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Book Review: 'Making Aid Work' by Guilain Denoeux, Robert Springborg and Hicham Alaoui

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Title: Making Aid Work: Dueling with Dictators and Warlords in the Middle East and North Africa
Authors: Guilain Denoeux, Robert Springborg, and Hicham Alaoui
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In 'Making Aid Work' the authors present an astute analysis of the collective failure of assistance providers to promote economic development or advance political reform in the Middle East. Based on decades of collective experience and expertise in the political dynamics of Arab states, they identify flaws in the foreign assistance practices of Western states, principally the United States, and make recommendations for a new approach to adverse prevalent circumstances.

A major obstacle to democratisation described by the authors is the regression of Arab states into harder forms of authoritarianism and, in many cases, what they call 'militianization' whereby central governments have lost control over large parts of their territories and resources to armed militias, often backed by competing regional powers. Militianized states include Lebanon, Libya, Iraq, Sudan and Yemen. Palestine also meets that definition. Hardened authoritarianism characterises Algeria, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia. Wealthy Gulf states are not recipients of development or DRG assistance, so are not included in this analysis. However, the assertiveness of regional authoritarian powers, very much including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, together with Iran, Israel and Turkey, is identified as a factor that has contributed to trends that have been increasingly resistant to development and DRG programmes promoted by the US and other Western powers.

Faults are to be found in both aid recipient countries and among aid providers. Liberalised autocracies became more adept at deflecting international pressure for reform and coopting or suppressing domestic attempts to advance democracy or more accountable government. They proved to be resilient.

Destabilising international events – the U.S. led 'global war on terrorism' after the 9/11 attacks on the United States, the disastrous failures of US-led state building efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the economic shock of the 2008 global financial crisis, the Arab Spring uprisings and revolutions of 2011 – all contributed to changing the calculus of local ruling elites and donor powers. Western states increasingly prioritised countering perceived threats from terrorism and irregular migration. They found willing partners among Gulf monarchies, alarmed by the democratic impulses fuelled by the 2011 uprisings, and hardening autocracies in limited access order (LAO) regimes, seemingly stable pacts among elites that excluded the majority of people from any role in governance and exacerbated income inequality. The bargain was to tolerate and even support elite capture in order to head off disorder. This mutually convenient arrangement between donors and Arab states was inimical to the stated objectives of US and European development and DRG programmes that continued to function despite being increasingly disconnected from political realities.

Two case studies, Egypt and Morocco, convincingly demonstrate 'the inadequacy and ineffectiveness…of standard democracy assistance programs in hardened authoritarian settings.' The authors provide ample evidence for the conclusion that 'neither the United States nor Europe display the capacities or political will to advance the cause of democracy in the Middle East.' They describe how interest in advancing democracy in the Middle East has been superseded by a focus on containing Russia and China, undermined by a growing crisis within Western democracies themselves, and redirected towards a goal of regional integration within the framework of the Abraham Accords, a formula for a reconstituted authoritarian order. Having demonstrated the futility of democracy promotion in such inauspicious circumstances, the authors move on to the challenging task of charting an alternative way forward.

The authors are fully aware of the contradictions in standard foreign assistance practice: assistance strategies are based on false assumptions: goals of economic reform and democratisation are incompatible with the broader strategic objectives of donor states; and, the nature of the political economies in recipient countries stand in the way of the stated goals of this assistance.

The authors were confronted by a seismic shift in its subject matter during the book's writing. The foreign assistance landscape, with a primary focus on U.S. government programmes, looked very different when the project was conceived than it did on its publication in November 2025. In normal circumstances, the trenchant critique of conventional foreign assistance practice that the book provides would have been enough to spark a constructive re-examination of objectives and methods, but the landscape has changed. The Trump administration's destruction of USAID has severely curtailed US development assistance and is reshaping aid relationships between wealthy countries and aid recipients around the world. As the authors note, this moment is both an existential threat to foreign assistance and also potentially a moment of opportunity to do away with methods and approaches that have been failing to deliver on their promises, and to rebuild improved development assistance programmes in the United States and other wealthy countries. The questions the authors raise and the problems they describe are overdue for examination and

remedy. Unfortunately, they must now be addressed with the din of Elon Musk's chainsaw and wood chipper ringing in our ears and the supporters of retaining robust foreign aid capabilities required to defend themselves in a battle they know they have no chance of winning, at least in the short term. This is not an auspicious context for the consideration of serious issues.

For hardened authoritarian states the authors recommend postponing ambitious goals of democracy promotion and a turn toward a narrowly focused emphasis on providing policy makers in recipient states with reliable, independent policy analysis that would equip them to deal more effectively with the severe challenges they face from macroeconomic underperformance, environmental degradation and other problems. They suggest that this information should be provided quietly, without confronting ruling elites with their failures. Ideally it would come from revitalised domestic research institutes, from technocrats and experts forced into exile by repression and lack of opportunity at home, and from frank exchanges between recipients and aid providers.

While all of this would be desirable, it is difficult to see why hardened authoritarian leaders, primarily concerned with retaining and strengthening their grip on power and directing state resources to that end, should be motivated to act differently to achieve development objectives for their people, still less to expand democratisation. The authors argue that this approach would respond to the greatest vulnerabilities of hard authoritarians: macroeconomic underperformance and a dearth of political legitimacy. The type of information they would be offered offers them a lifeline to enable them to climb out of their current predicaments. However, it is the authoritarian leaders themselves who have taken steps to shut down independent research and information sources on socio-economic conditions and trends in their countries. They are able to extract needed economic and other support from donor states by other means: in the case of Egypt, for example, by being an interlocutor ostensibly helpful to managing regional crises in Gaza, Sudan and Libya. As regional crises, state collapse, and militianization spread, the relative value of stable authoritarians increases. Regional states are also adept at exploiting European concerns about unregulated migration from further south and east, as well from their own countries, through unseemly and scarcely disguised threats. Similarly, Western states value their relationships with authoritarians as supposedly reliable counter-terrorism partners.

The authors call for 'far less politically loaded, provocative and disingenuous' relationships between aid providers and recipients. Again, this sounds desirable, but the means necessary to make such relationships work - like closer alignment of broader diplomatic and security goals with development objectives and serious conditionality mechanisms - don't exist now and, as the authors have described earlier, it is hard to discern where donor states would find the political will to act differently. Current relationships function well enough to serve the interests of donor governments and recipient authoritarians as long as the well-being of people living in these countries is left out of the equation.

The authors are strongly critical of 'demand-driven' DRG programmes focused on developing grass roots organisations to push for rights and development goals. They are right that these approaches have largely failed, especially over the last ten to fifteen years as civil society space

has come under sustained attack by regional authoritarians. It is then surprising that in confronting the 'hardest nut' of promoting democratisation and governance reform in militianized states, they take encouragement from citizen uprisings against militia control in Lebanon, and advise donors to 'go local' to support citizen groups.

These chapters setting out supposedly new approaches to development and DRG assistance are the least convincing in the book. The elements necessary for their success are precisely those lacking from current aid relationships, rightfully described by the authors as failing and inadequate. The vague hope that 'hard constraints' on the readiness of aid providers to continue to support a failing project, and the mounting economic crises facing hard authoritarian regimes will force both parties to make new arrangements seems unpersuasive.

The final chapter provides a more concise statement of the problems the book is highlighting and points to a way forward. The authors take a critical eye to the statements of leaders of USAID's aid programmes in the aftermath of Trump's demolition of the agency. Former administrator Samantha Power is taken to task for portraying aid programmes as 'a superpower' and for claiming that authoritarians would welcome the demise of the agency. In the Middle East context, at least, the authoritarians in countries like Egypt and Morocco were favoured USAID partners, who had long been happy to bank the support. In their public defence of US foreign assistance programmes, the authors note that the emphasis was on praising humanitarian assistance and little effort was made to defend DRG assistance (which had received a majority of the agencies' resources), implying that the aid providers were aware of the lack of empirical data to support the efficacy of their major programmes.

Finally, the authors observe correctly that the roots of humanitarian crises that have afflicted the region in recent years: in Syria and Yemen and now in Palestine and Sudan are 'fundamentally political' as is severe economic underdevelopment constituting 'structural violence' against the people of countries like Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia. Solutions to such problems will require more than development assistance alone can offer. The necessary change in political will from Western donor countries would provide hope that political problems may be met with solutions that properly integrate political pressure with development objectives. Absent such integration, the failures the authors describe in advancing development, democracy, human rights, and governance throughout the region are likely to persist.

About the Author

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AI Assistance Statement

The author did not use any AI tools or programmes.