumbent office holders and the institutional structure are crucial: whereas denunciation and advocacy can be powerful tools, the trap here is that without the availability of credible enforcement mechanisms, calls for SA can be ignored, defused or diverted. Without sufficient 'bite', SA initiatives can be captured by established elites.

Finally, participatory governance mechanisms provide groups of (under-represented) citizens with opportunities to engage directly in the policy process. Moreover, participatory institutions are said to improve the poor's well-being (Touchton and Wampler, 2014). Such tools include participatory budgeting or community co-management of education, water or health facilities, thus emphasizing the collective dimension of SA. Whereas examples exist in which such mechanisms have led to tangible development impacts, empirical evidence on participatory governance outcomes is mixed (Fox, 2015). In particular, the assumptions that 'community participation is democratic' or that 'decentralization brings government closer to the people' turn out to be weak. This does not mean that SA tools systematically fail to trigger virtuous circles of mutual empowerment but for that to happen, it appears, some conditions should be met.

Fox advocates the need for a 'sandwich strategy' that consists of both *voice* (citizen capacity for collective action in support of accountability) and *teeth* (defined as the institutional capacity to respond to citizen voice) in these words:

> The sandwich strategy's point of departure is that anti-accountability forces, deeply embedded in both state and society, are often stronger than pro-accountability forces. To break these 'low-accountability traps', resistance is likely and therefore conflict would be both expected and necessary. While initial opportunities for change are necessarily context-driven and can be opened either from society or from the state, the main determinant of a subsequent pro-accountability power shift is whether or not pro-change actors in one domain can empower the others […]. In this scenario of mutual empowerment reformists within the state need to have actual capacity to deliver to their societal counterparts, by providing tangible support and the political space necessary to provide some degree of protection from the likely reprisals from vested interests (Fox, 2015: 356).

The strength of Fox's model lies in his recognition that incumbent power holders and anti-accountability forces are deeply embedded in both state and society. However, the question is whether his model goes beyond a revamping of prevailing perspectives on SA as widgets. Even though Fox acknowledges that 'many accountability campaigns are led primarily by pressure from below', his strategy emphasizes a state-first, top-down reasoning. In many societies (including those in the MENA region), the main question is not how openings from above can meet mobilization from below but, rather, the other way round: how to ensure that when pressure builds from below, there will be receptive openings at the top? In the words of Bauhr and Grimes, how to channel indignation into socio-political transformation by avoiding resignation? According to Fox, such initiatives 'may or may not' find counterparts within the state, but this hardly advances our insight on how to facilitate this process in and beyond the MENA region.

5 Social accountability in the Arab Middle East and North Africa: renewed attention for state–society relations

Geographically speaking, stocktaking exercises on SA have documented an impressive corpus of initiatives across many regions of the world, including Africa (Claasen and Alpín-Lardiés, 2010; Dewachter et al., 2018; McNeil and Mumvuma, 2006); Asia (Ankamah, 2016; Arroyo, 2004; Dhungana, 2020; Peisakhin and Pinto, 2010; Sirker and Cosic, 2007); Europe (Kurze and Vukusic, 2013; Novikova, 2007); and Latin America (Gonçalves, 2014; Mainwaring and Welna, 2003; Peruzzottti and Smulovitz, 2006; Puschel et al., 2020). However, the MENA region has been conspicuously absent from these efforts.

Thematically speaking, the 'state of the art' covers many policy sectors – from education (Boelen, 2018; Pandey et al., 2009; Reinikka and Svensson, 2011) to food security (Mutersbaugh, 2005; Pande and Houtzager, 2016) and public health (Björkman Nyqvist et al., 2016; Lodenstein et al., 2017; Mahmud, 2007) to natural resources (Isham and Kahkonen, 2002; Mejía Acosta, 2013; Moldalieva and Heathershaw, 2020; Ribot and Larson, 2005) or finance (El-Halaby and Hussainey 2015). Yet, here again, very little attention has been paid to initiatives conducted in MENA, which, initially, were concentrated in education, health or water management and in municipal governance (Bousquet, 2012).

This is not to say that no attempts have been made to explore SA strategies in the MENA region. Fully in line with other parts of the world, international donors and practitioners have preceded scholars in promoting and analysing SA in MENA (Atammeh et al., 2013; Beddies et al., 2011; UNDP, 2004; Meknassi, 2014; Bousquet, 2012). Although the uprisings of 2011 brought momentum to the politics of accountability in the region, the post-Arab Spring literature was mostly channelled into topics linked to democratic transitology and (post-)authoritarianism. This has come to include a wide array of issues, such as authoritarian upgrading; regime survival; counter-revolution; sectarianism; and Western (EU, US) policy towards MENA (e.g. Dalacoura, 2012; Freyburg, 2011; Freyburg and Richter, 2015; Hashemi and Postel, 2017; Hassan, 2015; Heydemann and Leenders, 2013; Teti et al., 2018; Volpi, 2013).

At first, less attention was paid to the internal dynamics of social change, partly because of the ongoing reconfiguration of social forces. However, this has now started to change. When domestic developments did become the object of focus, interest tended to cluster around themes like citizenship (Alessandri et al., 2016; Butenschøn and Meijer, 2018; Challand, 2013; Meijer and Zwaini 2015); social movements (Beinin and Vairel, 2013; Geha, 2019; Rougier and Lacroix, 2015); Islamist parties (Cavatorta and Merone, 2013; Lynch and Schwedler, 2020; Vannetzel, 2017;); spatial politics (Al Sayyad and Guvenc, 2015; Bogaert, 2018; Rabbat, 2012; Schwedler, 2013; Singerman, 2011); women (Allam, 2018; el-Husseini, 2016; POMEPS, 2016); and youth

(Herrera 2014; Korany et al., 2016; Sika 2017). So, even though scholars have started to explore how citizens across MENA rethink institutional governance (Ahmed and Capoccia, 2014) and improve socio-economic well-being through pressure from below (Harders, 2013; Volpi and Jasper, 2017), one decade after the Arab uprisings, to our knowledge, no systematic effort has zoomed in exclusively on social accountability initiatives.

A second reason for placing the emphasis squarely on SA initiatives in MENA in our proposed research agenda is that we have witnessed a multitude of such initiatives across the region over the past decade. Yet, only a few of these actions have been identified as SA initiatives. In the wake of the Arab uprisings, substantial attention has been devoted to social movements and social media activism as well as practices of civil resistance or citizen protest. While all of these phenomena may have been involved in facilitating social accountability, few of these activities have been labelled or recognised as SA initiatives. This may be due, at least partially, to an obsession with (waves of) democratization and authoritarian rule. A shift in attention is needed to move beyond authoritarianism, and there are good reasons to believe that micro-level politics plays a major role in producing state-level outcomes – as such, 'informal networks are an important variable for political change' (Medani, 2013: 223).

As a matter of fact, several scholars have studied either state-led (Bellin, 2012; Kamrava, 2014; Stacher 2015; Thyen, 2018) or citizen-led responses to the 2011 uprisings (Achcar, 2013; Cambanis and Mokh, 2020; Gerges, 2016; Tripp, 2013). Consequently, we have seen a proliferation of studies on the strategies of governments (the counter-revolution paradigm, the deep-state syndrome, regime re-making tactics) on one hand and on grassroots actors (youth, Islamists, women, CSOs) on the other. Most of these efforts echo how scholars have traditionally kept track of social change and democratic governance progress in MENA – either by investigating pressures from below (Bayat, 2010; Ben Néfissa et al., 2005; Brynen et al., 1998; Cronin, 2008; Halpern, 1963; Hudson, 1977; Khadduri, 1970; Sharabi, 1988) or by adopting the view from above (Binder, 1964; Dekmejian, 1975; Issawi, 1956; Perthes, 2004; Salamé, 1994; Valbjørn and Bank, 2012; Zartman et al., 1982).

However, very few studies published after the 2011 watershed have offered a more comprehensive picture of social change by combining perspectives and integrating both top-down and bottom-up dynamics. It is evident, nevertheless, that grassroots activism does not exist in a void and cannot, therefore, be separated from policy making at the higher level. We believe that SA mechanisms are particularly relevant to documenting and understanding power shifts in state–citizen relations (Bergh, 2019; Heydemann, 2020). Successful SAIs clearly illustrate how such challenges to the status quo are never the result of only one set of actors getting actively engaged but rather, as suggested by Grandvoinnet et al. (2015), that such shifts in state–society relations are always the outcome of interactions between civic mobilization and state action.

Having outlined the theoretical and conceptual lenses, and having made the case for the need for research on SAIs in the MENA region, we now propose three (inter-related and sequential) thematic research lines that we hope will be taken up by the academic and policy community.

6 Social accountability in MENA state–society interactions: three thematic future research lines

Theme 1 – Stocktaking: meanings, types and contexts

The Arabic language has at least two words for accountability: *muḥāsaba* and *musā'ala*. Because the former revolves around the notion of accounting or auditing, it can be associated with the principle of reckoning. The second term conveys the idea of questioning and is closer, therefore, to the concept of answerability and responsibility. A third word, *shafāfīya*, is widely used as an equivalent of transparency. The very existence of this rich vocabulary (Deladrière and Findley, n.d.; Abadzi 2017) indicates the need for a common understanding of what kind of activities we are labelling here as social accountability (*muḥāsaba/musā'ala ijtimā'īya*). The first imperative is thus to conduct a thorough stocktaking exercise to help clarify what can be understood by SA initiatives in MENA and to what extent SA means the same thing to all the people involved. Crucially, we must ask how citizens engaged in SA mechanisms refer to it and ascribe meaning to it.

When he was still a member of the opposition, Abdelilah Benkirane, Morocco's first-ever Islamist prime minister, insisted on improving accountability in public governance by vowing to stop the Makhzen's[3] 'wheeling and dealing' (Beaugé, 2008) and by framing transparent decision making as a sharia-inspired obligation. Although several innovative measures were taken under his premiership (2011–17), Benkirane's party (the PJD) stands accused nowadays of having made only limited progress, 'particularly related to anticorruption, the judiciary, and the structural economy' (Fakir, 2018). This mixed record of Moroccan moderate Islamists is echoed across the region, even though there is considerable variation depending on whether one looks at the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or at Tunisia's Ennahda. Indeed, based on historical evidence stretching back beyond the 2011 uprisings, many have come to 'perceive the radical Islamist model as a failure in terms of bringing either prosperity or establishing accountability' (Angrist, 2013 citing Goldstone, 2011).

However, to dismiss the attempts of Islamist parties to bring about accountable governance in the societies they serve by simply pointing at the meagre results so far is a form of myopic reasoning. Such logic fails to acknowledge the fact that many religiously inspired political actors have integrated calls for accountability into their discourse. They are by no means alone anymore: secular forces have also been deeply involved in campaigns to bring down Arab autocrats and in protesting against self-serving elites. From Algeria to Jordan and from Beirut to Rabat, we have seen ordinary citizens

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[3] The Makhzen is considered the principal locus of political power in Morocco: it is an informal network operating between the palace and its clients – especially the king's advisers, business elites, high-ranking bureaucrats, the security apparatus and loyal traditional or tribal leaders (Hissouf, 2016: 43 cited in Vollmann et al., 2020).

push previously established 'red lines' in piling pressure on incumbents across ideological, socio-economic or cultural divides.

The very threat of challenges to power holders is shaking up the region, and one major question in this respect is: what is the language used to extend the boundaries of citizen power? This should be taken very literally, by looking at the vocabulary employed by protesters. The obvious example here is the speedy diffusion of slogans acting as cognitive shortcuts in periods of uncertainty (Weyland, 2012). Besides, the language of change obviously also begs questions as to which action format proved successful (or not), where and in which circumstances? When we conduct this stocktaking exercise, can we identify any emerging patterns in the SA mechanisms deployed across MENA? For example, are widgets more numerous than watchdog initiatives?

Finally, there is wide recognition in the MENA literature that context matters considerably in understanding state–society relations. Since this has long been a feature of Middle East Studies, we may wonder whether this due attention to contextual factors helps us to differentiate between various types of context that may be more or less amenable to successful SA interventions. Can we distinguish types of contexts that are more conducive to successful SA than others? And what about the actors: are political activists or international donors the main agents of SA in MENA? How do these actors relate to each other?

Summary of Theme 1 – Stocktaking: meanings, types and context
- Local terminologies, understandings and meanings for SA.
- What kind of activities are we labelling as SA? Widgets and watchdogs in MENA, e.g. Islamists *vs* secularists driving accountability: (how) does ideology/culture/religion matter in state–society interactions?
- Can we differentiate between various types of context? Do certain types of contexts (e.g. more or less authoritarian systems) trigger corresponding types of SA?
- There is wide recognition in MENA literature that context matters. Given this due attention to contextual factors, can we speak of any emerging patterns in SA mechanisms?

Core concepts: Context differentiation; *muhāsaba/musā'ala*; widgets and watchdogs

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Theme 2 – Analysing outcomes: opening up or constraining citizen empowerment?

The fact that accountable governance has become a standard narrative of so many reform-minded public and private actors across the MENA region since 2011 reinforces our intuition that SA could amount to the kind of new common denominator in micro-level activism that leading scholars urged us to look for in the wake of the Arab uprisings. In particular, students of MENA societies were encouraged to 'develop comparative studies that think creatively about connections across cases [by exploring], for example, the spread of notions of legal accountability and how discourses […] adopt new tropes' (Schwedler, 2015: 151). Indeed, the increased attention on citizen participation in social accountability configurations seems a good starting point from which to evaluate both the legacy of and the follow-up to the 'modest harvest' of the 2011 revolts (Brownlee et al., 2013).

One big and obvious question in this respect is, of course, to what extent can this discursive shift and the prominence of SA bring real and lasting social change to MENA societies often (and still) marked by authoritarian rule? This in turn requires an assessment of what SA initiatives contribute, in net terms, to the advancement of civic freedoms and social justice. Can SA mechanisms trigger genuine, deep reform that benefits large swathes of citizens? How do SA initiatives perform in regard to their intended objectives, and do they generate any unintended outcomes? Such questions seem particularly relevant against the backdrop of the well-documented 'window-dressing' tendencies of authoritarian leaders who, during the 1990s and 2000s, notoriously paid lip-service to agendas of democratic and market reform only to further strengthen their grip on power (Heydemann, 2007; Hinnebusch, 2006; Schlumberger, 2007). As Salamé observed long ago (1994), democratic reform has often been abused by rulers in order to buy social peace. Indeed, since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, MENA governments have used state of emergency laws to crack down (even) harder on regime critics (see Lynch, 2020).

We must, therefore, remain vigilant and ask whether SA constitutes merely the latest fashion on behalf of international donors – a trend that leaders ostensibly embrace, only in order to tacitly preserve their domestic and foreign coalitions of survival (Yom and Gause, 2012). The question at hand is thus whether SA can really expand the invited and created space for citizen empowerment or if, rather, it may give way to forms of authoritarian accountability and accountable authoritarianism (Tadros, 2018)?

'Authoritarian accountability' is a label used here for situations in which authoritarian systems of governance are kept intact or even strengthened by being associated with Western-style accountability programmes because the latter lack the teeth of Fox's 'sandwich' strategy to genuinely threaten the status quo. Instead of threatening authorities, such SA initiatives generate win–win situations for donors and governments alike: the former can tick the 'doing accountability' box and the latter can project an image of improved state–citizen relations. Such programmes can be interesting exercises in applying SA

tools on the ground, but they are cosmetic and hollow when celebrated as if they are genuine expressions of citizen power (Tadros, 2018).

FIGURE 1
An authoritarian accountability continuum
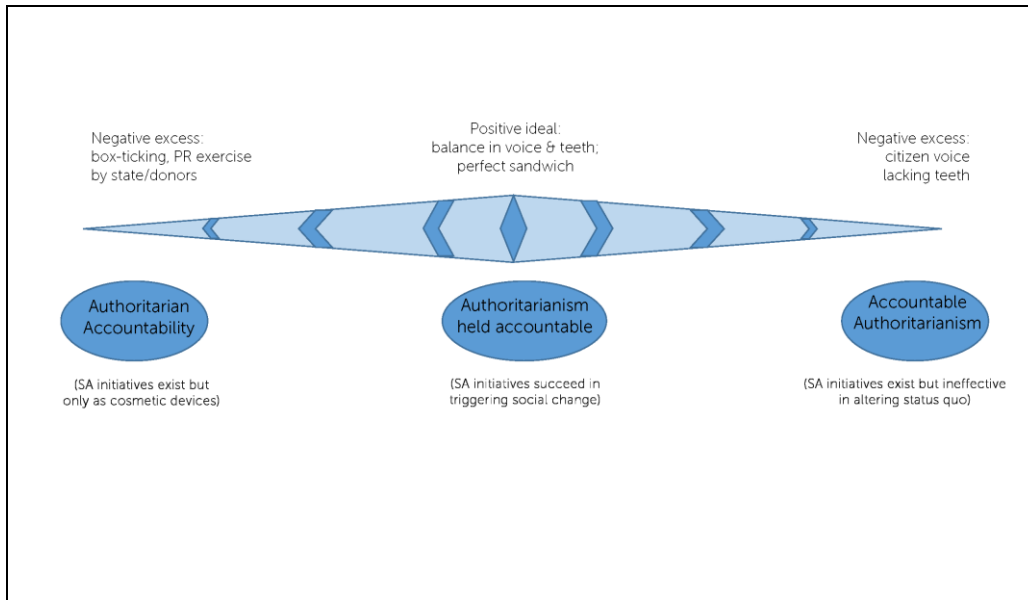
At the other end of the spectrum is 'accountable authoritarianism' – in which pockets of people or sub-units within any given governance system lend voice to citizen-led demands. Authorities may or may not admit it, but their degree of responsiveness does not alter the status quo. If the problem with authoritarian accountability is that it is an apolitical, technical fix, the problem with accountable authoritarianism is that it does not fit the critics' conceptual framing of what qualifies as a successful SA outcome. In other words, while accountable authoritarianism may succeed at the level of civic mobilization it may fail to trigger the tangible, long-term improvements campaigners aspired to. The tragedy here is that such accountability struggles tend to be overlooked or forgotten because they do not bring about lasting power shifts in state–citizen relations (Tadros, 2018, and see Figure 1).

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> **Summary of Theme 2 – Analysing outcomes: opening up or constraining citizen empowerment?**
>
> - What is the net impact of implementing SA initiatives in MENA contexts marked by authoritarian rule?
>   In particular, how have SA interventions affected the power balance in state–citizen relationships?
> - Intended *vs* unintended outcomes: Can SA reinforce autocrats/established elites rather than hold them to account? Depending on type of SA mechanism, objectives may differ.
> - Conceptualizing impact: how useful is it to think of a continuum between accountability and authoritarianism? Can we define alternative criteria that hold across cases to capture how SA initiatives differ? How can we differentiate between meaningful social change and cosmetic tokenism? Is there a trade-off between visibility and empowerment?
>
> Core concepts: Net impact; unintended outcomes; continuum between authoritarianism and accountability; tokenism

Theme 3 – Theorizing: conditions for failure and success

One of the biggest challenges in making SA initiatives work in (and beyond) MENA is the question of scaling up: how to facilitate openings in the higher echelons of the governance pyramid when pressure builds from below? We hope that future research will contribute to burgeoning theories about which circumstances enable small-scale interventions to trigger virtuous cycles by coupling demand-side initiatives with matching institutional capacity and political will on the supply side.

Among the basic assumptions shared by advocates of SA measures is the conviction that by offering avenues of accountability (such as community score cards and grievance-redress mechanisms) and improved access to information (i.e. transparency, public disclosure) citizens and other stakeholders can experience better governance performances leading, ultimately, to a stronger rule of law, increased social justice and transformative development. The idea is that empowering citizens to hold elites accountable for their decisions eventually helps states become more responsive and less corrupt. Thus, most SA instruments have been devised to shift the burden of improving livelihoods from the highest level in the hierarchy of the state (i.e. mostly central governments and their regional representatives) towards the grassroots level, where previously marginalized citizens are then assisted to take the lead. It is well known, however, that 'the poorest and most vulnerable people who are the main target of social protection interventions are [often also] those worst-placed to generate the agency required to mobilise and hold public institutions to account' (Hickey and King, 2016: 1235).

In the eyes of some experts, therefore, SA approaches appear either hopelessly naïve or blatantly ineffective. As we have said, there are indications that SA mechanisms do not automatically yield the much-anticipated improvements in the quality of governance and in some cases may even lead to a sense of resignation or demobilization of public opinion. That is why recent strategies have started to look for catalysts of citizen empowerment at an intermediary level.

The role of intermediaries (elites, orders, cliques, brokers, middlemen, fixers) has long been acknowledged in Middle East Studies (Bill, 1973; Cammett, 2014; de Elvira et al., 2019; Denoeux, 1993; Gellner and Waterbury, 1977; Haenni, 2005; Hourani, 1968; Springborg, 1982; Wehrenfels, 2014). Clientelist networks are often associated with cronyism (Al-Ramahi, 2008; Cunningham and Sarayrah, 1994; Mohamed and Hamdy, 2008) or – unsurprisingly, perhaps – with authoritarianism (Lust, 2009). Informal networks are thus seen as 'a primary cause of political instability' (Denoeux, 1993: 5) or as obstacles to development (Barnett et al., 2013; Loewe et al., 2008). Indeed, a common assumption in the literatures on both democratization and clientelism is that a reliance on brokers curtails the political agency of voters.

In a recent extension to the literature on clientelism, in which intermediaries often have a negative connotation, an increasing number of scholars has started to explore the potential benefits of brokers. Such informal proximity circuits are theorized to facilitate state–citizen exchanges across various societal contexts (Auerbach, 2016; Smith et al., 2012; Piper and von Lieres, 2015). Such studies emphasize the empowering dimensions of the mediation provided by brokers. Berenschot (2019) offers the analytical means to reconcile observations about 'perverse accountability' (Stokes, 2005) on one hand and the potentially enabling role of brokers on the other, by arguing that the capacity and willingness of voters to punish non-performing incumbents depends on the character of broker networks.

In short, 'democratization processes may have an informal dimension: when broker networks become more fragmented, institutionalized and levelled, citizens have a stronger capacity to hold their rulers to account' (Berenschot, 2019: 221). Broker networks are *fragmented* when more brokers compete with each other in offering services to citizens; they become *institutionalized* when citizens have access to them even in non-electoral times – e.g. through party-political affiliation. Finally, brokers are *levelled* with citizens when the recognition of brokers depends on the latter's capacity to effectively deliver services to citizens rather than on a superior socio-economic or religious status.

Reliance on or rejection of brokers and other kinds of mediators may thus yield valuable theoretical insights into which factors influence the success and failure of SA approaches.

In this respect, and moving from individual to collective brokers, we may wonder if the depth and breadth of CSO activity make a difference to SA outcomes. Some have argued (e.g. van Zyl, 2014) that CSOs can act as

intermediaries in order to ensure that transparency effectively leads to accountability – for instance by facilitating access to and circulation of information, by demanding accountability from government and by supporting formal and informal oversight actors in their demands for accountability (Al-Shbail and Aman 2018). In paying attention to this mediating function, we may wish to highlight the role of information (on the quality of services, public budgets and expenditures, etc.) in the state–citizen interface.

Summary of Theme 3 – Theorizing: Conditions for failure and success

- Based on a review of SA initiatives and the analysis of case studies, can we formulate any theoretical insights on what influences the success or failure of SA initiatives?
- Can we identify any factors (contextual drivers?) as decisive: How important is the role of information? Does the depth and breadth of CSO activity make a difference?
- Can we relate our lessons on SA in MENA to inform scholars and practitioners beyond MENA? Consider the role of informal democratization here: brokers can become actors of accountability under certain conditions.

Core concepts: nature of CSOs; role of brokers; (collective) intermediaries; information

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7 Conclusion

In this paper, we have reviewed the concept of social accountability in connection with Middle East Studies. We first mapped conceptualization attempts in the extant literature, highlighting how the notion of social accountability has gained currency in the analysis of most parts of the world but also how the MENA region has tended to be overlooked. This is astonishing given that attention to citizen-led protests in the Arab world peaked in the wake of the 2011 uprisings. Documenting dominant trends in the region, we then connected the literature on SAI with Middle East Studies scholarship and formulated a research agenda articulated around three main axes, hoping to extend this body of research.

We are conscious of the fact that as researchers hailing from northern Europe, and despite our long-standing professional and personal connections to the MENA region (Lebanon and Morocco in particular), we run the risk of being perceived as wanting to impose a Western-centric research agenda on the MENA region and on researchers based there. We thus sincerely hope that the ideas we have presented here are read as we intend them to be read – namely, as a well-meant attempt to push the boundaries of our knowledge, conscious of the fact that our ideas and the way in which we have formulated them reflect our specific positionalities and educational backgrounds. In the spirit of the research tradition at ISS, we thus plead for feedback and inputs from our colleagues in the region to help us take an emic (rather than etic) approach to studying social accountability in the MENA region, which could facilitate the co-creation of knowledge. At a practical level, given the current Covid-19-related travel restrictions, we also fully recognize that we are more than ever dependent on researchers based in the region to engage with our ideas and make them their own to the extent that they perceive them to be useful.

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