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Talking about the Revolution: Narratives on the Origin and Future of the Arab Spring

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European Institute of the Mediterranean

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*Timo Behr**

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Introduction

There are few commentators that have foreseen the extraordinary wave of mass protests that engulfed the Arab world in the course of 2011. Indeed, little more than a year ago, it would have seemed foolish to predict the imminent demise of the Arab authoritarian system. And while some farsighted researchers have warned of the structural weaknesses and escalating economic challenges experienced by a host of autocratic Arab countries, most would have agreed with Eva Bellin's analysis that "no matter what the explanation is, low levels of popular mobilization for democratic reform are a reality in the region."¹ This lack of anticipation is hardly surprising, given the amount of ink that has been spilled for over two decades in order to explain the robustness, durability and adaptability of Arab authoritarianism. Having been caught off-guard by recent events, researchers on the region have now been forced to play catch-up in order to rationalize the unexpected emergence of decentered politics and pro-democracy movements across the Arab world. The result has been a burgeoning literature that has been trying to understand, dissect and explain the origins of what has now widely become known as the "Arab Spring".

In many ways, this new literature has turned the previous debate about the Arab political system on its head. Academic conversations about the Arab world's "democratic exceptionalism" have been replaced by discussions on the region's "transitional model". And researchers that previously predicted the unshakable stability of autocratic Arab regimes are now anticipating their impending collapse. By highlighting some of those issues that have previously been outside the mainstream of scientific enquiry – the central role of contentious politics, the impact of social networking and communication technologies, and the contagious impact of democratic demonstration effects – this new literature has provided many interesting insights on the origins and future of the Arab Spring protests. However, there are clear risks associated with exchanging one academic fad for another. With much of the attention now having shifted towards the purported weakness of the Arab authoritarian systems and the previous blind spots in academic enquiry, there is a clear potential for overstating the case for change in the region.

Apart from this particular bias, the literature on the Arab Spring has also been divided on two broad issues. First, commentators have been torn over the universalistic versus particularistic nature of the uprisings. Much of the current literature has stressed the common elements of protests by framing them as: the Twitter Revolution, the Facebook Revolution, the Arab Youth Revolt, the Pan-Arab Revolt or the Arab winter of discontent. By emphasizing the collective nature of events, these descriptions tend to suggest the inevitable end of the Arab authoritarian system, as one country after another succumbs to the unstoppable tide of popular protests. With the "wall of fear" having been breached, the only unknown remains the tenacity of each individual dictator as he struggles against his inevitable demise. Another part of the literature has cautioned that despite its collective regional character, the nature and outcome of mass protests have differed and have been shaped by particularistic and country-specific factors. As a result, popular demands have varied, as have

1. Eva Bellin, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective", *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 2, 2004, p. 151.

the reactions of incumbent regimes. Rather than depicting the Arab Spring in a teleological and reductionist fashion, these accounts have tended to adopt a more measured view of the future and have pointed towards real obstacles for a democratic transition and the potential for an autocratic reversal.

Commentators have been similarly divided over the role of structure versus agency in explaining the origins of the Arab Spring. Here the debate has closely followed the academic divisions that have emerged over the theories of revolution. Some of the dominant explanations for the Arab Spring have traced the so-called third-generation theories of revolutions by highlighting the role of structural issues, such as regime characteristics, changing class structures and the role of external shocks in causing revolutionary uprisings.² As a result, much attention has focused on such issues as youth unemployment and the role of the middle class in explaining the Arab Spring. This trend has been countered by another set of explanations that have adopted so-called fourth-generation theories of revolution by urging greater attention to agency-based explanations. These approaches have tended to highlight the role of ideology, culture, leadership and coalitions in shaping revolutionary mobilization and objectives and in deciding the outcome of the revolutionary transition processes.³ While in principal structure and agency-based approaches can be combined, in practice that has seldom been the case.

These divisions have widened the gap in our understanding of the nature and consequences of the Arab Spring and suggest a widely different set of future scenarios and policy recommendations to outside actors. Keeping these various cross-cutting issues in mind, this paper seeks to examine some of the major debates and narratives that have developed on the origins of the Arab Spring. In order to do so, it will critically review the main structural, institutional, technological, and ideational explanations for the Arab Spring protests. What has been the explanatory value of each of these factors? How are they connected? And what do they suggest about the future of the Arab Spring? While the paper will treat these different explanations as analytically separate elements for the purpose of this analysis, it argues that ultimately a multivariate explanation is needed. The paper will conclude with some consideration about what these various explanations tell us about the future prospects of the Arab authoritarian system.

2. Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979.

3. Jack A. Goldstone, "Toward a Fourth Generation of Revolutionary Theory", *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 4, 2001, pp. 139-187.

Structural Transformation: A Middle-Class Revolution?

Most traditional theories of revolution tend to highlight the negative impact that deteriorating fiscal and socio-economic conditions are having on the authority of the state and class relations. A standard definition by Theda Skocpol defines social revolutions as “rapid, basic transformations of a society’s state and class structures... accompanied and in part carried through by class-based revolts from below.”⁴ In line with this definition, many researchers have identified growing socio-economic pressures and an increasing alienation of the Arab middle class, as being amongst the main precursors to the Arab Spring. Indeed, while much of the Arab world has experienced high economic growth rates of around 5-6% over the past decade, experts have for long pointed towards a number of destabilizing socio-economic factors hampering the development of Arab societies. A lack of economic diversification and job creation, deepening social inequalities, rising popular expectations and deteriorating education systems and public services together with high population growth rates and uncontrolled urbanization have contributed to a widespread feeling of insecurity and frustration that have been at the heart of the recent uprisings.⁵ And although the level of socio-economic problems and tensions has varied considerably from country to country, these trends have disproportionately affected the Arab middle class and the region’s youngest age cohorts.

Most analysts have now concluded that these developments have led to a breakdown of the “authoritarian bargain” that has sustained autocratic Arab regimes for so long.⁶ This bargain was based on an implicit tradeoff between economic development and political freedom. In return for providing social welfare, public services, subsidies and employment through large public administrations, Arab citizens accepted certain limits on their political rights. With large parts of the population dependent on the state for public services and employment, few would dare to oppose it. Moreover, large state bureaucracies provided jobs and privileges to the middle classes and allowed for some form of upward mobility. As a result, Arab regimes could count on a patronage-based form of legitimacy. However, this bargain gradually unraveled as Arab states pursued liberal economic reforms throughout the 1990s and 2000s.⁷ By slashing state budgets and slimming public administrations, Arab regimes violated their end of the bargain and alienated large parts of the population. As a consequence, they were forced to rely on an ever smaller network of supporters consisting of the urban bourgeoisie and rural elites.

As Arab socialism was replaced by crony capitalism the legitimacy of Arab regimes declined. Rapid demographic growth, a decline in middle-class and youth employment, falling real wages and heightened inequalities prepared the way for the eventual collapse of the authoritarian bargain and allowed for mass mobilization. But what evidence is there for these developments? Did Arab regimes really ignore the lower and middle classes at their peril? And were the society and class structures in all Arab countries similarly “ripe” for such a rapid transformation led by the Arab middle classes?

4. Theda Skocpol, op. cit., 1979, p. 4.

5. World Bank, *Unlocking the Employment Potential in the Middle East and North Africa: Toward a New Social Contract*, Washington, DC, World Bank, 2004; UNDP, *Arab Human Development Report*, New York, UNDP, 2009.

6. Oliver Schlumberger (ed.), *Debating Authoritarianism: Dynamics and Durability in Non-Democratic Regimes*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2007.

7. Lahcen Achy, “The Breakdown of the Arab Authoritarian Bargain”, Carnegie Commentary, 9th January 2012.

Demographic developments have been frequently singled out as a key factor in this chain of events. Due to years of strong population growth, the Arab world has accumulated a large “youth bulge”, with close to 50% of its population currently under 25 years of age. The situation tends to be even worse in conflict countries like Iraq, the Palestinian Territories and Sudan, where more than 40% of the population are under 15 years of age. This is problematic not only because Arab labor markets need to generate large numbers of jobs. Social science research suggests that countries with large youth bulges are generally more vulnerable to public violence and unrest.⁸ Statistical evidence further indicates that the prospects for successful democratic transitions are closely linked to the median age of the population. Here the threshold has been assumed to be around 30 years. This condition has been met by few Arab countries aside from Tunisia and Bahrain.⁹

Demographic Profile of Arab Countries

Country	Median age	Population under 25	Annual pop. growth (1980-2009)	Annual pop. growth (2009-2015)
Algeria	27.6	47.5%	2.13	1.46
Bahrain	30.9	43.9%	2.84	1.81
Egypt	24.3	52.3%	2.15	1.68
Jordan	22.1	54.3%	3.60	1.61
Libya	24.5	47.4%	2.55	1.81
Morocco	26.9	47.7%	1.70	1.18
Palestinian Territories	n/a	n/a	3.67	2.90
Saudi Arabia	25.3	50.8%	3.40	1.96
Syria	21.9	55.3%	3.08	1.86
Tunisia	30	42.1%	1.60	0.96
Yemen	18.1	65.4%	3.57	2.76

Source: ESCWA (2009), *The Demographic Profile of the Arab Countries*, Beirut, UN-ESCWA; CIA World Factbook Online; Economist Intelligence Unit Database.

As a result, the demographic picture of the Arab region not only favors unrest and instability, but also appears to work against a democratic transition. While these have been persistent factors across the region, recent years have seen a dramatic drop in fertility rates in many Arab countries, suggesting that a demographic transition is close at hand. Academic research has suggested that it is exactly at this inversion point, as youth bulges start to recede, that political transitions become more likely. However, it also cautions that these transitions bear their own uncertainties and instabilities.¹⁰ Some researchers have also warned that the recent drop in fertility rates is likely to be

8. Henrik Urdal, “A Clash of Generations? Youth Bulges and Political Violence”, *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 50, No. 3, 2006.

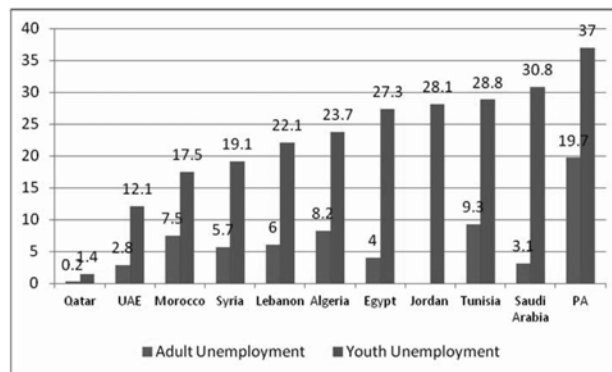
9. Robert Springborg, “The Precarious Economics of Arab Springs”, *Survival*, Vol. 53, No. 6, 2011.

10. Neil Howe and Richard Jackson, “Battle of the (Youth) Bulge”, *The National Interest*, Vol. 96, July-August 2008.

temporary and that it will be followed by an “echo boom” in several years. Nevertheless, demographic evidence appears to strengthen the case for a generational conflict.

The problems resulting from rapid demographic growth have been reinforced by the weaknesses of Arab labor markets. Here much of the focus has been on the high levels of youth unemployment and the failure of Arab countries to create jobs for skilled labor. Overall, Arab labor markets have seen a positive development over the past decade. Robust growth and declining fertility rates have led to a slight drop in unemployment rates, with the steepest decline being registered in the Maghreb countries. However, this positive trend has hidden the deteriorating labor market conditions faced by the youngest age cohorts. Amongst 15-24 year old workers, unemployment rates have been estimated at around 20-40% across the Arab region and a recent report by the International Labor Office (ILO) reported that youth unemployment in the Middle East increased by 25% during 1998-2008, while in North Africa it declined by 1.5% over the same period.¹¹

Adult and Youth Unemployment Rates (Average 2006-2010)



Source: ILO, Department of Statistics.

While this seems to tally with the more positive labor market developments amongst North African economies, much of the job creation over this period has been confined to the low-skilled and informal sectors. Demand for middle- and high-skilled labor, on the other hand, decreased due to an overall drop in manufacturing. Public sector employment similarly has been constrained given the neoliberal reforms embarked upon by many Arab countries.¹² These developments have forced a growing number of college graduates to take up positions in the informal economy, as they were unable to find employment in line with their qualifications. One estimate has shown that amongst the Arab Mediterranean countries the average unemployment rate amongst university graduates (17.4%) in 2009 was more than double that for workers with no or only primary-level education.¹³ Even worse hit have been women, with one report estimating that young educated women are four times as likely to be unemployed as young men.¹⁴

11. International Labour Organization, *Global Employment Trends for Youth*, Geneva, ILO, 2010.

12. Jad Chaaban, *Job Creation in the Arab Economies: Navigating through Difficult Waters*, “Research Paper Series”, New York, UNDP, 2010.

13. Iván Martín, “Youth Employment in Arab Mediterranean Countries: The Key to the Future”, *Med.2009 Mediterranean Yearbook*, Barcelona, IEMed, 2009.

14. Ragui Assaad and Barsoum Ghada, *Youth Exclusion in Egypt: In Search of “Second Chances”*, Working Paper, Dubai School of Government, The Middle East Youth Initiative, 2007.

The problem of unemployment amongst high-skilled youth also points towards the failings of the Arab education system. First, education standards are generally low and unable to provide the skills needed in the labor market.¹⁵ Second, many Arab countries register a high concentration of university students in the social sciences and humanities. Traditionally, graduates from these concentrations have found employment in the large public sector of Arab economies. But with falling public sector employment and wages there has been little demand for their skills. Moreover, with opportunities being limited, nepotism and cronyism have been on the rise. But the failure of educated middle-class youth to find adequate employment not only impacts their living standards. Marriage patterns have also changed as young people are unable to shoulder wedding costs and social tension has increased between the winners and losers of neoliberal reforms.¹⁶

Rising unemployment and falling living standards have not solely been a problem for the urban middle classes. Amongst the Arab Mediterranean countries only one out of seven job-seekers has a higher education degree, indicating that despite the woes of the middle class, the bulk of the unemployed are still in the low-skilled wage sector. However, even those that have been able to secure employment have often had to deal with deteriorating real wages. In Egypt, for example, real wages fell during 2006-2009 and only recovered somewhat thereafter. As a result, Egypt has seen a rapid growth in strikes and labor action, which according to the ILO grew from 17 in 2001 to 382 in 2007.¹⁷ Similar trends have been witnessed in a few other Arab countries, such as Jordan.

But a number of Arab countries have in fact shown a positive trend when it comes to improvements in real wages and poverty reduction. Thus in 2010 the UN highlighted that five Arab countries had been amongst the top ten movers when it comes to the human development index (HDI).¹⁸ Oman, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco were all lauded for having made significant gains in a variety of sectors including health, education and income. While poverty remains disproportionately high in most Arab countries, this highlights the significant differences across the region. Similarly, income inequality, while having risen in several states, still remains moderate in international comparison across most of the Arab world, as well as by historical standards.¹⁹

All of this seems to indicate that although socio-economic trends have been negative, they have been far from linear. Moreover, while countries in the region have shared similar problems, especially uncontrolled demographic growth and youth unemployment, other socio-economic problems have been more country specific. Educational institutions and public services are generally of a higher standard in Tunisia than in Egypt. Similarly, poverty and illiteracy have been much more pronounced

15. Lahcen Achy, *Trading High Unemployment for Bad Jobs*, "Carnegie Papers", No. 23, Carnegie Middle East Center, June 2010.

16. Diane Singerman, *The Economic Imperatives of Marriage*, Working Paper, No. 6, Dubai School of Government, Middle East Youth Initiative, 2007.

17. Solidarity Center, *Justice for All: The Struggle for Worker Rights in Egypt*, Washington, DC, Solidarity Center, 2010.

18. UNDP, *Human Development Report 2010: The Real Wealth of Nations*, New York, UNDP, 2010.

19. Where data is available, they generally show a gradual decline of the Gini coefficient value over the last two decades. Overall, inequality in the Arab world is also less pronounced than in Latin America or Sub-Saharan Africa. According to a study from 2009, income inequality in Egypt is one of the lowest in the region: Sami Bibi and Mustapha K. Nabli, "Income Inequality in the Arab Region: Data and Measurement, Patterns and Trends", *Middle East Development Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2009.

in Egypt or Yemen than in Tunisia.²⁰ This means that at least when it comes to socio-economic indicators, there has been neither a uniform trend nor any clear indications that mass protests would inevitably lead to a region-wide domino effect. If anything, socio-economic conditions in Egypt and Tunisia appear to have improved slightly in the run-up to the crisis.

How do these developments mesh with the popular image of a middle-class revolution? Throughout history, the middle class has been an important agent of change and revolutions and media reporting has persistently highlighted the role of well-educated middle-class youth in driving the protest movements in the Arab world. Even before the recent protests it was acknowledged that the Arab middle class could play a transformative role. One book on the rise of the Muslim middle class by Vali Nasr argues that by integrating itself into the global economy, the new middle class is changing Muslim societies by combining capitalism and religion.²¹ Another recent survey by Booz & Company indicates that two-thirds of middle-class households across the Arab region have been dissatisfied with the economic status quo over the last five years.²²

Indeed, it has been widely recognized that recent years have seen a decline in the role of the middle class in many Arab countries. One recent study has shown that in Egypt the share of middle-skilled occupations in employment declined by 5.2% between 2000 and 2009.²³ Market-friendly reforms have also caused a relative decline in middle-class incomes in many Arab countries, including in Egypt and Morocco. Simultaneously, education appears to have lost its central role as a conduit for upward social mobility, further undermining the status and prospects of the middle class. Instead, cronyism and corruption have been more important for social mobility. All of this has favored a breakdown of the authoritarian bargain and favored growing public unrest. However, there is little evidence of a clear regional trend. Some Arab states, such as Yemen, never developed a substantial middle class. Similarly in Syria, initial protests were disproportionally rural and working-class, while in Libya they had a regional character.

Overall, there is little doubt that socio-economic grievances have been at the heart of the current protests. Demographic pressures, rising youth unemployment and the relative decline of the middle class have all been noted as important causes of the Arab Spring. While this might have led to a breakdown in the authoritarian bargain in some countries, others have experienced different developments. After all, it was only in Tunisia and Egypt that the middle class has taken a leadership role. Moreover, the breakdown of the authoritarian bargain does not need to spell an end to patronage-based legitimacy per se, given the rentier state structures of many Arab economies. While structural transformation and class conflicts might therefore explain the initial outbreak of mass protests, they have been shaped by a considerable number of additional factors.

20. Oliver Neuschmidt et al., *Effective Schools in Arab Educational Systems: An Analysis of TIMSS 2003*, Amsterdam, IEA, 2008.

21. Vali Nasr, *Forces of Fortune: The Rise of the Muslim Middle Class and What It Will Mean for Our World*, New York, Free Press, 2009.

22. World Economic Forum, *The Compendium on Economic Governance in the Arab World 2011*, Geneva, WEF, 2011, pp. 14-15.

23. Nesma Nowar, "Education Challenge", *Al Ahram Weekly*, 2011.

External Shocks: The Dark Side of Globalization?

Although long-term structural trends no doubt have played a role in mobilizing the middle classes in some countries, a number of external economic shocks seem to have further exacerbated the situation for lower and middle-income groups on the whole. Here much attention has been given to the impact of the global financial crisis on Arab economies, as well as on the fall-out that has resulted from the rapid increase in food and fuel prices across the region. While analysts agree that these issues have played some role in stoking popular grievances, they are hardly new. Volatility in food and fuel prices and periodic external shocks are common across the Arab world. On occasions they have inspired mass riots, as was the case during Egypt's bread riots in 1977, Algeria's Black October in 1988 and Egypt's General Strike of 2008. While these food riots have occasionally facilitated deeper policy changes, Arab regimes have generally been adept in dealing with them through a mixture of patronage and violence.²⁴ However, one factor that could have heightened the fall-out from the most recent shocks is the greater level of economic integration that Arab countries now entertain with the world economy.

Over the last decade, Arab economies have not only engaged in a number of structural reforms that have reduced their ability to react to economic shocks, but have also opened their markets further to the global economy and with that have become more sensitive to the global economic climate.²⁵ North African economies have especially integrated themselves progressively into the European market through the adoption of EU Association Agreements and have concluded a number of other bilateral and regional trade agreements. While this strategy was successful in increasing foreign trade and investment flows, it also made them more vulnerable to external shock. As a result, North African countries have become highly dependent on the European business cycle and the price of oil for foreign trade and investment. At the same time their ability to absorb external shocks has decreased, due to structural reforms and the lowering of subsidies.²⁶

Nevertheless, the link between external shocks and internal turmoil appears at best tenuous. In its initial stages, the international financial crisis primarily affected the Arab Gulf countries that were most integrated into international financial markets and heavily invested abroad.²⁷ North African economies were notably less affected, due to their much more limited exposure to international capital markets. More problematic was that within a short period of time the crisis also ended the oil boom of 2007-2008 which had been a source of regional growth and investments. While the direct impact on the stock markets of Arab Mediterranean countries was less pronounced, the indirect effect on their economies was therefore much more severe. As the crisis deepened throughout 2009, its impact was felt through a reduction of remittances, foreign investment and exports.²⁸

Although most Arab Mediterranean countries suffered as a result, the impact differed considerably, largely depending on each country's dependence on the Gulf. The drop in remittances was most

24. Eva Bellin, op. cit.

25. Timo Behr, "Il Nord Africa e l'economia globale", in Karim Mezran et al. (eds.), *L'Africa mediterranea tra storia e futuro*, Rome, Donzelli Editore, 2011, pp. 173-194.

26. Gary Clyde Hufbauer and Claire Brunel (eds.), *Maghreb Regional and Global Integration: A Dream To Be Fulfilled*, Washington, DC, Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2008.

27. Zafiris Tzannatos, "The Global Financial, Economic and Social Crisis and the Arab Countries", ILO, Arab Employment Forum Beirut, 19-21 October 2009.

28. International Monetary Fund, *Regional Economic Outlook: Middle East and Central Asia*, October 2009, p. 1.

pronounced in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon, whereas remittances in Morocco and Tunisia, originating mainly in Europe, were less affected. Similarly, revenues from tourism dropped sharply in the Middle East, but increased even slightly in North Africa throughout 2009. Foreign direct investment and exports finally declined across the board, depressing economic growth and job creation. While GDP growth in the MENA region as a whole dropped by 3% during 2009, the overall impact was again less severe for the Arab Mediterranean states. Crucially, the impact on the labor markets of North African countries seems to have been moderate. For example, the World Bank estimated that Egypt had seen a mild decline in unemployment and a slight increase in labor force participation rates throughout 2006-2009.²⁹ While labor market developments in Jordan and Tunisia were less positive, there is little evidence for a dramatic rise in unemployment or a fall in living standards as a result of the global financial crisis.

Mixed evidence can also be found when considering the impact of the food price shock. Food price volatility is a regular source of instability and has been the cause of many public disturbances across the Arab world.³⁰ In 2007-2008 the Arab world experienced a severe food price shock in conjunction with a spike in oil prices. Food prices rose to record levels during this period, triggering a number of riots and protests most notably in Egypt and Algeria. Arab governments, caught by surprise, reacted by increasing food subsidies and stocks. While food prices declined intermittently they again approached record levels in the second half of 2010, when the FAO food price index jumped by 32%. These developments gave rise to speculations that the Arab Spring protests were directly fueled by the latest hike in food and commodity prices in many Arab countries.

However, the evidence for a direct link between rising food prices and popular mass protests appears weak. First, international wheat prices, the principal staple food across the Arab world, were still markedly below the record levels reached in 2008.³¹ Second, Arab governments had substantially increased food subsidies and stocks as a result of the 2008 crisis, therefore mitigating the impact of food price increases on consumers.³² Thus, the FAO reported that previous to the uprisings in Tunisia domestic food prices had not increased substantially as a result of high international prices.³³ In Egypt, government subsidies ensured that bread prices remained relatively stable. But prices for other food products were allowed to rise affecting middle-income earners more disproportionately.

There is little doubt that food insecurity is a persistent long-term challenge in many Arab countries and that it has been part of an overall mix of public grievances.³⁴ This is confirmed by the fact that many Arab regimes reacted to public protests by announcing further increases in food and fuel

29. World Bank, *Sustaining the Recovery in Times of Uncertainty*, October 2010, p. 15.

30. Rabah Arezki and Markus Brückner, *Food Prices and Political Instability*, IMF Working Paper WP/11/62.

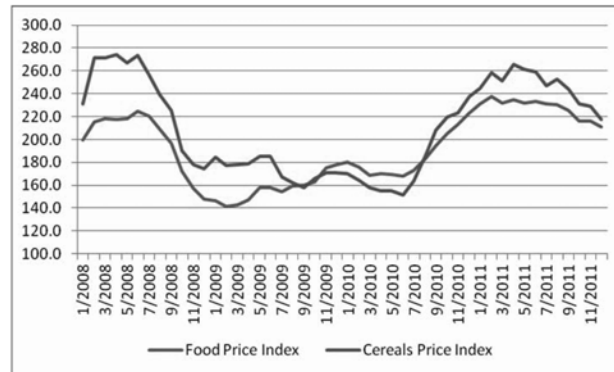
31. In December 2011, the price for a ton of wheat was \$327, compared with \$482 in March 2008. Richard Cincotta, "Socioeconomic Studies", in Ellen Laipson (dir.), *Seismic Shift: Understanding Change in the Middle East*, Washington, DC, Stimson Center, 2011.

32. In Egypt, for example, the government increased the budget for food subsidies by 25% in 2008, doubled the amount of rice distributed under ration cards, adopted plans for a 20% increase in domestic wheat production and created an authority to monitor the production and distribution of subsidized bread.

33. FAO, *GIEWS Country Briefs: Tunisia*, 21st October 2011.

34. Rami Zurayk, *Food, Farming, and Freedom: Sowing the Arab Spring*, Charlottesville, VA, Just World Books, 2011.

Food Price Indices (2002-2004=100)



Source: FAO World Food Price Index.

subsidies.³⁵ And while rising food price inflation throughout 2010 might have worsened the plight of many people living in destitution, it was neither unprecedented by historical standards nor catastrophic in terms of its overall impact on living standards. Rather, food price increases have represented one more drop in the bucket of grievances. Moreover, food riots in the Arab world have historically proven to be short-lived and have rarely led to deep systemic changes, but brief phases of repression and reforms. While external shocks might have further augmented already existing tensions and grievances, the failure of Arab governments to control them through the usual mixture of patronage and repression suggests they played a minor role.

35. Algeria, Jordan and Morocco all increased food subsidies on basic food stuffs in early 2011, while other countries reacted through salary increases or one-time cash handouts.

Regime Collapse: The King's Dilemma?

Although structural explanations might be able to account for the heightened levels of popular mobilization witnessed during the Arab Spring, on their own they do not explain the startling feebleness of Arab regimes. In the past, these regimes have shown a surprising resilience when confronted with domestic protests, labor strikes and food riots. Moreover, Arab political institutions have proven very adept in preventing the emergence of elite fissures and co-opting large parts of the opposition. This “robustness” of Arab authoritarianism has led to a whole school of academic literature trying to understand and explain regime stability in the Arab world.³⁶ Given this widespread focus on stability, most analysts were taken by surprise when the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes imploded within a matter of weeks without much of a fight. While some have regarded this as a confirmation of the inherent frailty of liberalized autocracies, others have argued that it might have simply proven their adaptability and that change is likely to be shallow.³⁷

In the past, analysts have pointed towards a number of factors explaining the robustness of Arab authoritarianism. One strain of the literature pointed towards their level of internal cohesion and especially their ability to maintain the loyalty of the armed forces.³⁸ According to one observer, “even the most professional militaries of the region would not hesitate to intervene in politics to try to maintain the status quo.”³⁹ This view led to the widespread assumption that the military and the political elites in Arab countries were united and that Arab militaries were so deeply entrenched in the political process that they were able to “rule without having to govern.”⁴⁰ Egypt, Algeria and Syria all seemed to be prime examples in this regard, given the close personal and institutional ties of the incumbent regimes with the military elites. With military elites being closely involved in the running of the country and dependent on regime support in order to maintain their social and economic privileges, a division between the two appeared unlikely.

A second set of explanations underlined the ability of Arab regimes to use political institutions in order to co-opt and control political dissent.⁴¹ Outsized security apparatuses instilled a climate of fear and closely monitored opposition activities. Powerful ruling parties like Egypt’s National Democratic Party and Syria’s Ba’th party provided an effective tool to assure regime cohesion, navigate internal conflicts and distribute patronage. At the same time, tightly regulated opposition parties enabled Arab regimes to co-opt and control opposition activities. By forcing opposition activists to choose between participating in the political process and remaining outside of the system, Arab regimes succeeded in imposing their rules of the game.⁴² Multiparty elections finally allowed Arab regimes to maintain the façade of a democratic process.⁴³

36. Daniel Brumberg, “The Trap of Liberalized Autocracy”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 2002; Oliver Schlumberger, *Debating Arab Authoritarianism*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2007.

37. Michael Scott Doran, “The Heirs of Nasser”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 3, May-June 2011.

38. Zoltan Barany, “Comparing the Arab Revolts: The Role of the Military”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 22, No. 4, October 2011.

39. Mehran Kamrava, “Military Professionalization and Civil-Military Relations in the Middle East”, *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 115, No. 1, 2000, p. 92.

40. Steven Cook, *Ruling But Not Governing: The Military and Political Developments in Egypt, Algeria, and Turkey*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007.

41. Daniel Brumberg, op. cit. Jason Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

42. Holger Albrecht and Eva Wegner, “Autocrats and Islamists: Contenders and Containment in Egypt and Morocco”, *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 2006.

43. Lisa Blaydes, *Elections and Distributive Politics in Mubarak’s Egypt*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010; Jennifer Gandhi and Ellen Lust, “Elections under Authoritarianism”, *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 12, 2009, pp. 403-422.

In many cases Arab regimes could also count on external support and legitimization, by engaging in a security bargain with western governments.⁴⁴ This bargain allowed them to trade their cooperation on issues such as counter-terrorism, the Middle East peace process and immigration for some external legitimization as well as important political and economic support.⁴⁵ The security establishments in the Middle East have been especially dependent on these relationships.⁴⁶ Western governments engaged in this bargain, due to their own dependence on Arab regimes for support in the “Global War on Terror”, as well as their concerns about the nature of political Islam.⁴⁷ Fearing the economic and security impact of regime change, they regularly turned a blind eye to regime excesses and in some cases provided substantial external rents that allowed Arab regimes to buy off and placate internal dissent. Countries that rejected this bargain, like Syria or Iran, could rely on their anti-western and pan-Arab credentials to rally internal support.

In the light of recent events, most of these assumptions about the robustness of Arab authoritarianism now appear to have been flawed.⁴⁸ Faced with high levels of public mobilization, Arab regimes quickly collapsed as security services proved unable or unwilling to quell dissent, political parties and institutions disintegrated and political elites fractured as parts of their ranks defected to the opposition. There are a variety of explanations for this sudden collapse and the unexpected weakness of Arab political institutions. One of them holds that semi-authoritarian or hybrid regimes are inherently unstable, despite the seeming robustness of Arab authoritarianism. Following Samuel Huntington's “King's Dilemma”, once a regime introduces limited political reforms it raises expectation that can easily be frustrated should the reform process stall.⁴⁹

In the Arab world many regimes introduced limited political reforms in the mid-2000s on the back of the US “freedom agenda” leading to more open elections, greater political liberties and a more inclusive political process. However, recent years have seen a rolling back of political liberties and a clamping down on opposition groups and civil society. In Egypt, this political reversal began in 2007 and culminated in the rigged Parliamentary elections of 2010.⁵⁰ Similar trends have been evident in a number of countries, including Jordan, Morocco and Yemen. With the prospects of gradual regime-driven change receding, opposition groups no longer had an incentive to work through the political institutions of authoritarian regimes. This benefited the creation of political opposition movements outside of established party politics, including Egypt's Kifaya and the April 6 Movements.⁵¹ While this was not a uniform process, as some countries continued on the road of reforms, the overall political climate had notably changed by the late 2000s.

44. Larry Diamond and Daniel Brumberg, “Introduction”, in Larry Diamond et al. (eds.), *Islam and Democracy in the Middle East*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003.

45. Mahmood Monshipouri and Ali Assareh, “The New Middle East and the United States: What To Expect After the Uprisings?”, *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 2011.

46. Eva Bellin, op. cit.

47. Hartmut Behr and Lars Berger, “The Challenge of Talking about Terrorism: The EU and the Arab Debate on the Causes of Islamist Terrorism”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 21, No. 4, 2009.

48. F. Gregory Gause III, “Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring”, *Foreign Affairs*, July-August 2011.

49. Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1968.

50. Mona El-Gobashy, *The Dynamic of Egypt's Elections*, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero092910>; Timo Behr, *Deciphering Egypt's Transition*, FIIA Briefing Paper, No. 72, 2011.

51. Tarek Masoud, “The Road to (and from) Liberation Square”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 22, No. 3, 2011.

Another explanation for the weakness of Arab institutions has been the growing internal fissures within Arab regimes as the life-cycles of long-standing Arab dictators in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, and Libya were nearing their end. Controversy over the line of succession inevitably led to conflicts within regimes and heightened the prospects of defection. The Egyptian military, for example, has made little secret of its opposition to the succession of Hosni Mubarak by his son Gamal. Similarly, infighting has been on the rise in a number of other countries due to the prospect of managed successions.⁵² Other countries experienced a different set of challenges as relatively young and inexperienced rulers succeeded their fathers. Given that many Arab dictators depended on personal loyalties and patronage networks, these rulers experienced their own problems. While these growing fissures might have emboldened opposition activists, elite theory generally holds that for political crisis to emerge elites need to be not only divided, but polarized.⁵³ This was rarely the case at the outset of the Arab Spring, although polarization did take place in some cases, such as Libya and Yemen, after the initial outbreak of protests.

The unexpected rupture between the armed forces and incumbent regimes, as in Egypt and Tunisia, has been another focus of discussion. Much of the transition literature suggests that high levels of popular mobilization tend to deter acts of violent repressions from the military establishment due to the consequent costs in terms of institutional integrity and international support.⁵⁴ This seems to have been largely validated throughout the Arab uprisings, as professional armed forces refused to intervene in order to quell domestic protests in several countries. However, the opportunity costs of repression are less pronounced for military regimes built around ethnic or religious lines and for elites whose own survival is at stake. Unsurprisingly, these have been the ones most likely to resort to violence and the least deterred by high levels of mobilization.

The institutions of liberalized autocracies similarly failed to channel and co-opt political interests in their presupposed way. With a gradual shift of political activism away from the formal opposition towards new forms of political activism, these institutions ceased to play a role in generating domestic support.⁵⁵ The new social movements and online activism that have been on the rise in recent years are also more difficult to control through police violence and repression. Moreover, with the reversal of political reforms and the increasingly shambolic nature of Parliamentary elections, political institutions stopped playing their designated role of generating internal legitimacy and ensuring regime cohesion. As a result, autocratic institutions have proven to be largely irrelevant in face of the Arab Spring and were amongst the first victims of the revolutions.

Finally, it is impossible to explain the sudden collapse of Arab autocracies without locating it within the wider regional and geopolitical context. With western influence in the Middle East and globally on the wane, the Arab Spring has taken place in a more permissive world context. While the security bargain between Arab regimes and the West still holds in the geopolitically significant Gulf

52. Kristina Kausch, *Managed Successions and Stability in the Arab World*, FRIDE Working Paper, No. 104, November 2010.

53. Jack A. Goldstone, op. cit., p. 150.

54. Eva Bellin, op. cit., p. 146.

55. Marina Ottaway and Amr Hamzawy, *Protest Movements and Political Change in the Arab World*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Policy Outlook, 28th January 2011.

region, western governments have felt constrained in propping up client regimes in Tunisia and Egypt.⁵⁶ In both cases the withdrawal of their support was preceded by democratic opposition forces signaling their capacity to rule and convincing western governments about their commitment to international obligations. In this sense, the framing of the Arab Spring as being secular and middle-class by protesters and the media was essential in attracting western support.

Overall, there is much evidence to suggest that regime-specific factors, such as the prospects of succession, the type of the regime in question, its ethnic and religious composition and its systemic importance for US foreign policy have all had a large impact in determining the outcome of popular protests. In some cases, these factors favored a regime collapse, while in others they enabled a violent crack-down or more gradual reforms. Moreover, these factors seem to have directly impacted the level of mobilization. In the case of Egypt, for example, the succession question clearly functioned as a rallying point for the protest movement. In others they have deterred greater mobilization. While this seems to confirm the relevance of Huntington's "King's Dilemma", these explanations also point towards the pivotal role of country-specific factors.

56. France's Foreign Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie initially tried, but failed, to rally support behind the Ben Ali regime, ultimately leading to her resignation.

Technological Change: A Twitter Revolution?

Another set of explanations for the Arab Spring has singled out the role of information technology. Technological innovations have always played a key role in promoting social change. The printing press, the newspaper, radio and television have all been at the heart of deep social transformations and have played a pivotal role in numerous revolutionary uprisings throughout history. Unsurprisingly, many analysts have argued that new information technologies like Facebook and Twitter in conjunction with more established mass media outlets, such as Al-Jazeera, have been important conduits for the recent uprisings. According to this argument, these new media technologies allowed young protesters not only to circumvent state censorship and mobilize outside support, but also to transform the public sphere of traditional Arab societies.⁵⁷ While there is much evidence that information technologies have indeed played a vital role, their importance and potential in transforming Arab societies remains open to debate.

Debates about an impending media revolution in the Arab world have been raging since approximately the late 1990s.⁵⁸ There is no doubt that the launching of Arab satellite stations like Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya has transformed the Arab media landscape.⁵⁹ By breaking the state monopoly over the flow of information these TV stations arguably contributed to the creation of a new Arab public sphere.⁶⁰ They provided a new discourse that emphasized the unity of the Arab region and consistently highlighted problems of common concern, such as the Palestine-Israel conflict and the Iraq War, as well as more recently, political reforms. Given the deep penetration of satellite TV in the Arab world, the message of these stations reached a broad audience. In Egypt alone, some 70% of the population is estimated to have access to satellite TV with 95% having access to television.⁶¹ Arab regimes proved adept in adjusting to this new challenge, by launching competing TV stations and media outlets, sanctioning content and targeting journalists.

In the 2000s, the rapid spread of the Internet added a new dimension to debates about the role of new media technologies, enabling users to access an even greater variety of content and providing a new challenge for state censors. The appearance of affordable “smart phones” in the late 2000s was another significant development that provided activists with a quick and easy way to upload content and increase their visibility in Internet debates. Media enthusiasts were quick to point out that by 2011 there were more Facebook users in the Arab world than newspaper subscribers.⁶² Indeed, citizen journalists accounted for much of the investigative journalism in the Arab world over the last decade, by using the Internet in creative ways to unveil political corruption and police violence.⁶³ However, evidence that activists were able to use these technologies in order to mobilize wider support remained scant. For a long time, protest movement like Kifaya, the April 6

57. Marc Lynch, “After Egypt: The Limits and Promise of Online Challenges to the Authoritarian Arab State”, *Reflections*, Vol. 9, No. 2, June 2011.

58. Kai Hafez (ed.), *Arab Media: Power and Weakness*, New York, Continuum, 2008.

59. Marc Lynch, *Voices of the New Arab Public: Al Jazeera, Iraq, and Arab Politics*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2006.

60. Dale F. Eickelmann and Jon W. Anderson, *New Media in the Middle East: The Emerging Public Sphere*, Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 2003.

61. USAID and UNICEF, *Egypt: Demographic and Health Survey 2008*, March 2009, p. 23.

62. Marc Lynch, “After Egypt: The Limits and Promise of Online Challenges to the Authoritarian Arab State”, *Reflections*, Vol. 9, No. 2, June 2011, p. 303.

63. Philip N. Howard and Muzammil M. Hussain, “The Upheavals in Egypt and Tunisia: The Role of Digital Media”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 22, No. 3, July 2011.

Movement and the Iranian Green Movement appeared unable to attract a wider support base beyond their core constituency by using these technologies. Indeed, Kifaya-organized protests in 2005-2006 regularly attracted a much lower turn-out than those organized by trade unions and the Muslim Brotherhood, using more conventional methods. Only during the current unrests have these technologies played a greater role.

In debating the impact of these technologies on the current uprisings, analysts have tended to focus on four broad areas. First, they have argued that Internet technologies have allowed activists to mobilize a larger number of supporters by circumventing state censorship and breaking the atomization of authoritarian regimes.⁶⁴ Videos of protests and police violence were spread via the Internet while Facebook groups with tens of thousands of supporters provided reassurance and a feeling of strength in numbers. In this way, protesters were able to “break the wall of fear” and mobilize support amongst diverse interest groups around the common goal of overthrowing the incumbent regime.

Second, Internet technologies played a key role in garnering international support.⁶⁵ By bringing videos and commentary of the uprisings to a wider international audience, activists were able to generate a positive public image and helped to sever the long-standing ties between western countries and Arab regimes. Uploaded video footage and English-speaking Arab bloggers were instrumental in challenging the widespread perception amongst the western public and governments that any regime change would inevitably empower radical Islam. Instead, they portrayed protesters as secular, Internet-savvy, urban youth that had much in common with their western counterparts.

Third, Internet technologies have been widely credited with having aided the contagion-like spread of the revolutionary uprisings throughout the Middle East.⁶⁶ By bringing images of protests to a wider regional audience and enabling young activists to share information and tactics via the Internet, new technologies turned protests that were driven by country-specific dynamics into a regional event. Notably, protesters across the Arab world have employed similar chants, tactics and tropes, have rallied in solidarity with their fellow activists, and have appropriated the same discourse about freedom and social justice, regardless of the country-specific context. While the Internet has contributed to this process of contagion, its role is indivisible from that of satellite television.

Finally, and most ambitiously, some analysts have argued that new technologies are contributing to a much deeper and wider transformation of the Arab public sphere. According to Marc Lynch, “whatever immediate changes result from the 2011 uprisings, the impact of the Internet over the long term will be to empower and to transform the nature of the public sphere in authoritarian Arab societies. This creates conditions by which demands for accountability and transparency and citizenship long denied by the authoritarian Arab state can be effectively pressed.”⁶⁷ Others have

64. Clay Shirky, “The Political Power of Social Media”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 1, 2011.

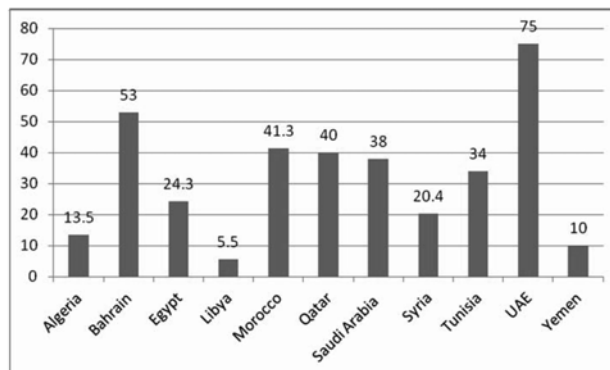
65. Jon B. Alterman, “The Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted”, *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 4, Fall 2011.

66. Timo Behr and Mika Aaltola, *The Arab Uprising: Causes, Prospects, Implications*, FIIA Briefing Paper, No. 76, 2011.

67. Marc Lynch, “After Egypt: The Limits and Promise of Online Challenges to the Authoritarian Arab State”, *Reflections*, Vol. 9, No. 2, June 2011, p. 306.

taken this argument even further by contending that the spread of digital communication will inevitably undermine the power and legitimacy of nation states, which are no longer able to control the flow of information on a national level.⁶⁸ However, such far-ranging assertions remain questionable, given the established track record of nation states to adjudicate communication technologies for their own means and purposes throughout history.⁶⁹

Internet Penetration (% of Population; 2009)



Source: ITU World Telecommunication/ICT Indicator Database 2010.

While there is little doubt that the Internet and digital media have played an important role in shaping the Arab Spring, claims that these events represent a “Twitter Revolution” are likely to be overblown. Most importantly, there appears to be no clear relationship between the spread of Internet access across the Arab world and mass protests. Indeed, countries with higher rates of Internet penetration appear to have been either successful in subduing mass protests or have avoided them altogether. In contrast, Internet penetration rates in revolutionary Egypt, Syria, Yemen and Libya are actually amongst the lowest in the Arab world. This does not necessarily mean that digital technologies did not play an important role. These technologies have been important in mobilizing vocal minorities and uploaded videos of mass protests and police violence have been spread by international broadcasters that reach a wider audience. However, with only a small fraction of the population able to access the Internet in Libya or Yemen, mass mobilization is likely to have emerged through other more traditional channels.

Moreover, while digital reporting has allowed for greater transparency, it has also introduced greater opaqueness into reporting about the Arab world. With both Internet activists and government supporters engaged in information warfare on the Internet and much of the claims and counter-claims about ongoing events being difficult to evaluate, news broadcasters have played an important role in shaping reporting about the Arab Spring. By choosing to trust certain sources over others and

68. Manuel Castells, *Communication Power*, Palo Alto, CA, Stanford University Press, 2008.

69. Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*, New York, PublicAffairs, 2011.

relying for information on a relatively small group of English-speaking Internet activists, TV broadcasters framed the uprisings as being secular and middle-class in nature and comparable to the velvet revolutions of 1989. While it is still too early to determine the final outcome of the Arab Spring, it is clear that in some cases this reliance on digital sources has led to an under appreciation of more traditional elements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Although Internet technologies have provided a catalyst for the uprisings, “television drove them, framed them, legitimized them, and broadcasted them to a wider audience.”⁷⁰

All of this indicates that while technological change has played an important role in shaping the Arab Spring, it would be wrong to understand it as the single or even the most important factor behind the recent events. There is no doubt that digital media enabled a small group of activists to organize themselves and articulate a message that was able to garner a wider popular appeal and rally international support. However, digital media alone does not account for the high levels of mobilization witnessed across the region. Nor is it likely to have a decisive impact on the outcome of the current transition processes. Recent elections in Tunisia and Egypt have shown that the secular middle-class activists that have been the poster children of the Arab Spring represent a clear minority in their countries. Revolutions tend to instrumentalize the technologies that are available to them. While it is impossible to say whether the Arab Spring would have occurred without Facebook and Twitter, their role lay primarily in documenting preexisting grievances and communicating a new way of thinking to a broader audience.

70. Jon B. Alterman, op. cit., p. 114.

Ideational Contagion: A New Arab Discourse?

Surprisingly little attention has been paid to the ideological drivers of the Arab Spring. In fact, many analysts have simply assumed the absence of any “big think” behind the recent wave of leaderless mass protests that have brought together ideologically-divided opposition groups behind the single goal of “overthrowing the regime.” Regardless of the frequent parallels that are being drawn between the Arab Spring and the events of 1848 and 1989, recent protests bear little resemblance to earlier social revolutions that have been driven by big ideological currents such as liberalism, nationalism or communism.⁷¹ But despite the explicitly non-ideational nature of the Arab Spring, protesters have rallied behind a new Arab discourse that has consciously sought to set itself apart from the traditional post-colonial discourses of the Arab world. The core concepts of this new discourse – “personal freedom”, “dignity” and “social justice” – have been an integral part of all mass protests across the region.⁷² By focusing on these concepts and deemphasizing traditional religious, ethnic and tribal divisions, the protesters were able to attract mass popular support and win vital international backing for their cause.

This new discourse emerged in the mid-2000s from the ranks of the educated middle classes and had a particular appeal amongst the younger age cohorts that have highly-developed social networking skills and that felt alienated from the post-colonial identities of the older generations.⁷³ In Egypt, it was the Kifaya movement that was the first to adopt this new discourse, by campaigning for political change, personal liberties and an alternation of power. By integrating and developing earlier experiences of issue-specific protest movements, such as the Popular Committee for the Support of the Intifada, Kifaya also experimented with the methods of social protests and managed to temporarily unite disparate strains in the Egyptian opposition.⁷⁴ Founded in 2004 by a group of Marxist, Nasserist, Islamist and liberal activists, the Kifaya movement organized a series of well-rehearsed protests throughout 2004-2006 that inspired a myriad of new offshoots, such as the Youth for Change, Workers for Change and Journalists for Change. These in turn provided a training ground for the current youth activists and played an important role in “showing the way of political struggle that Egyptians had long forgotten.”⁷⁵

While Kifaya provided an important inspiration for social activists and a push factor for the more established opposition groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, the popular appeal of its discourse remained relatively limited throughout these years. Indeed, while the movement attracted considerable national and international attention, it was rarely able to draw more than 1,500 people to its rallies. Given the limited initial appeal of Kifaya’s original message and discourse, what explains its surprising popularity half a decade later?

For Kifaya’s discourse to attract wider popular support, a number of developments were necessary. In most Arab countries, the legitimacy of post-colonial Arab regimes was based on the legacy of national liberation and anti-imperial resistance, as well as a project of national economic develop-

71. Robert Springborg, “Whither the Arab Spring? 1989 or 1848?”, *The International Spectator*, Vol. 46, No. 3, 2011.

72. Marc Lynch, “The Big Think behind the Arab Spring”, *Foreign Policy*, December 2011, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/11/28/the_big_think.

73. Andrea Teti and Gennaro Gervasio, “The Unbearable Lightness of Authoritarianism: Lessons from the Arab Uprisings”, *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 2011.

74. Rabab El-Mahdi, “Enough! Egypt’s Quest for Democracy”, *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 5, June 2009.

75. A.B. Shaaban, cited in Rabab El-Mahdi, op. cit., p. 1026.

ment.⁷⁶ However, in the case of Egypt, both of these elements had gone increasingly amiss under the Mubarak regime. Mubarak's close partnership with the US throughout the second Intifada and the Iraq War evoked a feeling of national humiliation and gave rise to some of the largest mass protests previous to the Arab Spring.⁷⁷ No longer was the regime able to claim the mantle of national resistance and Arab liberation. Nationalist and liberation discourses, which previously had been a core element of the post-colonial legacy of Arab regimes, increasingly merged with demands for democratic reforms. This appropriation of nationalist discourses by the pro-democracy movement was self-evident throughout the Arab Spring, with protesters brandying national flags and employing slogans such as: "Hold your head up high: You are Egyptian." Similar nationalist celebrations were the hallmark of all of the uprisings.

Similarly, as Egypt and several other Arab countries turned towards market-oriented economic policies in the mid-2000s, their claim of leading a project of national economic development became increasingly untenable. These policies increasingly alienated the middle classes, who saw their relative position in society decline. Simultaneously, Egypt experienced a wave of labor protests and strikes that began in 2004 and lasted until the eve of the uprisings. According to one report, in the period between 2004 and 2008 some 1.7 million workers took to the streets to protest for better wages.⁷⁸ While the labor movement and democracy protests evolved largely in parallel, they began to merge when youth activists founded the April 6 Youth Movement in spring 2008 in order to support the strike of textile workers in the industrial town of El-Mahalla El-Kubra.⁷⁹ By merging demands for democratic reforms with calls for social justice, pro-democracy activists were therefore able to undermine the regime's claim to be an agent of national economic development. Demands for "social justice" have since become another goal of the protests, even though demonstrators face very different economic realities.

The final element that allowed for mass mobilization behind demands for political reforms has been the gradual bridging of the Islamist-secularist divide in Arab societies. For a long time divisions between the secular and Islamist opposition have been the most significant obstacle hindering the development of an effective political opposition.⁸⁰ Healing this rift has been possible mainly because of two elements. First, over the past two decades, Islamist parties have increasingly moderated and have been willing to endorse and adjust to democratic principles. In this respect, the writings and broad popular appeal of charismatic Islamist scholars and "Telemuftis", such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi and Amr Khaled, have been particularly important.⁸¹ Second, through their participation in a number of national parliaments across the Arab world, Islamist parties have been able to dispel some of the fears and suspicions of the secularist opposition and have been able to collect expe-

76. Steve Heydemann, "Social Pacts and the Persistence of Authoritarianism in the Middle East", in Oliver Schlumberger (ed.), *Debating Authoritarianism: Dynamics and Durability in Non-Democratic Regimes*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2007.

77. Larbi Sadiki, "Popular Uprisings and Arab Democratization", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2000.

78. Solidarity Center, *Justice for All: The Struggle for Workers Rights in Egypt*, Washington, DC, Solidarity Center, 2010.

79. David D. Kirkpatrick and David E. Sanger, "A Tunisian-Egyptian Link that Shook Arab History", *The New York Times*, 13 February 2011.

80. Dina Shehata, *Islamists and Secularists in Egypt: Opposition, Conflict & Cooperation*, London, Routledge, 2009.

81. Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen and Bettina Graf (eds.), *The Global Mufti: The Phenomenon of Yusuf al-Qaradawi*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2009.

riences in collaborating with other opposition elements. Most notably, while Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood never cooperated in a structured way with the Kifaya movement, it openly supported Mohamed El Baradei's National Association for Change in the run-up to the Egyptian Parliamentary election in 2010.

As a result of these various developments, the democratic reform discourse that had initially been adopted by the Kifaya movement in Egypt was able to attract a mass following throughout the Arab Spring protests of 2011. Many western academics have been quick to argue that this new discourse represents a decisive break with the past in the Arab world. They claim that not only did it end the hierarchical structure of Arab societies, by emphasizing universal concepts of personal and political freedom, but that it has also refuted traditional identifiers like Arabism and Islamism and undermined the appeal of nationalist and anti-imperialist discourses.⁸² More likely, however, this new discourse has temporarily integrated and submerged these different elements under the banner of political change and reforms. The continuing, if not growing, relevance of Pan-Arab issues and the Palestinian question have been amply demonstrated in the months following the revolution in Egypt. Similarly, Islamism has shown its continuing relevance as the largest political force following elections in Tunisia and Egypt.

Once this new discourse developed and was able to take root, it not only allowed protesters to build a unified front against the regime, but also enabled a process of cross-country contagion driven by social media platforms and Arab television networks. Generally speaking, the term "contagion" refers to the epidemic-like spread of demonstrations and disturbances that elude any intentional efforts by the regimes to control their intensity, scope, or direction. This type of contagious process is characterized by rapid transmission through the social media and new Arab satellite television networks like Al-Jazeera.⁸³ The spread from Tunisia onwards happened in a quick and intense series of events. Hence, political disturbances in Tunisia sparked internal disarray elsewhere. Similar contagions have happened before, as in the case of a series of upheavals and revolutions in Eastern Europe at the end of the Cold War.

The contagion of political disturbances can be understood in terms of a learning process. Often, learning is considered to be a conscious cognitive process. Therefore, much emphasis is placed on the spread of ideas, information and knowhow as the spearhead of contagion. However, the contagion effect can also be based on less cognitive and conscious processes than the dissemination of information and knowhow. Indeed, the literature on the contagion effect has also identified processes that are characteristically more unconscious and habitual social learning that is primarily non-cognitive and non-technical. Instead of constituting technical knowhow, these rapid contagious learning processes are based on emotions and sentiments. The "buzz" felt during the spread of demonstrations is in itself intoxicating and deeply epidemic. In this way, contagion in the Middle

82. Kristian Coates Ulrichsen and David Held, "The Arab 1989 Revisited", *Open Democracy*, 27 September 2011; Fareed Zakaria, "How Democracy Can Work in the Middle East", *Times*, 3 February 2011.

83. Marc Lynch, "After Egypt: The Limits and Promise of Online Challenges to the Authoritarian Arab State", *Reflections*, Vol. 9, No. 2, June 2011.

East is based on people becoming motivated and inspired to join demonstrations and other political mobilizations. Besides teaching people how to organize protests, contagion prompts sudden jolts of collective movements and shared emotions.

Such pulses of stimulation characterize the crucial emotive aspect of contagion, which might be better understood in terms of broad yet subtle subconscious persuasion. It consists of appeal at the level of alluring, emerging collective identities and seductive group dynamics, which spread by example and through highly visible spectacles and pure buzz. What remains uncertain so far is whether this contagion will also be able to create a new Arab identity and politics that are reflective of the new discourse adopted by Arab protesters. Here the evidence seems to be inconclusive. While there were signs during the revolutions that some of the traditional political affiliations were weakening, ever since the general trend seems to be favoring a return of more traditional politics. Not only Islamism, but also tribalism, regionalism and ethnic conflicts have returned to the fold. In conclusion, while there is much evidence that a new non-ideational Arab discourse has played an instrumental role in mobilizing and uniting disparate opposition forces, it is still too early to tell whether this will favor the development of a new form of Arab politics.

The End of Arab Authoritarianism?

In the final analysis, it is clear that there is no single explanatory variable that is responsible for the extraordinary events of the Arab Spring. In fact, while it seems impossible to pin one particular label to the Arab Spring, it is easier to say what it is not. The mass protests that have rattled the region over the past year are neither the product of a Twitter Revolution, nor are they the consequence of some dramatic external shocks to the Arab economies. They barely fit the image of a traditional class revolution – with the middle class taking a leading role in some cases, but not in others – and have not been animated by one overarching ideological trend, even though they share a common narrative. Finally, to portray them as revolutions against the Arab world's western-dominated post-colonial system seems equally misleading, given the key role that the West has played in shaping the outcome of most of the revolutionary uprisings.

The Arab Spring has been neither of these and it has been all of these. Just like previous revolutions, the uprisings have been driven by a combination of several variables: a gradual and uneven build-up of socio-economic pressures; a change in expectations amongst the younger age cohorts; a weakening of the state institutions; deepening elite divisions; the ready availability of new communication technologies; a narrative that was able to express commonly felt grievances and bridge ideological differences; and the demonstration effect and emotional contagion that followed the Tunisian uprisings. All of these have been necessary to allow for a rapid and sustainable process of political change. But despite the much noted similarities in both form and process of the protests, not all of these have been a given in all countries and, as a result, the outcomes are likely to differ.

Similar to the velvet revolutions of 1989 and the color revolutions of the 2000s, the Arab Spring has also demonstrated that regime collapse in one country can prove highly contagious and have an explosive effect on neighboring countries that are at very different stages of their political and economic development. As a result, regimes like al-Assad's Syria and Gaddafi's Libya, which many would have previously considered as more stable than protest-ridden Egypt, were sucked into the revolutionary maelstrom. However, while conditions in these countries were sufficient to nourish and sustain popular protests and revolts, they did not allow for the swift and largely peaceful change experienced by Tunisia and Egypt. Libya required a robust military intervention to shake off the yoke of Gaddafi, while Syria's revolution is going to test the cohesion of the country. In both cases, the incumbent regimes have been too coherent and the opposition too divided to allow for rapid political change. Both also demonstrate the crucial role that external actors are still playing in shaping the outcome of the Arab Spring protests.

What does all of this tell us about the future of Arab authoritarianism? Many universalistic explanations have emphasized that in 2011 the Arab world has once and for all broken down the "wall of fear" that has held back popular demands for democracy and that the achievements of the Arab Spring revolutions, even if still incomplete in some cases, have now become irreversible. The only

choice left to autocratic Arab leaders, according to this argument, is between a voluntary process of political reforms following in the footsteps of Morocco and a sudden and violent end to their rule as in the case of Gaddafi.

The Arab Spring has dramatically demonstrated the inherent instability of semi-authoritarian Arab regimes. But it has also shown that not all countries are likely to experience the same peaceful transition as Tunisia and Egypt. And while further instances of violent insurrection and civil war appear likely, there is little telling their outcome. Libya's revolution succeeded largely due to western intervention, but does not provide a ready model for the region. Moreover, the more protest movements are going to depend on external support in order to topple incumbent regimes, the more these revolutions will come to reflect geopolitical factors, rather than genuine domestic trends. With few prospects for real political change in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere, for the time being the Arab Spring is likely to remain a phenomenon with limited geographical reach.

Finally, it would be naïve to confuse the breakdown of the authoritarian model with the success of democracy and to argue that change is irreversible. Most revolutions throughout history had to contend with a counterrevolutionary backlash and not all recent revolutions have led to stable democracies. Both Lebanon's Cedar Revolution and Ukraine's Orange Revolution have recently seen a gradual roll-back in the gains made by protesters. Egypt, in particular, seems vulnerable to experiencing a similar process. Once again, the role of external actors will be crucial – either in defending the gains of the revolution, or belatedly undermining its success. Forming stable democracies in the region will unavoidably take time. Meanwhile, the narrative of the Arab Spring remains incomplete. Arab authoritarianism might be down, but cannot yet be counted out.



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