



# Executive Power in the Middle East

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# Executive Power in the Middle East \*

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## **Terms and Abbreviations**

MENA: Middle East and North Africa

HoS: Head of the State

HoG: Head of Government

Executive: HoS, HoG and the Cabinet

## Introduction

Following the Arab Spring, political processes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have received much public and scholarly attention - in particular the actions of the executives. This briefing paper provides a concise overview of the V-Dem data collected on the development of executive power in the MENA region from 1900 to 2012.<sup>1</sup> Regional averages are displayed and selected countries are analyzed in greater detail.<sup>2</sup>

Sustainable democratic institutions require that the executive does not undermine checks and balances within the political system by overreaching and undermining the legislature or the judiciary. Therefore, it is essential in order to gain a better understanding of the development of executive power over time, which is the purpose of this briefing paper.

V-Dem provides a unique database containing more than 350 indicators on democracy, including a variety of indicators measuring different aspects of the executive. The aim is to provide scholars, practitioners, and policy makers with more nuanced measures of democratic development, which were collected with the help of more than 2,600 country experts covering 173 countries.

Most of the countries in the MENA region have presidential systems, whereas others are monarchies. There are two variants/forms of monarchies in The Middle East: Either the king holds both the offices of the Head of Government (HoG) and the Head of State (HoS) or the monarch is formally restrained to the office of HoS. In general, multiparty elections for the Executive are not common in the region.

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1 Coppedge, Michael, John Gerring, Staffan I. Lindberg, Svend-Erik Skaaning, Jan Teorell, with David Altman, Michael Bernhard, M. Steven Fish, Adam Glynn, Allen Hicken, Carl Henrik Knutsen, Kelly McMann, Pamela Paxton, Daniel Pemstein, Jeffrey Staton, Brigitte Zimmerman, Frida Andersson, Valeriya Mechkova, and Farhad Miri. (2015). "V-Dem Codebook v5." Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project.

2 The MENA-region is delineated based on the politico-geographic classification by Hadenius and Teorell (2005) from V-Dem data set based on QoG) including the following countries: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Yemen (taken from V-Dem; based on the Quality of Government Standard Dataset (2013)).

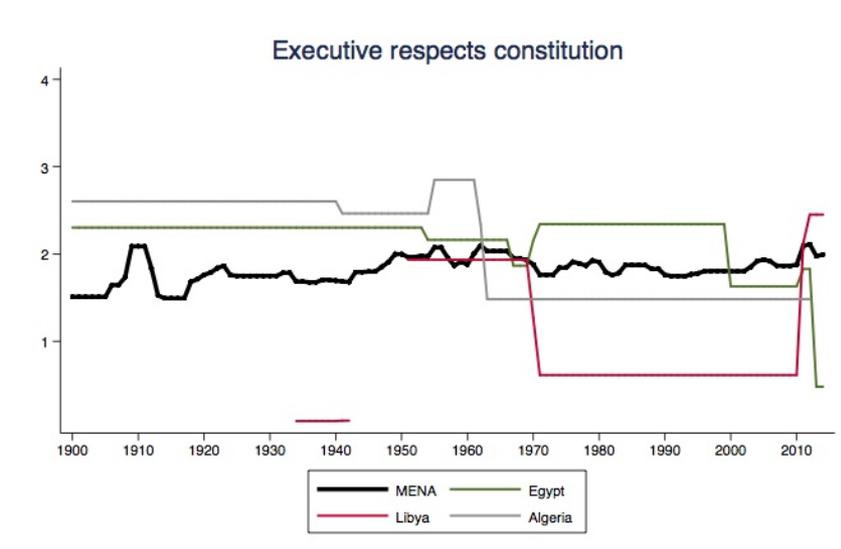
## Respect of Constitutions

In the MENA region, many executives demonstrate limited respect for the constitution. Limited/constrained legislative power allows the executive to both control the legislative agenda and restrict the power of the legislature.

**Figures 1a and 1b** plots the extent to which the executive respects the constitution from 1960 to 2012. The graph suggests that no executive in the Middle East fully respects the constitution of its country. Furthermore, the executive violates many provisions of the constitution without legal consequences in most countries of the region, even if they still respect certain provisions. Members of the executive in Jordan may, however, face legal consequences for violating the law.

Constitutions signal sovereignty after independence<sup>3</sup> but serves also to signal ideological preferences. Monarchies (e.g. Jordan and Morocco) tend to violate their constitutional provisions less often, which might be explained by the argument that in these contexts legislatures are often designed in a way to serve the interests of the head of state<sup>4</sup>.

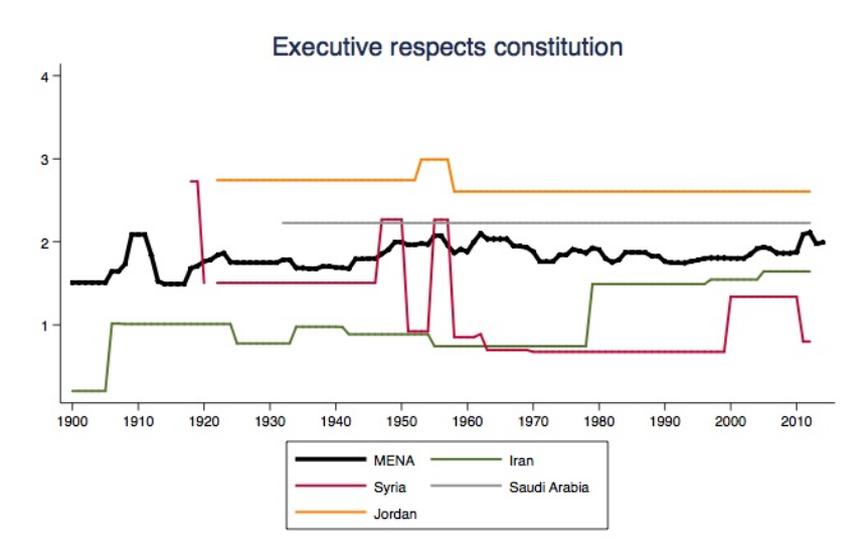
**Figure 1a: To what extent do executives respect the constitution?**



3 Nathan Brown, *Constitutions in a nonconstitutional world: Arab basic laws and the prospects for accountable government* (2001)

4 Ellen Lust, *Structuring conflict in the Arab World: incumbents, opponents, and institutions* (2007).

**Figure 1b: To what extent do executives respect the constitution?**



## Veto for Legislation

Figures 2a and 2b display the V-Dem data on the power of the head of state to veto legislation in the MENA region. Veto includes – according to the V-Dem definition - either a partial veto (concerning any parts of a bill) or package vetoes (in terms of whole bills). It captures whether the head of state is considered to hold this power in practice.

The data demonstrate that heads of state in practice have been able veto any legislation without any constraints in Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Egypt, during most of the studied time period. After the ousting of Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq, the legislative can override the veto by simple or absolute majority. The same applies to Tunisia and Libya after the Arab Spring. The V-Dem data also imply that, in Syria, the ability for the head of state to veto legislation could be overridden by a qualified majority prior to the rule of the Baath party.

Figure 2a: Can HoS veto legislations?

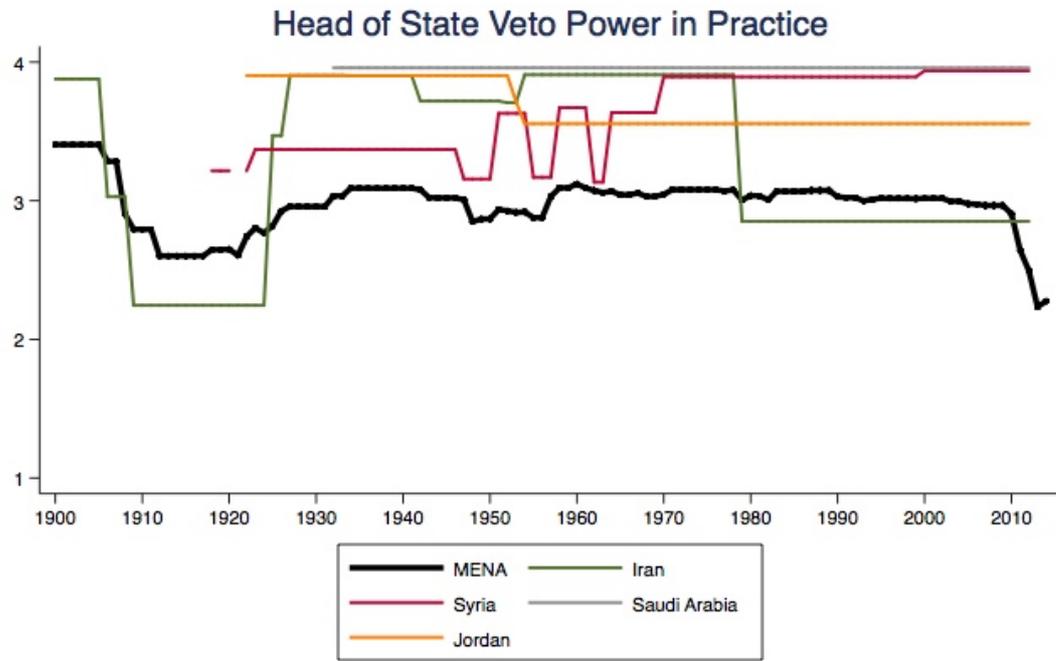
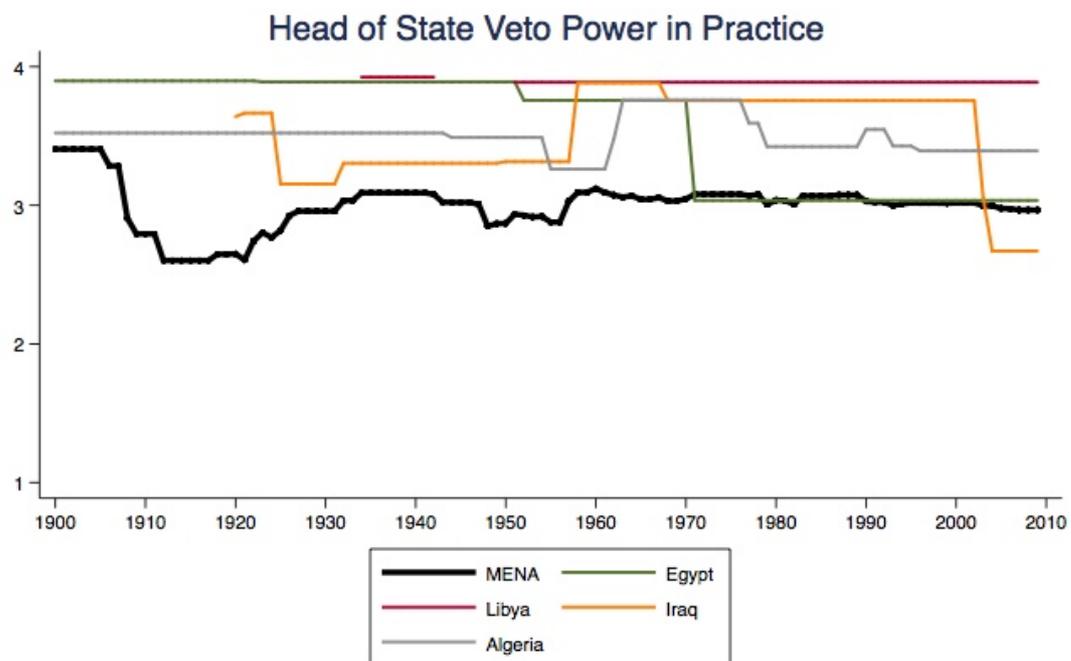


Figure 2b: Can HoS veto legislations?



## Proposing of Legislation

**Figures 3a and 3b** indicate the ability of the head of state to introduce legislation in practice. The lowest score (0) indicates that the HOS can propose bills in all policy areas. The score of 1 suggests that the HoS shares this power with legislatures and other bodies (e.g. Shura's council, Parliament, royal council). A score of 2 implies that the head of state cannot introduce legislation at all.

Lebanon is the only country in MENA where the head of state is prohibited from introducing bills. In all the other countries, the head of state is sharing the power to propose legislation with other bodies for most of the period analyzed. However, it has been a common practice in the region to ensure that the parliaments and other bodies are loyal to the heads of state.

**Figure 3a: Can HoS propose legislations?**

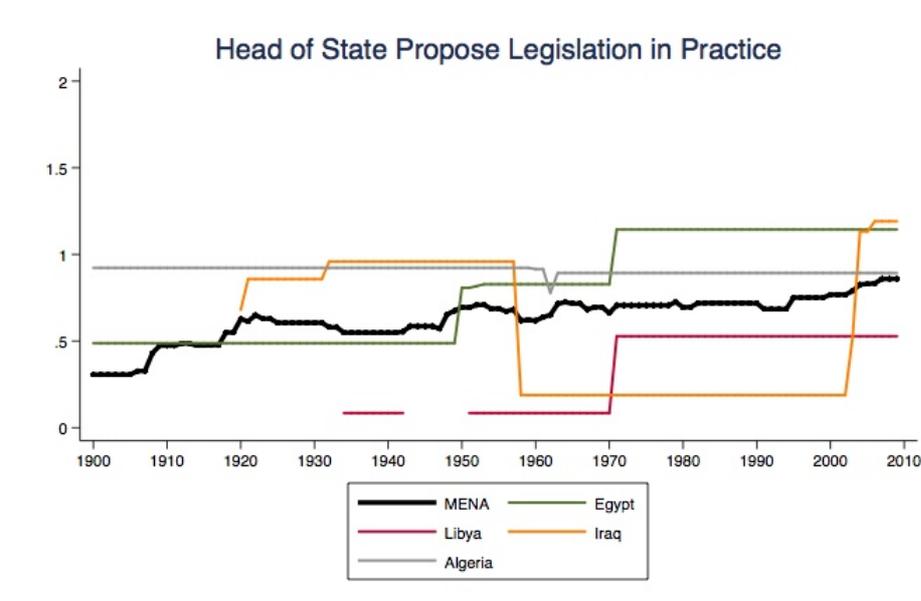
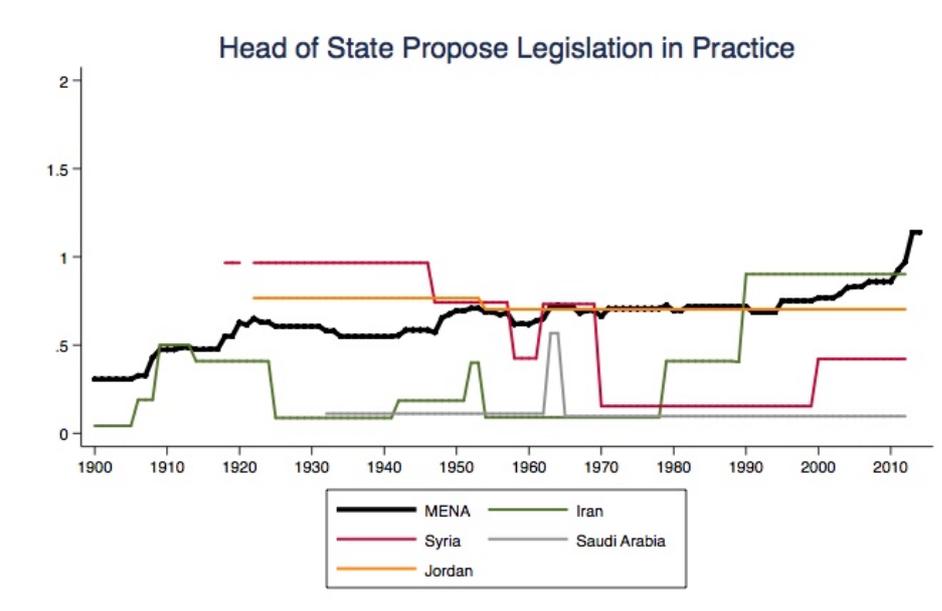


Figure 3b: Can HoS propose legislations?



## Ability to Dismiss Ministers

In Figures 4a and 4b, the ability of heads of state to dismiss ministers is depicted. In most countries of the region, heads of state have an unfettered power in practice to dismiss any minister at his discretion. Whereas in Iraq, Tunisia, Iran, and Libya this power was constrained after the revolutions in 2011.

Figure 4a: HoS ability to dismiss ministers

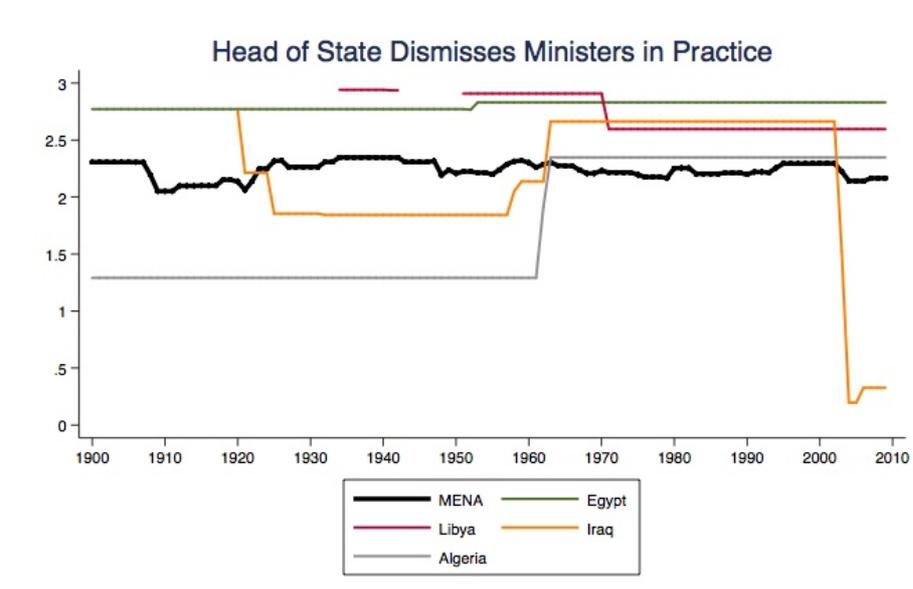
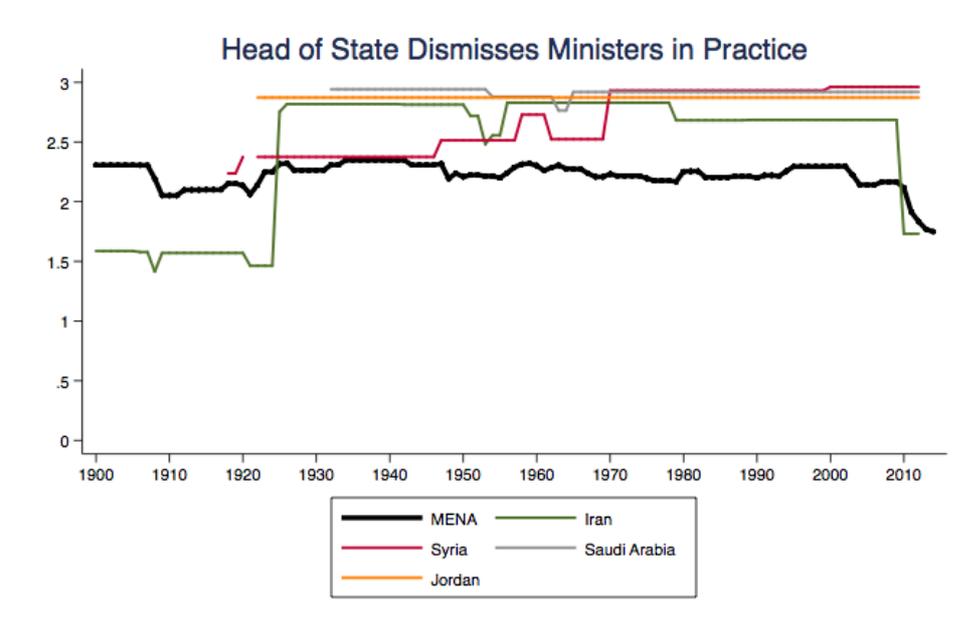


Figure 4b: HoS ability to dismiss ministers



## Oversight over Executive

In **Figure 6** we have plotted the Legislative Constraints on the Executive Index, measuring to what extent legislatures are capable, in practice, to question, investigate, and exercise oversight over the executive.

The data demonstrate a very low level of legislative constraints on the executive evaporated in Egypt after 2012. Conversely, the weak oversight and legislative constraints on executive in Tunisia changed dramatically for the better around 2012. Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran have relatively high levels of constraints on the executive. In Lebanon, this reflects the political power-sharing system – which is a form of consociationalism<sup>5</sup>.

5 Noel, Sid, ed. From power sharing to democracy: Post-conflict institutions in ethnically divided societies. Vol. 2. McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP, 2005.

Figure 6: Legislative constraints on executive in MENA

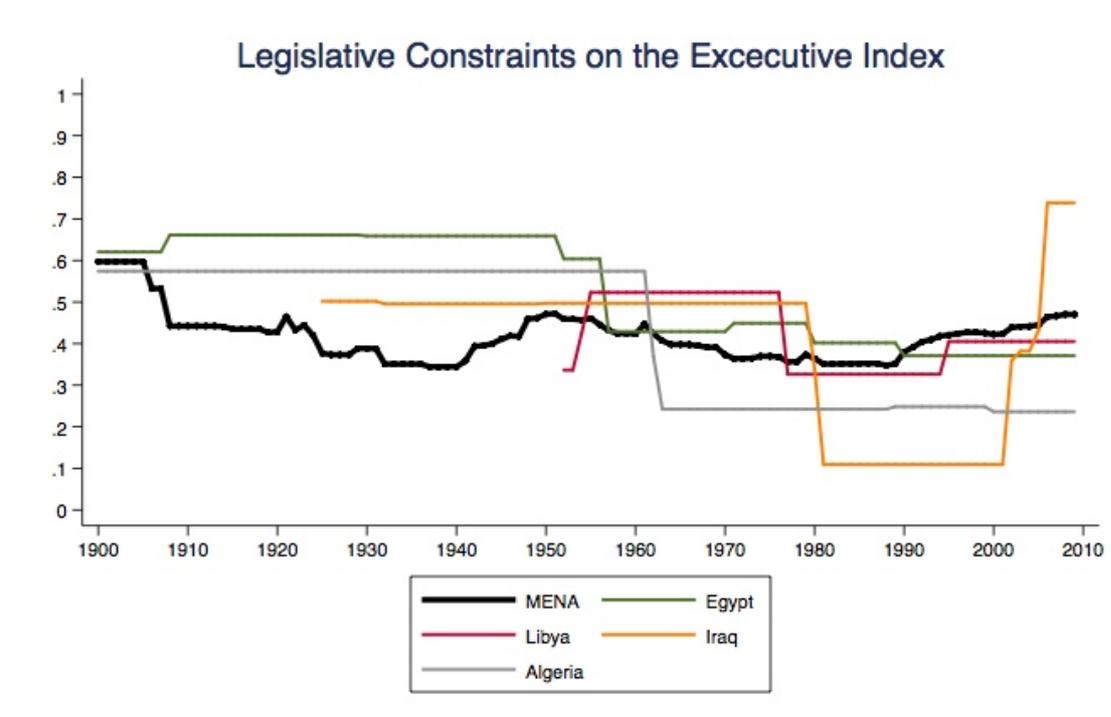
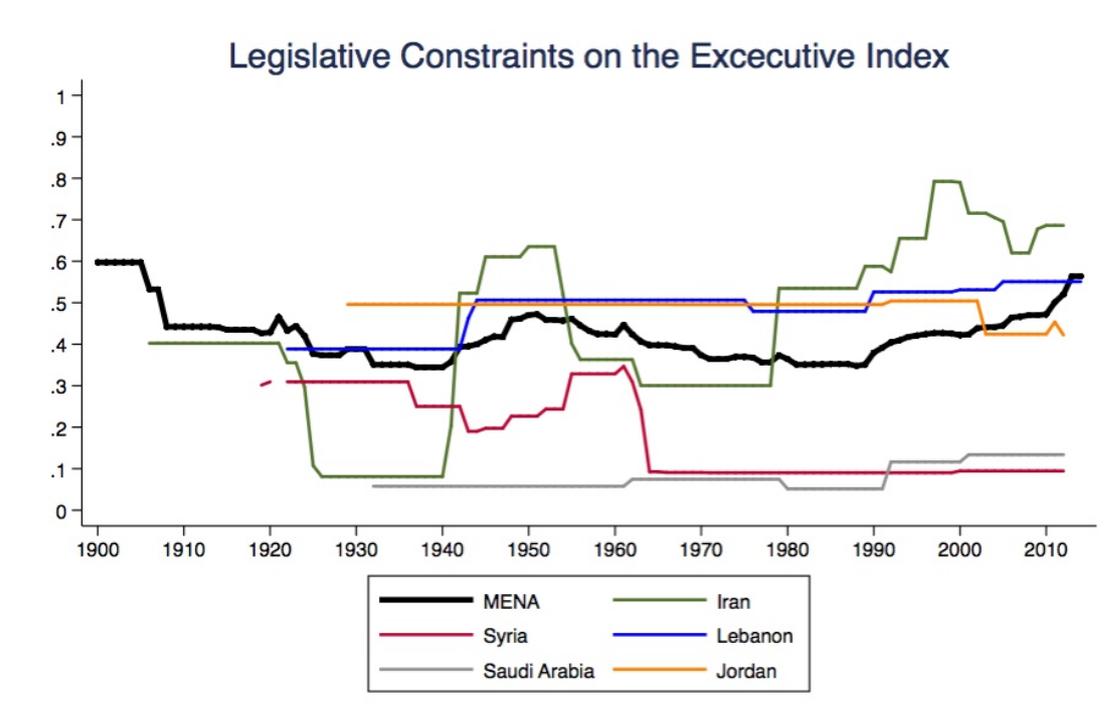


Figure 6b: Legislative constraints on executive in MENA



## Corruption of the Executive

Corruption, in particular corruption in the executive, appears to be widespread across the MENA region, according to the data. The V-Dem indicator used in this brief (**Figure 7a, 7b**) measures how routinely members of the executive or their agents grant favors in exchange for bribes, kickbacks or other material inducements. The scale ranges from 0 - indicating executive bribery to be the routine - to 4 - implying that it rarely happens.

V-Dem data in **Figures 7a and 7b** indicate that executive corruption is relatively frequent in all of the MENA countries covered in this paper. Only in Tunisia, the situation improves significantly after the Arab Spring. In Syria, the data demonstrate high levels of executive corruption throughout the studied time period, but the country is not alone.

**Figure 7a. Executive Corruption in MENA**

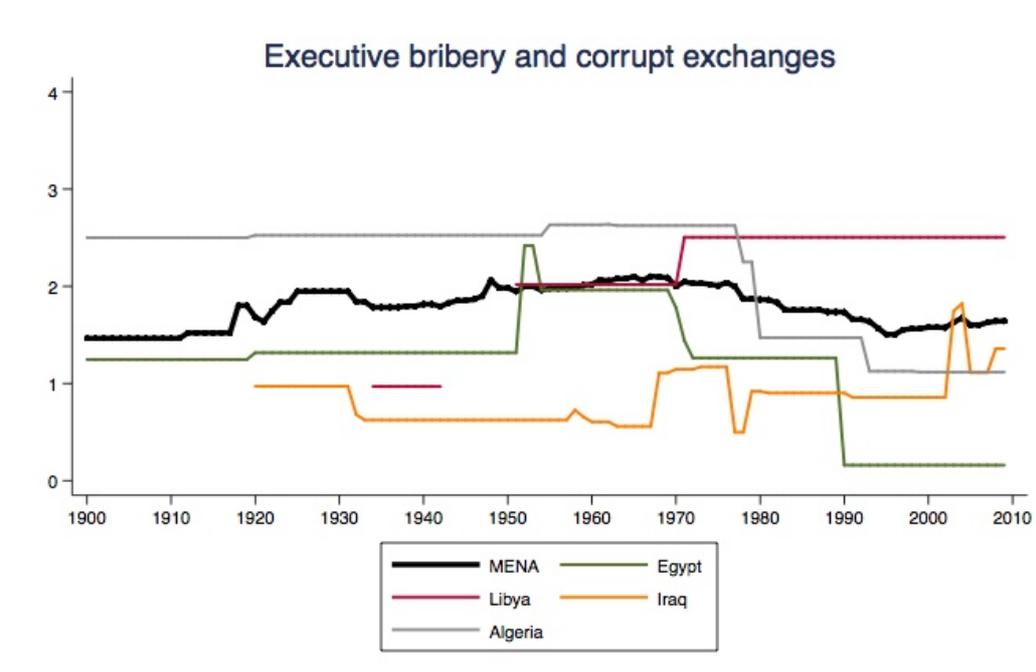
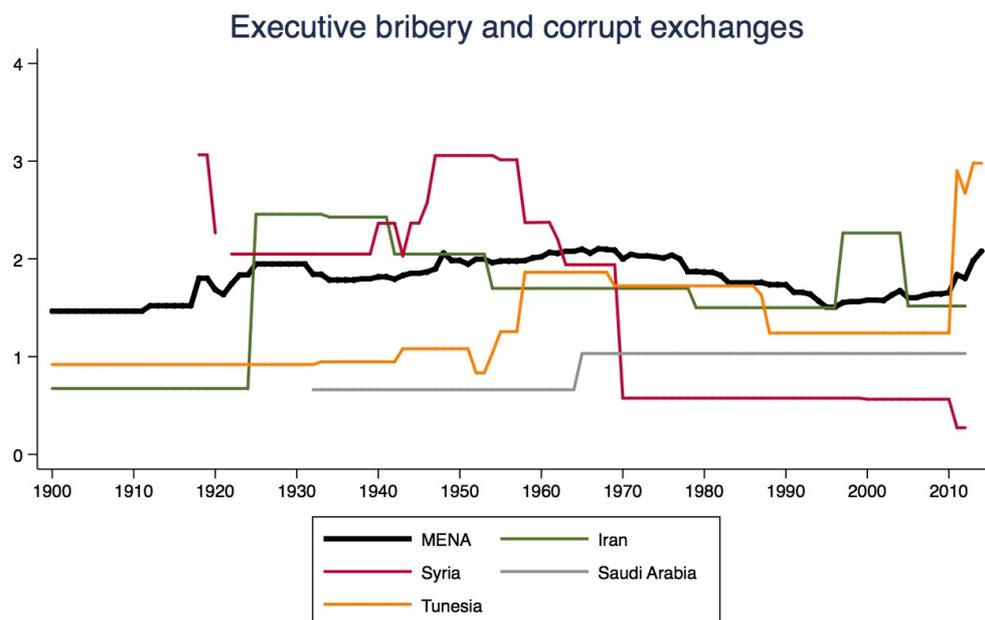


Figure 7b. Executive Corruption in MENA



## Conclusion

This briefing paper reports on several V-Dem indicators on executive power in the MENA region. Extremely strong executive powers have been wide-spread across the region over long periods of dictatorships (Iraq, Libya and Syria)<sup>6</sup>, authoritarianism (Egypt) or theocratic regimes (Saudi Arabia and Iran)<sup>7</sup>. The V-Dem data informs in detail where and to what extent executive power is still unconstrained, and hence provides valuable information for future research as well as for policy reform efforts.

Executive power remains a challenge in MENA's societies. They tend to circumvent legislative control, and have a strong capacity to use the veto in parliaments, and to dismiss cabinet members. Moreover, the data presented in this paper suggests that the MENA countries suffer from significant levels of executive corruption. Only Tunisia is displaying consistent and coherent signs of moves towards a more constrained and democratic executive as well as reduction of corruption.

6 Hinnebusch, Raymond, Authoritarian persistence, democratization theory and the Middle East: An overview and critique. *Democratization*. 13.3 (2006): 373-395.

7 Amuzegar, Jahangir, Iran's theocracy under siege, *Middle East Policy* 10.1 (2003): 135-153.