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Introduction: Social Accountability and Civic Innovation in the Arab World

Ward Vloeberghs and Sylvia I. Bergh

Abstract The Middle East and North Africa region has been absent from stocktaking exercises on social accountability initiatives (SAI), an umbrella term to designate citizen-led tools aimed at socio-political change. We argue that this sidelining is unwarranted, given the proliferation of participatory governance initiatives, civic associations and popular mobilisation in Arab societies after 2011. Whereas the struggle for improved

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accountability in the Arab world remains under-researched, analysis of authoritarian regime tactics has proliferated. The fact is, however, that many Arab societies have experimented with mechanisms to apply political pressure on corrupt elites while international donors have launched diverse SAIs, including community score cards and participatory and gender-responsive budgeting initiatives. In this chapter, we first identify this double gap: not only has the literature on SAIs overlooked the MENA region but scholarship on the Middle East has largely failed to recognise initiatives launched across the region over the past decade as SAIs. Then, we aim to address the blind spot of Arab SAI's as pathways towards improved governance. Finally, we present an overview of extant literature and introduce a set of four research questions to better understand what social accountability means for people on the ground. These questions focus on the various meanings of social accountability (*musā'ala* vs *muhāsaba*), its modes of mobilisation, the responses from authorities to such initiatives and their overall outcomes.

Keywords Public service delivery · Social accountability · Democratisation · Civic innovation · Middle East North Africa region · Arab world

1.1 BACKGROUND

On 25 April 2022, Walid Fayyad, Lebanon's Energy Minister, had just finished dinner when he was physically assaulted outside a Beirut restaurant by a well-known activist ('Lebanon Energy Minister shoved', 2022). Although other activists were quick to condemn this aggression, by early 2023, headlines of desperate citizens confronting politicians or violently reclaiming their bank deposits had become scarily mainstream in Lebanon. Such incidents of 'direct accountability' show what can happen when livelihoods collapse. Fortunately, misgovernance does not only inspire harm or destruction; it can also spark unprecedented unity and cooperation.¹ This is as true in Lebanon as in other (Arab) countries, sometimes in settings where it is least expected (Findell-Aghnatiou & Majzoub, 2022; 'Vive la résistance', 2023).

Over the past decade, ordinary citizens across the Arab world have increasingly taken matters of public service delivery into their own hands

amidst what they perceive as betrayal by corrupt officials, impunity of elites incapable of good governance and lawmakers unwilling of democratic reform. This book focuses on the wide variety of international donor programmes, community-level participatory governance mechanisms, civil society activism, grassroots mobilisation and social movements aimed at forcing public actors to explain or justify their conduct. Below, we discuss such efforts from a cumulative perspective under the umbrella term of social accountability (SA) and analyse them as tools of civic innovation contributing to socio-political change.

To clarify the concept of SA, we can say that accountability is about doing what you say and saying what you do. A more scholarly definition views accountability as ‘a relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has an obligation to explain and justify his or her conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass judgment, and the actor may face consequences’ (Bovens, 2007, p. 450). Given the historic transformation of political authority in Western Europe from personal to institutional rule, the principle of accountability was usually closely associated with formal mechanisms fixing taxation and representation: to determine the level of taxation, the monarch needed a count of his or her citizens’ possessions. Later, as the balance of power shifted from king or queen to parliament, the legislative came to hold the executive to account.

Adding the adjective ‘social’ to accountability further emphasises the relational nature of the concept by drawing attention to the possibility of involving ordinary citizens in this process. Citizens are often organised at the level of a (local) community or in common interest associations at the level of the neighbourhood that hold authorities, such as municipalities or ministries, to account. Furthermore, SA implicitly refers to two additional dimensions often found in the scholarly literature: answerability and enforceability (Kuppens, 2016). Answerability is an *ex ante* dimension of accountability, since it refers to the obligation of officials to inform citizens about policy measures and justify why they are needed. By contrast, enforceability is an *ex post* dimension of accountability since it refers to the sanctions (formal or informal) that can be imposed on power holders who transgress their mandate.

However, these two dimensions are not always present in equal measure across social accountability initiatives (SAIs), and scholars continue to disagree about which of these (the practice of explaining or the ability to punish) is the most crucial condition for accountability to exist. Moreover, SAIs can vary significantly in ambit and format,

ranging from participatory budgeting—where citizens have the power to co-decide on government budget allocation (Wampler et al., 2021)—to grievance-redress or transparency mechanisms, where citizens target specific power holders or institutions to exact more information or redress (Vian, 2020), to contentious action as part of social movements, which targets a wider class of elites (Almén & Burell, 2018; Volpi & Clark, 2019).

Given the diverse operationalisations of SA and because of its broad use across actors, sectors and regions, one key question we address below and in the rest of this book is: what does SA look like for people on the ground in the Arab world?

1.2 A ‘DOUBLE GAP’ IN THE SCHOLARLY LITERATURE

To a Tunisian street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi, accountability seemed so unattainable that he set himself on fire in protest at the harassment and humiliation local authorities subjected him to, including the confiscation of his wares. His tragic act of desperation—staged in a modest Tunisian town in December 2010—proved the catalyst for Tunisia’s so-called Jasmine Revolution and triggered subsequent uprisings across the Middle East that became known as the Arab Spring (Bayat, 2017; Lynch et al., 2022).

The decade since the Arab Spring protests of 2011 has often been analysed, especially by Western scholars, as a popular call for democratisation (Ahmed & Capoccia, 2014; Howard & Hussain, 2013; Huber & Pisciotta, 2022). It is said that Arab regimes responded to this rallying cry for democracy with a counter-revolution consisting of repression or state violence (Allinson, 2022; Al-Rasheed, 2011; Heydemann & Leenders, 2013; Hinnebusch, 2018; Stacher, 2020).

However, to define the Arab uprisings as a wave of democratisation is a mischaracterisation of developments (Abushouk, 2016; Allam et al., 2022; Maboudi, 2022). Democracy was never an explicit demand of the regional protests. Rather, demonstrators asked for dignity, freedom, social justice and an end to corruption. The deficit of a democratisation prism of analysis has been further underlined by Tunisia’s backsliding under President Kais Saied, even though the country had been hailed as the only one that successfully transitioned from autocracy to democracy (Bou Nassif, 2022; Ridge, 2022).

In this book, we argue that rather than a wave of democratisation, the uprisings in Arab societies highlight a remarkable drive of citizens and local communities to challenge the social status quo by seizing the opportunity to launch local campaigns grounded in concrete actions—ranging from leaderless protests to new formats of mediating state power. The willingness and capacity of citizens to organise themselves *despite* authoritarian rule or dysfunctional public governance structures have been remarkable over the past 15 years or so. Across the Arab Middle East and North Africa (MENA), citizens have launched campaigns to directly improve public service delivery or hold public officeholders to account. In this book, we study these dynamics and those initiatives by ordinary citizens and small associations, as they are the prime agents of what we label ‘social accountability initiatives’.

We maintain that the scholarly literature suffers from a double gap: not only has the literature on SAIs neglected the MENA region, but there has also been a blind spot when it comes to SAIs. Below, we argue that the limited attention to SA in Arab countries is unwarranted, given the proliferation of participatory governance initiatives, civic associations and popular mobilisation in the decade after 2011.

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 with the uneven distribution of civic, political and social citizenship rights 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 key Arab regimes’ counter-revolutionary tactics to suppress demands for social change (Bulliet, 2015; Hinnebusch, 2018; Josua & Edel, 2021). 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 the MENA 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 decentralisation to the municipal level and the establishment or strengthening of economic and social councils or ombudsman offices. Similarly, international donors have scaled up their work on SAIs, including community score cards in the education (Egypt and Morocco), health (Egypt) and water fields (Yemen). Elsewhere, participatory and gender-responsive budgeting initiatives have been launched.

In short, even though SAIs 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 transformations of the status quo. 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 (Cavatorta & Clark, 2022; Dunne, 2020). On the contrary, some of the collisions that erupted in 2011 have resurfaced or given rise to renewed forms of popular protest in 2019 and beyond, from Sudan to Algeria. Hereafter, we review the existing literature on SA in more detail to highlight the gap this book intends to fill.

Geographically speaking, stocktaking exercises on SA have documented an impressive corpus of initiatives across many regions of the world, including Africa (Claasen & Alpin-Lardiés, 2010; Dewachter et al., 2018; Kanyane et al., 2022; McNeil & Mumvuma, 2006), Asia (Ankamah, 2016; Cammett et al., 2022; Dhungana, 2020; Peisakhin & Pinto, 2010; Sirker & Cosic, 2007), Europe (Kurze & Vukusic, 2013; Loia & Maione, 2022; Novikova, 2007) and Latin America (Gonçalves, 2014; Mainwaring & Welna, 2003; Peruzzotti & 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; Hansen et al., 2019; Pandey et al., 2009; Reinikka & Svensson, 2011) to food security (Mutersbaugh, 2005; Pande & Houtzager, 2016; Razzaque et al., 2023) and public health (Björkman Nyqvist et al., 2016; Jacobs et al., 2020; Lodenstein et al., 2017; Mahmud, 2007) to natural resources (Isham & Kahkonen, 2002; Mejía Acosta, 2013; Moldalievá & Heathershaw, 2020; Ribot & Larson, 2005) or finance (El-Halaby & Hussainey, 2015; Neu et al., 2019). Yet, here too, very little attention has been paid to initiatives conducted in the MENA, which were initially concentrated in education, health or water management and municipal governance (Bousquet et al., 2012).

This is not to say that no attempts were made to explore SA strategies in the MENA region. Fully in line with other parts of the world, international donors and practitioners preceded scholars in promoting and analysing SA in the MENA (Atammeh et al., 2013; Beddies et al., 2011; Bousquet et al., 2012; Meknassi, 2014; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2004). The World Bank in particular has sponsored the establishment of an Arab regional network to complement its Affiliated Networks for Social Accountability (ANSA) initiated in 2006. This materialised, spurred on by unfolding developments, in November 2012.

Although the 2011 uprisings brought momentum to the politics of accountability in the region, the post-Arab Spring literature was mostly channelled into topics linked to democratic transitions and (post-) authoritarianism. This has come to include a wide array of issues, such as authoritarian upgrading, regime survival, counter-revolution, sectarianism, migration (Abdel-Samad & Flanigan, 2019) and Western (EU, US) policy towards the MENA (e.g. Bouris et al., 2022; Dalacoura, 2012; Freyburg, 2011; Freyburg & Richter, 2015; Hashemi & Postel, 2017; Hassan, 2015; Heydemann & Leenders, 2013; Roccu & Voltolini, 2019; 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 begun to change. When domestic developments became the object of focus, interest tended to cluster around themes such as citizenship (Alessandri et al., 2016; Butenschøn & Meijer, 2018; Chaland, 2013; Meijer & Zwaini, 2015), social movements (Beinin & Vairel, 2013; Geha, 2019; Rougier & Lacroix, 2015), Islamist parties (Cavatorta & Merone, 2013; Lynch & Schwedler, 2020; Vannetzel, 2017), spatial politics (Al Sayyad & Guvenc, 2015; Bogaert, 2018; Rabbat, 2012; Schwedler, 2013; Singerman, 2011), women (Allam, 2018; el-Husseini, 2016; Joseph & Zaatari, 2022) and youth (Herrera, 2014; Korany et al., 2016; Sika, 2017). Hence, even though scholars have started to explore how citizens across the MENA rethink institutional governance (Ahmed & Capoccia, 2014) and improve socio-economic well-being through pressure from below (Harders, 2013; Volpi & Jasper, 2017), one decade after the Arab uprisings, to our knowledge, no systematic effort has zoomed in exclusively on SAIs.

A second reason this book squarely emphasises SA initiatives in the MENA 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 SAIs. In the wake of the Arab uprisings, substantial consideration has been given to social movements and social media activism as well as practices of civil resistance or citizen protest. While all these phenomena may have been involved in facilitating SA, few of these activities have been labelled or recognised as SAIs. This may be due, at least partially, to an obsession with (waves of) democratisation and authoritarian rule. A shift in attention is needed to move beyond authoritarianism. There are good reasons to believe that micro-level politics plays a major role in producing state-level outcomes—thus, ‘informal networks are an important variable for political change’ (Medani, 2013, p. 223).

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 & Mokh, 2020; Cavatorta & Clark, 2022; 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 remaking tactics) on the one hand and on grassroots actors (youth, Islamists, women, civil society organisations [CSOs]) on the other. Most of these efforts echo how scholars have traditionally kept track of social change and democratic governance progress in the 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; Maboudi, 2022; Perthes, 2004; Salamé, 1994; Valbjørn & 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 (Mako & Moghadam, 2021). 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; Loewe et al., 2021). Successful SAIs clearly illustrate how such challenges to the status quo are never the result of only one set of actors getting actively engaged; rather, as suggested by Grandvoignet et al. (2015), such shifts in state–society relations are always the outcome of interactions between civic mobilisation and state action.

In order to fill this gap in our knowledge, the book proposes a systematic analysis of SA in three key countries by contextualising the contrasting understandings of SA in Arab societies. To do so, we explore what SA means in political as well as practical terms for people on the ground.

Some might argue that the three cases highlighted in this book are similar, since they share relatively open and pluralistic institutions, thus opening up questions on how SAIs have played out in authoritarian countries. We counter this by pointing out that Morocco and increasingly Tunisia are hardly liberal democracies and have their own authoritarian features. We do not intend to minimise the contributions of authoritarianism studies, but we wish to ensure that social dynamics and informal renegotiations of the social contract are not neglected. We did not include clear-cut authoritarian polities in the volume (such as Egypt and Syria), which have been studied elsewhere (Khodary, 2022a, 2022b; Sika, 2023). These studies have shown that even non-pluralistic regimes must contend with bottom-up demands to a certain degree.

Although we do address the often sobering net result (Chalcraft, 2021) of these manifestations of civic innovation, popular resistance or collaborative governance campaigns, we are most interested in the description and comparison of dynamics in which citizens take part to improve public service delivery, and their modes of action. In doing so, we question the common impression that accountability does not matter in Arab societies.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND STRUCTURE OF THE VOLUME

This volume engages several disciplinary fields, including public policy, Middle East Studies and development studies, to create a nuanced and effective framework underpinning the three case studies. Throughout the book and across the case studies, we document what SA means for stakeholders and practitioners, both conceptually and practically, by engaging four main subquestions linked to the multiple meanings of SA, mobilisation methods, responses by authorities and the outcomes of these civic innovation tools, respectively.

First, we set out to map the multiple meanings of the SA concept with the objective of gaining a grip on the terminology. Our working definition of SA is ‘any citizen-led action beyond elections that aims to enhance the accountability of state actors’ (Vloeberghs & Bergh, 2021, p. 8). With regard to the countries under review here, this often boils down

to six mechanisms: transparency, access to information, participation, answerability, rule of law and performance monitoring.

At this point, we must acknowledge the various terms which currently circulate to define accountability. The debate on how best to translate accountability into Arabic matters for our research because the two main corresponding words—*musāʿala* and *muḥāsaba*—each carry specific connotations. *Musāʿala* implicitly assumes questioning (*sāʿala*) and also hints at responsibility (*masʿūliya*), as the responsible is literally the one being asked (*al-masʿūl*). *Muḥāsaba*, on the contrary, has a connotation of reckoning and accountancy, as it relates more to settling a bill (*al-ḥisāb*). To cut a long discussion short, we note that SA is mostly translated as *musāʿala ijtīmāʿiyya*. This term has been popularised in recent years, thanks also to the institutional backing of actors like the World Bank and UNDP. As such, the chapters of this book document what people on the ground understand under this specific term.

A second subquestion relates to the mobilisation methods of SAIs. We noted how after 2010, ordinary citizens started to ask public officeholders questions, not only about corrupt or clientelist practices but also about waste management, unemployment, social injustice and human right abuses. Many of these initiatives, in our eyes, fit the definition of SAIs. We wanted to verify our intuition and document such initiatives to better understand and compare the driving forces behind these campaigns. As indicated, to us, the democratisation paradigm and corresponding answers from an authoritarianism perspective dominated by strategies of repression seemed inaccurate, or at least incomplete. It appeared oblivious to the possibility that—regardless of their actual success in bringing about social change—civic innovation efforts were a new phenomenon in the region. Thus, we became curious not only about the means of mobilisation but also about the authorities' reactions to it.

This is why the third subquestion focuses on responses by authorities: how did activists get officials to commit to providing better information or services? What kinds of responses did campaigns elicit from officials, and were these mostly cooperative or confrontational? And when there was collaboration of some kind, was this genuine or tokenism? This is where a discussion of co-optation and sabotage mechanisms becomes relevant.

The fourth and final subquestion of each chapter addresses the outcomes of the various mobilisation formats. As a logical extension of the third subquestion (official responses), the actual result of such

initiatives is discussed. Which measures work on the ground? Under what conditions do SAIs manage to improve public services for the local community? Do such (new) tools offer any (new) hope of achieving political change in contexts marked by corrupt elites or undemocratic decision-making?

We asked each chapter author(s) to systematically address these questions for their country context, i.e. in Morocco (Chapter 3), Tunisia (Chapter 4) and Lebanon (Chapter 5), using qualitative research methodologies (for details, please see the individual chapters). The next chapter (Chapter 2) briefly charts the surge of SA as a concept and then presents the theoretical framework used in the country case study chapters. Following the three case study chapters, we offer a conclusion (Chapter 6) in which we synthesise the differences and similarities among SAIs in the three countries and indicate what these insights tell us about SA in the wider region. We also engage in a comparative effort to assess the outcomes produced by SAI in the three countries by pointing to the issue of ‘lack of teeth’ and the difficulty of scaling up SAIs across local contexts. Here, we also highlight institutional obstacles to SA at the level of national authorities (some of which may be intentional) and the (mostly unintended) limitations caused by international donors’ funding and implementation modalities. Finally, this volume ends with some suggestions for (international, regional and national) policy-makers, donors, local stakeholders and practitioners to make SAIs more effective.

NOTE

1. For example, the advocacy organisation Kulluna Irada (we are all will[ingness]) is an initiative promoting political reform rooted in ‘transparency, accountability and citizen participation as major constituents of good governance’ (Kulluna Irada, n.d.).

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