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Arab LDCs:

main

developments

and trends



Political instability and poverty are root causes of Arab LDCs problems.



Arab LDCs are vulnerable to persistent transnational shocks, conflicts and crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and the potential effects of these shocks on their economies, humanitarian needs and population displacement.

The present chapter explains the basic criteria for inclusion in the international ‘least developed countries’ category. It outlines the main political developments that have affected the four Arab LDCs, namely Mauritania, Somalia, the Sudan and Yemen. These countries are also vulnerable to persistent transnational shocks, conflicts and crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, desert locust infestations, floods and droughts, which have significant implications for their economies, humanitarian needs and population displacement.

Least developed countries (LDCs) are the international community’s “poorest and weakest segment” accounting for “about 1.3 per cent of global GDP and less than 1 per cent of global trade and FDI”, and together constitute “about 13 per cent of world population.”⁵ LDCs face low socioeconomic development, weak development capacity, income inequality, and a lack of domestic financial resources. LDCs are also “vulnerable to external terms-of-trade shocks” and face “development constraints... insufficient domestic resource mobilization, low economic management capacity, weaknesses in programme design and implementation, chronic external deficits, high debt burdens and heavy dependency on external financing.”⁶

Classification as an LDC – a category which was established by the United Nations General Assembly in 1971 – is based on a country’s scores across three indicators, namely gross national income (GNI) per capita, the Human Assets Index and the Economic Vulnerability Index.⁷ Of the four Arab LDCs, Somalia, the Sudan, and Yemen have been included in the LDC category since 1971, and Mauritania was added in 1986.

Mauritania, Somalia, the Sudan and Yemen include about 90 million people (about 21 per

cent of the Arab population), according to data from the Committee for Development Policy (CDP) 2018 triennial review of the list of LDCs. Table 1 presents Arab LDCs’ performance against the three indicators that determine countries’ inclusion within and graduation from the LDC category.

In light of the 2011-2020 Istanbul Programme of Action (IPoA) that provides LDCs with a sustainable development strategy, and the 2030 Agenda, Arab LDCs have also been recipients of humanitarian and development foreign assistance.

As will be discussed below, these countries are also vulnerable to persistent transnational shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, desert locust infestations, floods and droughts as well as the potential implications of these shocks on their economies, humanitarian needs, and forced displacement. Addressing these shocks is dependent on international support and humanitarian aid.

The IPoA decade has been a period of serious political instability in all four countries. Many earlier crises worsened in intensity and importance while others emerged. By contrast, there were few improvements,

Table 1. Arab LDCs' performance in the LDC categorization indicators, 2018

	GNI per capita (dollars)	Human Assets Index (score)	Economic Vulnerability Index (score)
Inclusion threshold	1 025	60 or below	36 or above
Graduation threshold	1 230	66 or above	32 or below
Mauritania	1 230	46.9	39.9
Somalia	95	16.7	34.7
Sudan	1 452	53.0	49.2
Yemen	954	59.2	38.6

Sources: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *The Least Developed Country Category: 2018 Country Snapshots*, 2018.

the most notable one being the increased central government control in Somalia where a minimum of governance is re-emerging though the separatist tendencies remain strong and militant armed actors have not been defeated. Mauritania remains on the brink with its democracy weak and threatened, though economically it is graduating out of the LDC category. However, its instability is a fundamental reason to strengthen support to help its citizens avoid the fate of the likes of the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. The end of each decade has seen major upheavals and popular uprisings in Yemen and the Sudan respectively, whose outcome remains uncertain in both cases, though Yemen has now been in the grip of civil war for more than six years, while the Sudan is at the early stage of a transition which will, hopefully, have a better outcome, thanks to the lessons the Sudanese have learnt from the failure and fate of the uprisings of 2011 throughout the region. As of late 2020 the direction of the transition in

the Sudan remains uncertain in view of both internal and international political, financial and economic pressures on the transitional regime.

As is discussed in greater detail in the next section, instability and weakness have been the main characteristics of governance in all four countries, leading to greater or lesser levels of conflict. While Mauritania currently has an elected government, after a series of military coups, it is still characterised by high levels of inequality and poverty. However, the fact that three of these States are among the top ten fragile States demonstrates the seriousness of the situation and the extreme need for a change of course in the coming decade. Responsibility for their problems is shared between their own leadership and the international community's failure to provide financial and economic support to improve their people's living standards, issues discussed in detail in chapters 3 and 4.

A. Conflict in Yemen and Somalia

The Yemeni war is complex and entails active conflict and tension between various parties from local to regional and international actors. Close to six years of fighting have caused deep fragmentation within the country, with a multiplicity of political and military entities

fighting on numerous fronts throughout the country (figure 2). Ongoing conflict and fragmentation in Somalia.

In Somalia, the political leadership structure and security apparatus is fragmented.

Officially categorized as a federal republic, the political fragmentation of Somalia is evident in the issues between the central government in Mogadishu and the separatist ‘independent’ Somaliland as well as the ‘autonomous’ Puntland. Attempts at creating a federal structure cannot be said to have yet succeeded. Moreover, violence is also evident along inter-clan and intra-security institution lines.⁸

The ongoing conflict with al-Shabaab in Somalia, an official affiliate of Al Qaeda and its transnational network of militant armed actors, is one of the drivers of the country’s volatile

security situation.⁹ Al-Shabaab has been active for over thirteen years, and its continued presence in rural areas remains a challenge alongside the main one of re-establishing State authority over the entire country. The African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) is a regional peacekeeping mission by the African Union in cooperation with the United Nations. Its mandate is to mitigate the security threat caused by al-Shabaab and other armed groups, to support the provision of security and stability, as well as eventually to transfer the responsibility of maintaining security to the Somali security forces.¹⁰

B. Sudan in transition

After decades of conflict, the southern section of the Sudan became an independent State in 2011, but fighting and conflict remain active in Darfur and Kordofan; moreover, the independence of South Sudan deprived the regime in Khartoum of 75 per cent of its income from oil exports. Peaceful protests driven by diminishing economic and living standards situation in the Sudan erupted in December 2018 and led to the ousting of former authoritarian president Omar al-Bashir after a 30-year rule in 2019.¹¹ A transitional government was created with international recognition in 2019 and is scheduled to rule for three years with elections due to be held

in 2022. A Constitutional Document – aiming to “to dismantle the previous regime’s structure for consolidation of power and build a State of laws and institutions” – was signed between the Transitional Military Council and the Freedom and Change alliance representing key opposition groups in 2019.¹² In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, an economic emergency was declared in 2020, citing flooding, increased food insecurity and inflation with risks for protests re-emerging. On a positive note, in late 2020 the United States sanctions imposed on the country in June 2014 were lifted, and the positive implications expected as a result may emerge in the coming years.

C. Risks of political and security instability in Mauritania

Although the country is described as an “an impoverished country bedeviled by fragile politics, military factionalism, ethno-racial tensions, and budding militancy,” Mauritania also faces political and religious radicalization and risks destabilization with the potential return of Mauritanian combatants from other countries.¹³ Moreover, Mauritania continues to

face spill-over effects of the volatile security situation in neighbouring Mali by hosting refugees as well as prioritizing security in order to prevent terrorist attacks.¹⁴ Recent developments concerning the Western Sahara present a further risk to the stability of Mauritania, already badly affected by the rise of militant armed actors throughout the Sahel.