

# CONCLUSION

**L**ibrary shelves groan under the weight of decades worth of policy studies on the Middle East.

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Every aspect of the region's foreign affairs, politics, economic development, social and educational policy, and agricultural strategies seems to have been examined closely. Yet very few of those studies consider the provision of public services, and that is a mistake.

Public services such as power, water, and waste seem hopelessly pedestrian and remote from serious policy concerns in a world of glamorous conferences and high-wire diplomacy.

Few scholars of the region have been to cities and neighborhoods where services are irregular. Their contacts, almost inevitably living in wealthy neighborhoods in capital cities, have found work-arounds. The failure to provide services is lamentable, but too often it is seen as marginal to the real issues at hand.

As previously suggested, public services such as power, water, and waste provide a powerful lens through which to view the actual interactions between governments and societies, and between elites and the public, in the Middle East. These utilities account for massive amounts of public spending, and they affect the lives of every resident. In many middle-income countries, including the ones under study, these utilities have become increasingly contentious as governments have strained to meet swiftly escalating demand. Many efforts to meet that rising demand have layered incremental solutions on top of incremental solutions. The results have been expensive, environmentally unsustainable, and ultimately inadequate for national needs.

Technological advances in recent years provide opportunities for more affordable and sustainable solutions. Operating costs are lower, negative environmental impacts are minimized, and reliability is increased. As an added benefit, many of these advances can be managed locally, connecting communities to services and creating jobs for young people.

And yet, widespread skepticism of government inhibits the adoption of many of these technologies. Overly centralized organization, a checkered record of perfor-

mance, and deep perceptions of favoritism and self-dealing make millions doubt that sustainable solutions are sustainable at all. The public fears that such efforts will only enrich the powerful and exacerbate the unfair status quo. In addition, the political economies of many countries do not reward entrepreneurs working in these fields, in part because of inadequate support for entrepreneurs in general, and in part because of the political benefits that accrue from sustaining the status quo.



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Yet, those same obstacles signal the importance of success in this endeavor. Sustainable delivery of services will do more than merely improve environmental conditions in the Middle East and provide more reliable services to broad populations; it is also a vehicle to address the corrosive lack of trust in many Middle Eastern societies. That distrust is growing as governments are increasingly unable to meet the needs of their citizens. Building the capacity and accountability of local authorities will change their relationship with citizens for the better. Governments that are able to model effectiveness, efficiency, and fairness in the provision of services will win greater compliance in a range of regulatory activities. Nurturing a climate that fosters and rewards innovation in the environmental field will have ancillary benefits as well, not only creating a market for technological innovation but also providing opportunities for talented young men and women to advance their countries while they advance their own careers.

The policy studies on the Middle East address a myriad of issues, attribute them to many causes, and prescribe a wide array of solutions. Their diversity can feel overwhelming. To an unusual degree, a serious effort to increase the environmental sustainability of utilities would have a positive impact well beyond its notional parameters. It would have a halo effect on many of the most serious social, economic, and political challenges facing these societies. Technological advances allow services to be provided more effectively, economically, and sustainably than they are now, reaching larger populations more efficiently. The systems, habits, and behaviors

necessary to do so are within reach, and their benefits would extend far beyond the narrow realm of the services themselves. Technology can provide the pathway, but it is not enough. Governments and their citizens must seize the opportunity.



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