



# 3 REFORM // PROTEST // CHANGE

ESSAYS ON U.S. POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST



## No Going Back

Activists Reflect a Decade After the Arab Spring

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**F**or the generation of political activists that gave the world the Arab Spring in 2011, the ten intervening years have been an enormous letdown. The crowds called for democratic reforms, but the demands are largely unfulfilled.

There are still prospects for democratic development in North Africa, but in both Tunisia and Libya, portions of the public have become so disenchanted by political and economic setbacks that they are willing to revert to a more authoritarian rule. In the four other countries that saw

national uprisings in 2011, the political reform movement has hit bottom. In Syria, the Assad regime appears to be headed toward reconciliation with some Arab states despite its record of going to war against its own people and brutalizing its political opponents. The Egyptian government, led by Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, has carried out severe repression against civil society. And in tiny Bahrain, dissidents face steep challenges. Yemen, for its part, is engulfed in a complex civil war that grew out of the uprising.

While reform movements across the region may appear to be on life support, activists who took part in them say they are determined to press for political reforms that will give populations a voice in choosing their leaders, a role in governance, and real justice.

The aim of this paper is to take the pulse of the national reform movements a decade after they burst on the scene and ask those at the heart of these movements if they have a future. Activists from the six countries that staged national uprisings took part in hour-long Zoom interviews with the author, a method more akin to a multinational focus group than to a standard opinion poll. Underlying the talks was the assumption that 2011 was a transformative experience, and that those still active would have a unique perspective. Interviewees were presented with four questions:

Did anything go right in 2011?  
 What went wrong?  
 What lessons did you learn?  
 Where do you go from here?

Two interviewees were chosen from each country (three from Yemen) on the recommendation of area specialists at The Washington Institute and journalists in the United States and abroad. Eight of the thirteen activists—ten men, three women—reached are in exile, which itself tells a lot about the Arab Spring ten years on. Activists fear arrest, torture, death threats, or death in their home countries, and even abroad they fear the long arm of their countries' intelligence services. Two interviewees were reached in current war zones: Majed Abdelnour in rebel-held Idlib, Syria, and Osama Alfakih in Houthi-controlled Sanaa, Yemen. Only 2011-era activists from Libya and Tunisia could speak freely from their home capitals.

This paper recounts the views expressed by the interviewed activists, whose interpretation of events does not always jibe with the opinions of outside observers. The point is to offer an intimate sketch of activists' views of the past and future of their respective protest movements.

Taking part in a revolution, however incomplete, left a mark on every one of the interviewees. All have been sobered by the setbacks, but all say they are convinced that political change is inevitable; just when, no one can say.

Mohamed Soltan is an Egyptian-American who spent twenty-two months in an Egyptian jail where he staged a 489-day hunger strike, after having been arrested in

August 2013 for using his phone camera to document a lethal assault by Egyptian security forces at an Islamist protest.<sup>1</sup> On returning to the United States, he founded an NGO called the Freedom Initiative, which has helped win the release of political prisoners in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. In his view, “All of the conditions of the Arab Spring implosion currently are in place and exacerbated.” As for Egypt: “You cannot keep a population of 105 million, now growing at [an annual] rate of 2.3 percent, all this young energy—you cannot keep it locked up.” He and others say they are committed to continue what they started.

Baraa Shiban, who is from Yemen but is currently exiled in Britain, works for the NGO Reprieve. “We will face many challenges going forward, but I think the wrong response from our side would be that we give up,” he says. “This is a long struggle that may exist beyond our lifetime. We need to keep it alive. We owe it to the people who went out in 2011, who lost their lives, and to the many thousands who are in jail today who haven’t abandoned what we believe in.”



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—Baraa Shiban, Yemen

This essay’s thesis, drawn from the thirteen interviews, is that the Arab Spring has changed the Arab world, and there is no turning back the clock; the pushback by autocrats determined to thwart political reform is not the end of the story. Pro-democracy activists have yet to chart a path forward, but some have drawn thoughtful lessons from the setbacks they endured. Here are two ideas from interviewees:

- The reform movement should reach out to wary governments in neighboring states to win their understanding of the need for democratic reform (Bahrain and Yemen respondents).
- The reform movement should put a far greater emphasis on economic reform and on delivering a better life to the population at large (mentioned by activists from Tunisia, Libya, and Bahrain), versus quickly achieving electoral democracy.

None of the activists asked for the United States to take an active role in their domestic politics, other than to speak out against human rights abuses and to support economic reform.<sup>2</sup>

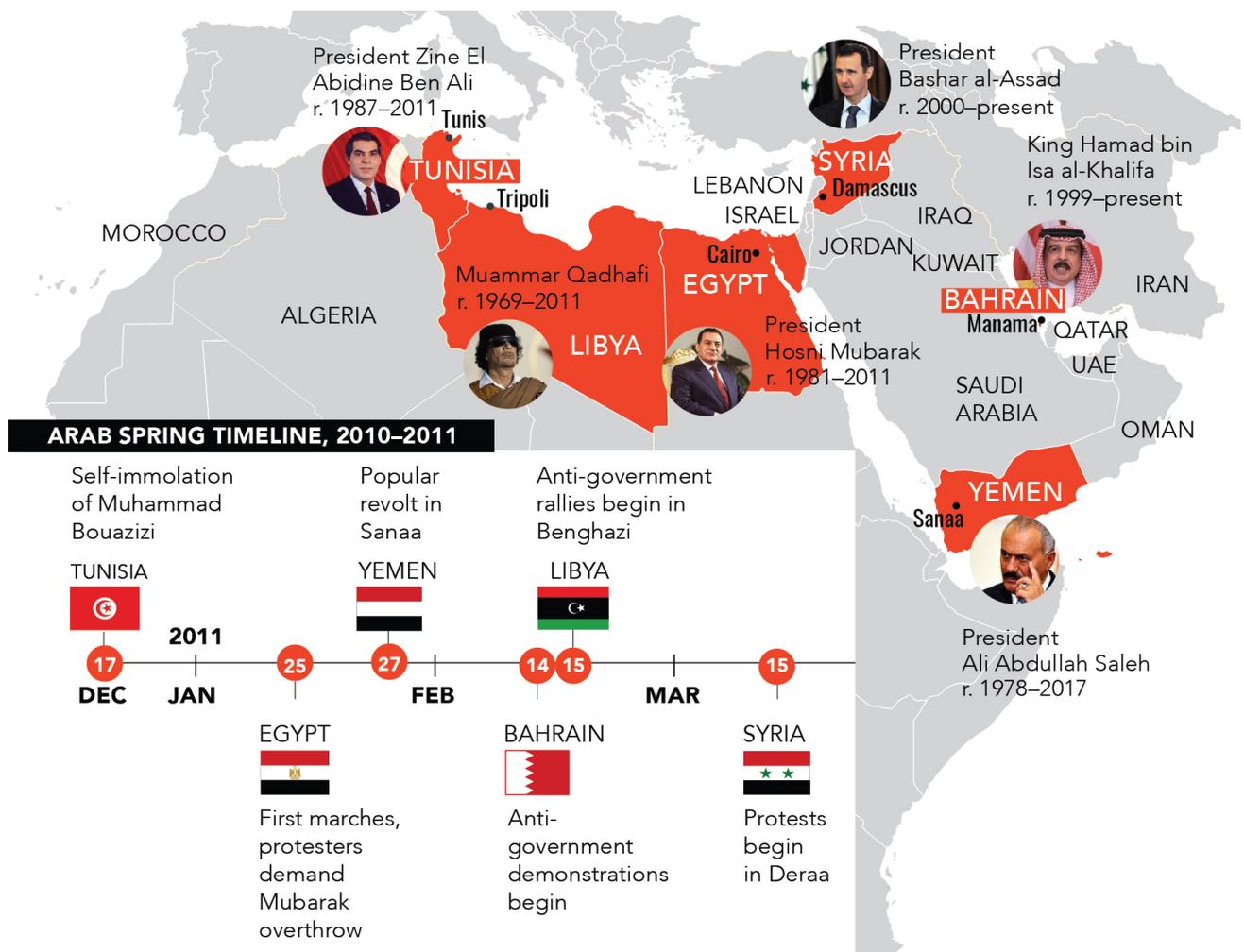
Their current circumstances may be dire, but the activists say they are on the right path. As Mohamed Soltan puts it: “Once we are able to get over this hump...I think we will say we made the best out of one of the worst, darkest moments in Egypt and the region’s history in terms of human rights, democratic governance, and the rule of law.”

## // Uprising and Crackdown

The Arab Spring began when a Tunisian street vendor set himself on fire in December 2010. This dramatic gesture kindled smoldering grievances long hidden by the absence of free speech throughout the region. The eventual fire spread faster thanks to social media as well as regional news media such as Al Jazeera. Populations across the region took to the streets and found their voices as they demanded respect for their dignity, a better life, change at the top of government, an end to corruption and repression, and the establishment of a modern, democratic political system.

In Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and Syria, the crowds called for the overthrow of the autocrat in power. In Bahrain, they called for political reform and more representation for the kingdom's Shia majority. It was high drama everywhere. The protests came seemingly out of nowhere. There were no real leaders. No one had a roadmap.

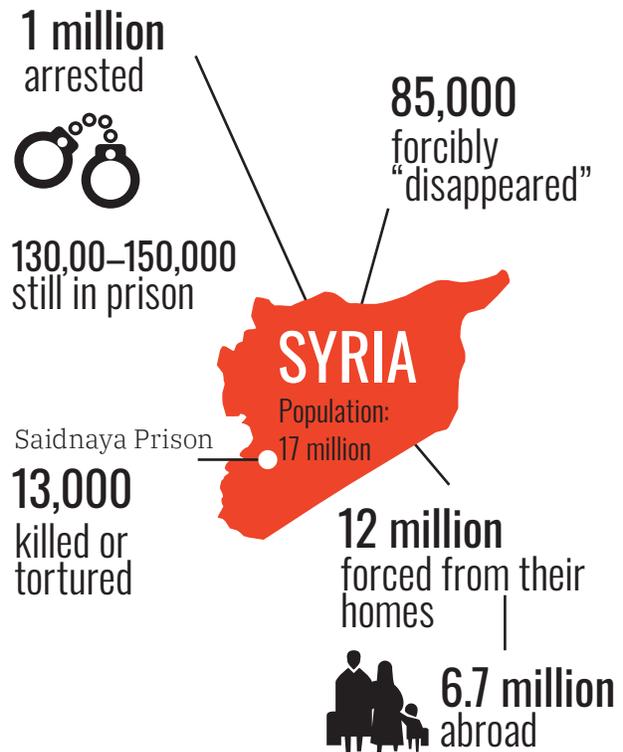
“People kind of rose spontaneously and instinctively on their own terms, exercising an agency they never thought they'd had and for a vision of liberation they had always aspired to as Bahraini citizens,” is how Alaa al-Shehabi, a Bahraini



living in London exile, describes the phenomenon. Demands were articulated under the banner of “people demand the downfall of the regime,” but what that meant for the youth was vague: “A sort of desire for what they considered to be forms of equality and anti-corruption, fairer distribution of wealth, and things like that.” For those older, a return to the constitution forged in 1972 was the ultimate aim. The radical flank in the movement went further to demand a republic.

The people paid a high price in 2011 and have ever since. The number of those imprisoned is staggering. One think tank estimates there are a quarter million political prisoners in the Middle East overall.<sup>3</sup> The biggest share is Arab Spring-related. In Syria, an estimated one million people have been arrested since the start of the revolution, and some 130,000, possibly 150,000, are still being held.<sup>4</sup> Some 85,000 Syrians have been forcibly “disappeared” by the regime since 2011. At least 13,000 were killed or tortured to death at Saidnaya Prison alone since 2011.<sup>5</sup> Then there are the displaced: according to UN figures, more than 12 million people were forced from their homes—6 million within the country, 6.7 million abroad. That accounts for more than half the population of 2011, and appears to be an intentional sectarian cleansing directed at the Sunni majority.

The picture is notably bleak in Egypt. The country’s “most prominent youth, the icons of the Arab Spring, are either behind bars, on travel bans, serving twelve-hour parole in police stations, or they are killed,” says Mohamed

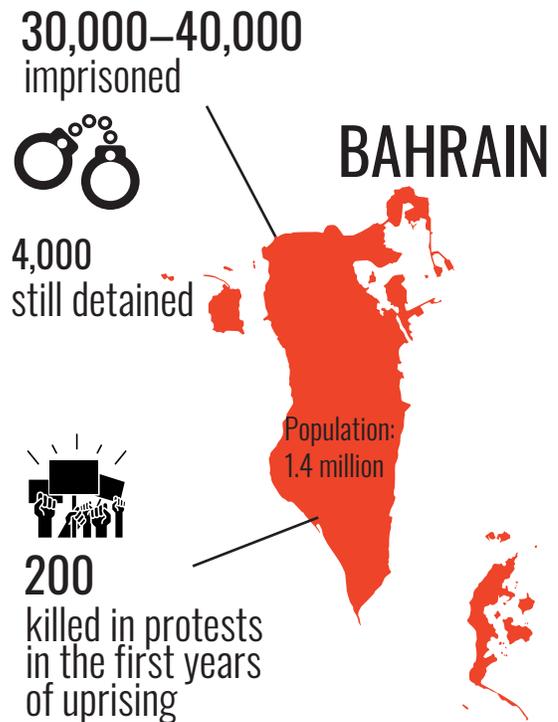
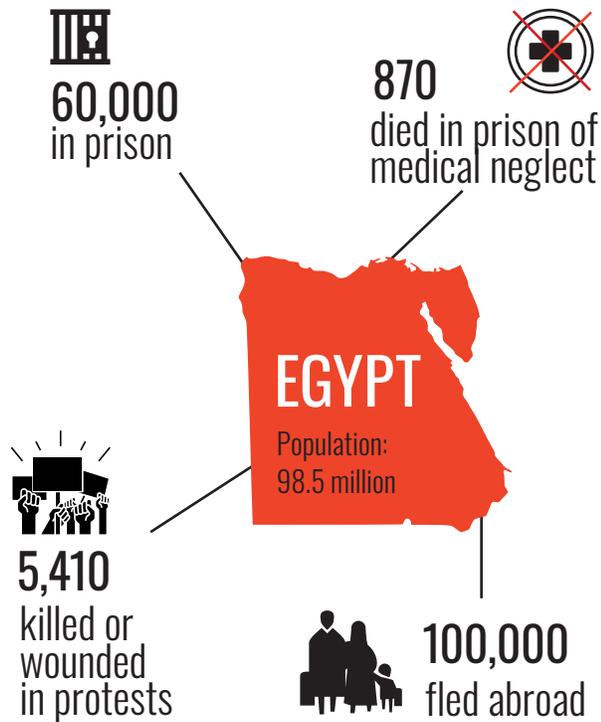


Soltan. “Egypt is more repressive than you’ve ever seen in history.” There are currently some 60,000 political detainees. Some 5,410 were killed or wounded in the uprising and subsequent suppression of protests.<sup>6</sup> At least 870 died of medical neglect while in detention, says Soltan. He collects his figures from the outside sources, which he says could be a violation of law, given that anyone who propagates statistics not approved by the government faces a five-year prison sentence.<sup>7</sup> Some 100,000 fled abroad, but the true number could be twice that, he says.



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–Mohamed Soltan, Egypt



In Bahrain, which has a population of 1.4 million, along with several hundred thousand expatriates, activists say that some two hundred people were killed in the first years of the uprising—an enormous number in a country that size. Some 30,000 to 40,000 people have been imprisoned at some point, and prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, some 4,000 were detained. Mass jailings were “unprecedented in Bahrain’s history,” says Shehabi, a Bahraini economics lecturer at the University of London. “It is not inconceivable that every [Shia] family has had a family member in prison at some point, or [has one who] is still in

jail...We never imagined what the cost was before because we never had that experience.”

This crackdown in Bahrain went way beyond what a peaceful popular uprising could sustain. “Think of the tools the government used,” Alaa al-Shehabi says. “People who are protesting peacefully have very little sway. This is something that may be insurmountable.”

In Yemen, activist Baraa Shiban estimates that as many as 18,000–20,000 people are in jail, with the largest number held by the Houthis after civil war broke out in 2014.<sup>8</sup>



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—Alaa al-Shehabi, Bahrain

## // Mass Repression and Its Risks

Imprisonment on the scale of the past ten years may alleviate the political pressure of the moment, but the activists point out that it will sow bitterness and enmity for generations. Abusive treatment of prisoners is likewise sure to generate blowback. In Egypt, jailers allow Islamic State jihadists under arrest to mix with prisoners from civil society. The IS prisoners have cell phones, license to roam, and the freedom to proselytize, according to Mohamed Soltan, who witnessed this occurring while he was imprisoned. This happened in Bashar al-Assad's jails as well.<sup>9</sup> It appears to reflect a

deliberate attempt to radicalize, and sometimes it works.

To quote Soltan: "The beast that can potentially come out of these prisons is something very scary. It is not just people coming out radicalized." Combine that with the fact that so many people have been arrested or killed simply for being at the wrong place at the wrong time, and sent to prison after mass show trials. "You have all segments of society who are disenfranchised." The prison population, in short, is a ticking time bomb.

## // "The Arab World Won't Be the Same Again"

Despite the repression or possibly because of it, activists say there is no going back. They say the changes brought about by the 2011 upheavals cannot be undone. "As it's looking now, it's as sh—y as it's ever been. It's way worse than it was pre-Arab Spring era," says Mohamed Soltan of Egypt. "But I think once we get out of this funk and start looking upward...we will look back at all of the lessons learned, all of the bridges that have been built across the ideological, the political, spectrum because everyone who's oppressed is [affected] in the same way."

Tunisians were the first to take to the streets, and they achieved the most of any Arab nation. But many fear, following President Kais Saied's decision to suspend parliament in July 2021, the constitution two months later, and then his attempt to suspend the country's Supreme Judicial Council in February 2022, that they will

lose the progress made. They can still celebrate having rid the country of one of the most oppressive dictatorships in the world, a police state that suppressed political opponents and held tens of thousands of prisoners of conscience, says Muhammad Saedani, a former student leader and activist.

Houssein Hajlaoui, another activist from 2011, says Tunisia is a "relative success" that still gives hope that democracy can be instituted in an Arab country. "We have a laboratory where we can show what happened," says Hajlaoui, a cofounder of the Tunisian investigative news website Inkyfada. Besides transforming Tunisia, which still has "a shot" at achieving a solid democracy, the mass uprisings put pressure on every Arab state, and some have taken the first cautious steps on the reform path. "So the Arab world won't be the same again," he says.



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—Majed Abdelnour, Syria

In Syria, where the Assad regime continues to shell its own civilian population in areas it does not control and makes no effort to convince the 12 million displaced to return to their homes, the activists say they nonetheless accomplished much. “The great achievement for us as Syrians is breaking the fear barrier that was built by the regime of tyranny and oppression,” says Majed Abdelnour, a former rebel spokesperson now working as a journalist in rebel-held Idlib. “Regardless of the outcomes of the revolution... regardless of the military defeats, regardless of the international collusion with the regime to bury this revolution, regardless of the conspiracies that targeted this revolution...we did something great. There is a long way to go, but we took the first step.”

In Bahrain, citizens, and women in particular, now have a far more advanced political

consciousness, says Alaa al-Shehabi. Women’s participation in the uprising was “massive” both in terms of organizing on the ground and in leading the protests.

Matar Matar, a newly elected member of parliament from the Shia-affiliated al-Wefaq Party when the Arab Spring swept Bahrain, points out that the reform movement coalesced behind demands for a constitutional monarchy with a separation of powers, an independent parliament, a government that represented the people, and a fair and independent judicial system. He is also quick to acknowledge that there was no progress on these demands. Al-Wefaq itself was later outlawed, along with virtually all other opposition parties. But the demands stand.

Yemen appears to many outsiders to be a hopeless case, mired in civil war and proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, but the Yemeni interviewees were among the most articulate in stating their goals, though like many others they have yet to chart the path to reach them. Osamah Alfakih, a Yemeni activist from 2011, today works as a human rights monitor based in Sanaa, which is under the control of the Iran-backed Houthi militia. There, he monitors war crimes, a daring task in the midst of war. “We believe that our neutrality has given us some protection because all the warring parties know that we are documenting the violations of all of them,” he says. “[But] personally, I don’t guarantee my safety even for the coming hour.”

Specifically, Alfakih is advocacy director for Mwatana, the independent Yemeni human rights monitor whose lawyers and staff report on war crimes from every province. Its staff has grown to 105 from seven or eight when he joined in 2015. Mwatana also has helped secure the release of more than six hundred people, among them political prisoners, arbitrarily detained, and “disappeared.” It is a remarkable example of activists from 2011 trying to bring about the rule of law in their country. (The American

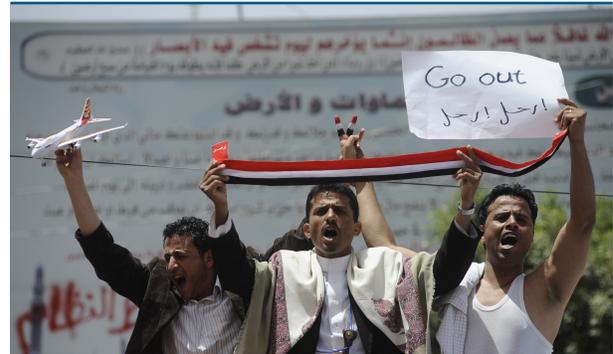
Friends Service Committee nominated Mwatana for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2021.)

Alfakih does not regret his participation in the Arab Spring. “I was just one of many young people who had dreams of a better future for Yemen and for ourselves,” he says. “In the end, it is a moment of hope. What went right is giving people a platform and the space to speak and express themselves, an increased political awareness.” The unsung political accomplishment of the Yemeni revolution was a National Dialogue about the country’s political future, he says. “One of the positive things is that there was a conference for dialogue in Yemen in 2013. That conference included all the political parties in Yemen. They met at the same table and agreed on a draft of the new constitution and a number of legal and constitutional regulations.” But there was a “disconnect” from the reality on the ground and an “absence of seriousness” in discussing major issues like transitional justice. The clearest sign of the conference’s failure was “when Houthis took control of Sanaa and the current armed conflict started.”

Yemeni Baraa Shiban, now living in Britain, has his vision: “The story isn’t ended, we’ve seen many chapters since 2011. It’s not always the case that you might live to see the end of the story.” The Arab Spring, he says,

definitely sparked a movement. The movement was led by the younger generation...many observers felt that this era would see the rise of terrorist organizations, radical organizations, but we saw a different generation. We saw a generation that aspired toward democracy, rule of law, good governance, and accountability. And I think that was an important step to realize, and an important step to move forward for the future of our country.

He recalls that “when we went out on the streets



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in 2011, it was the first time we felt proud to be Yemenis, and that we had something to share, and that the future is not doomed with authoritarianism, dictatorship and tyranny.” The same exists even today. “The youth were able to change the regime that oppressed the Yemenis for thirty-five years; that same regime is responsible for handing the army and the state institutions over to the Houthis,” the reference here being to the late president Ali Abdullah Saleh’s about-face to back the rebel group.

Baraa has a clear idea of what must happen for the Yemen crisis to end. “This is a civil war, an issue for the Yemenis,” he says. “They should come together to find a solution for themselves.”

## // Mistakes Made

It goes without saying that revolution by spontaneous uprising is not an orderly process. Ten years later, activists acknowledge many mistakes but say they have learned many lessons the hard way.

Tunisia was the first country to revolt and saw the quickest result, with the resignation of President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali just weeks after the start of street protests. The problems began with the follow-through in setting up a constitutional democracy. One issue was passage of an electoral law that made it impossible for big parties to win a majority and resulted in nine governments in ten years. A second was the failure of successive presidents to appoint members of a constitutional court. “We have a perfect constitution. But no one is respecting its provisions,” says activist Mohamad Amin Saedani, who is also a Tunisian official but is not being paid for his services.

In Egypt and Libya, activists say the public and civil society groups were too quick to celebrate the overthrow of leaders Hosni Mubarak and Muammar Qadhafi, respectively, as if the goal of the protests was their overthrow, not the establishment of a new constitutional order. This is a fallacy that great powers sometimes indulge, as the United States did in Afghanistan and Iraq. Ousting the ruling clique or individual does not mean the job is done but rather that it is just beginning.

In Egypt, the public filled Cairo’s Tahrir Square starting in late January 2011, and Mubarak was gone by mid-February. The crowds immediately

began to disperse, and public pressure for change gave way to political wrangling among the civil society groups and with the most powerful Islamist party, the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood saw its best chance for power in early elections, put a president in office, and held a referendum in late 2012 to approve a new Islamist-drafted constitution. But by going it alone, it played into the hands of Egypt’s Supreme Military Council, which pursued a divide-and-conquer strategy to the Brotherhood’s detriment.

Now, the Brotherhood is widely distrusted. Bassam Bahgat, an Egyptian writer living in Britain, charges that the Muslim Brotherhood was “exclusionary and not open to coalitions” and was “a factor in the major errors. And now they’re playing the victim.”

Consultations in Yemen were better organized than in Egypt when the country’s political players began their National Dialogue in spring 2013. The Houthis took part in the Arab Spring protests, but they were among the most disaffected parties in the dialogue, and Baraa Shiban acknowledges that civil activists failed to read Houthi intentions. As he puts it: “Are they just a marginalized group who...need just inclusion, or are they seeking to topple the government and end the transition and then move toward a more theocratic form of government?” The decision by ousted dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh to team up with the Houthis shifted the political and military balance. The Houthis took Sanaa in late 2014 and started conquering towns and provinces, rekindling a dormant civil war, he says.

## // Lessons Learned

The political grouping most heavily blamed for the failures of the Arab Spring is the Sunni Islamists, in particular the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization that was born in Egyptian jails, operated underground for decades, and emerged in 2011 to take a lead role in the Egypt, Syria, and Libya uprisings. The Brotherhood's failure and lack of competence inform the first major lesson, according to the activists. To be sure, their role differed in each country—and it did not exist in Shia-majority Bahrain.

Mohamed Soltan says that if the opportunity were given him, “I would do everything in my power to make sure political Islamists are not in the forefront of any [future] political reality.” The Brotherhood “did a disservice for everyone,” he says. They were “incompetent...mismanaged,” made “stupid decisions in power,” and they got “played” by the Egyptian military leadership.<sup>10</sup> His father, a prominent Islamic scholar named Salah Soltan, was detained in 2013 and sentenced in 2017 on charges stemming from protests against the removal of the elected president, Mohamed Morsi. Soltan has been held incommunicado since June 2020.<sup>11</sup>

The Brotherhood was a major player in both politics and fighting in Syria as well. Majed Abdelnour, the journalist now living in rebel-held Idlib, like Mohamed Soltan, would keep the Brotherhood away from the revolution forever. He accuses the Brotherhood of effectively destroying opposition political bodies by trying to control them all, preventing some of the best thinkers from taking leadership roles and, in general, “excluding all those who adhere to different ways of thinking.” “They wanted to be the only side that represented the revolution politically. They wanted to dominate all political bodies,” he says.

In the Syrian war, Abdelnour charges that the Brotherhood's armed affiliate, Ahrar al-Sham, functioned as “the hatchery” for armed Islamist groups. Ahrar al-Sham supported Islamists in order to fight moderate opposition groups “that were ideologically against them,” he says. The Brotherhood received considerable support from Turkey, whose leader, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is an outspoken Islamist, and from Qatar, a source of financial support. But Abdelnour also blames the moderates for not expanding their alliances against the Brotherhood. “We should have established bodies that could have created a balance...to prevent their monopoly of decisionmaking,” he explains.

Sentiment against the Brotherhood is widely shared. In Libya, Ibrahim al-Usaifer, who was a member of the Brotherhood at the time of the Libyan revolution, criticizes the group for turning much too quickly to arms after Qadhafi's overthrow. The Brotherhood “made a big mistake during the democratic transition period. They bet on war more than politics in the beginning,” he says. With the collapse of Qadhafi's one-man rule, weapons flooded Libya and the state was hijacked by military and religious militias, as he recounts the situation.

Usaifer himself, in his Brotherhood role, ran the Youth and Public Relations Office. But he underwent an ideological transformation and now is helping form a new party called the Democratic Party that will be neither religious, ethnic, nor ideological in character. “We want to establish a state of laws, according to the international norms. Religious ideology should be excluded... We draw our legitimacy from the laws.” Responding to a question about whether mosque can be separated from state, he explains: “There must be a separation between the two.”

A second major lesson for the interviewed activists is a recognition of the indispensable role of the state and the army in the transition from one political system to another. In Libya, with the collapse of the military that answered only to Muammar Qadhafi, there was an urgent need to collect arms and dissolve the armed factions, but the initial head of the National Transitional Council, who was de facto head of state, instead commissioned more factions. “Every time twenty people were able to reach [NTC head] Mustafa Abdul Jalil, they got his signature on a decision to permit them to establish a battalion,” recalls Akram al-Nejar, a non-Islamist activist who later became a leader of the National Forces Alliance party and an activist in democratic transition NGOs.

In Yemen, Saleh’s action in supporting the Houthis split the country’s defense force, undercutting the internationally recognized government’s ability to fight the group. Saleh’s successor, Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi, is the internationally recognized president, but activists say there is no army and no state, only a raging civil war, with Iran arming the Houthis. “The core of any country is defined by its monopoly over the use of force,” says Baraa Shiban, the Yemeni activist now in London. “If you lose that monopoly...no matter how great your ideals, how high the aspirations, how many vibrant movements you have, if you don’t have the basic fundamental state institutions that will hold this together, it will ultimately collapse, and that is exactly what happened in Yemen.” Or as Huda al-Sarari, a Yemeni human rights lawyer now living in Omani exile, puts it, “The state in Yemen is indispensable. We in Yemen lack the state. We lack the state institutions and the judicial system.”

The third major lesson the activists suggest is in the field of diplomacy. Those helping lead the uprisings in the two Gulf states, Bahrain and Yemen, say they failed to reach out to Saudi Arabia, the main power in the Gulf. The kingdom

was the ultimate arbiter, sending troops into Bahrain to back the leadership’s crackdown on protesters. In Yemen, the Saudis helped broker a Gulf initiative calling for then president Saleh to step down, meeting the main demand of the protesters, but the initiative granted Saleh legal immunity, to the dismay of many.

Matar Matar, the former Bahraini member of parliament, says the reason to reach out to Saudi Arabia is to win its understanding for a constitutional monarchy. “I do believe Bahrain can be a small lab for the Saudis to test what works and what doesn’t work,” he says. Leading members of his party, al-Wefaq, a moderate Shia Islamist group that the Bahraini government has now dissolved, had the goal of transforming Bahrain’s system from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy.

The proposal raises questions: Would the Saudi government engage with al-Wefaq if it were allowed to operate again? Would it engage with the secular-leftist National Democratic Action Society? Given Riyadh’s distrust of Shia-led Iran, and its experience with the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen, outreach by al-Wefaq seems unlikely to work but is a prospect that remains to be tested.

Explains Matar:

We want to convince the Saudis that change is in their interest...I felt it was a failure not being able to reach the Saudis. For me, I tried a lot, and it’s my priority. I prefer I write the Saudis as the most important [address]...I’d be very happy if I had this opportunity to speak with Saudi researchers, to speak with someone from the Saudi government and to give our perspective. To think how can we go and attract [and] serve the interests of both the Saudis and Bahrainis.

Yemenis are also self-critical about the failure of their diplomacy. On the assumption that

Gulf states would oppose any change in Yemen, protesters on Change and Freedom Squares were “very hostile,” says Baraa Shibani, “and I think that was a mistake.” He continues: “The youth decided to boycott all of the talks of the GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] initiative. We were meeting with the British and the Americans to communicate to the Saudis...we should have gone and tried to communicate [directly]...what do we want and how do we see this relationship moving forward.” The absence of communication “enabled the Houthis to hijack the message [and say] this revolution is basically going to be very hostile toward the monarchies in the Gulf.” Shibani summarizes: “We need to have a form of understanding with Saudi Arabia that can allow us to carry on doing our business as the Republic of Yemen, and they carry on doing their business as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The communication should have been better from 2011.”

The fourth lesson the activists say they learned is that economic reform should be a topmost priority. In Tunisia, the activists say their failure to improve the economy is the single biggest cause for the public’s disaffection with the revolution. “I would give extreme priority to economic reform,” says Houssein Hajlaoui, one of the founders of Inkyfada. “Democracy prospers when the economy is good. Democracy didn’t deliver the socioeconomic promises for ten years,” he says. There was a stark failure to “reverse, stop the decline of the Tunisian economy and the corruption. Everything just kept getting worse at exactly the same pace. But people were already beyond their capacity of acceptance.”

Bahrain’s Matar Matar agrees wholeheartedly and identifies economic reform as his top priority. Economic reform “would have a positive impact on democratization,” he says. “It isn’t necessary to start with democracy. Why not just start with whatever is feasible? If economic reform is feasible, then let’s start with it. And let’s keep democracy evolving as we have a healthier private sector.” He maintains that the private



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–Matar Matar, Bahrain

sector, which in a well-functioning economy requires the rule of law, open bidding on contracts, and an independent judiciary, “could be a driver for change.”

Is there a way to ensure that economic reform does not strengthen authoritarian regimes? Are some elements of economic reform more conducive to political reform? This is a topic that deserves thought. In a general sense, such reform can strengthen authoritarians, as in China or in Egypt under Hosni Mubarak, but there is no debate that economic reform is needed.

Libyan leaders also see the economy as the key to making democratization work. Electricity is off for twenty hours a day; public employees have had no salaries since early 2021, and the current inflation rate exceeds 20 percent. “All this has made average citizens complain about this revolution and wish that it had never happened,” says Ibrahim al-Usaifer. “Citizens start to...miss Qadhafi, who at least provided daily necessities and stability, where there were no wars, no rockets falling on their homes, and no warplanes bombing.”

## // The Way Ahead

Egyptian activists say that, to the best of their knowledge, the tens of thousands of Egyptians in exile have yet to come up with significant plans for future political action, but many conversations are taking place about how to unite and what to aim for. “We’re in that phase where people are just talking to each other,” Mohamed Soltan says. “We’re trying to find common ground, realizing there are many more commonalities than there are differences, and working together toward the common goal.” According to Bassam Bahgat, one politician who may try to set up a future organization is Ayman Nour, a former member of the Egyptian parliament who runs al-Sharq television as a platform from Istanbul, but his ties to the Muslim Brotherhood may prevent him from playing a leadership role.

Bassam Bahgat, the second of the two Egyptian interviewees, estimates it might take another “ten years [more or less]” for Egypt to have a representative democracy. Soltan is more bleak. “I don’t think the regime is going anywhere anytime soon,” he says. The opposition in exile so far has had no successes to mention. “The ability to mobilize and galvanize the masses and the folks in exile under one banner has been an utter failure thus far.”

As for Bahrain, Alaa al-Shehabi says of her fellow protesters: “I’m a bit disappointed with my generation in the sense we haven’t come up with alternative political groups. Critical activists of all ideological persuasions returned to silence or left the country and are scattered around the world, hunkered down...we haven’t turned that energy or consciousness to new political organization.” She adds: “It doesn’t help that ten of the elder leaders are in prison. Clearly, the threat they pose to the regime ten years on still remains,



**“I’m a bit disappointed with my generation in the sense we haven’t come up with alternative political groups. Activists of all political persuasions are scattered around the world, hunkered down...we haven’t turned that energy or consciousness to new political organization.”**

—Alaa al-Shehabi, Bahrain

especially as they have refused their own release in defiance of the conditions of release the regime has imposed. Many of these leaders haven’t made the news because of their Islamist leanings.”

The organization may be lacking, but the ideas are not. Matar Matar’s idea of pushing for economic reform as a top priority corresponds with the thinking in several other countries, and it is one the international community could easily support. A well-functioning private sector can thrive best supported by the rule of law, a free and effective judiciary to carry out the law, and watchdogs against corruption. It requires a policy of inclusivity encompassing women, marginalized groups, and foreign citizens, all of which benefits democratic development.

In Tunisia, economic reform is the order of the day. Activists say the failure to undertake

economic reform to improve daily life is the second biggest mistake made by the elected post-Arab Spring leadership; the first was the failure to appoint the justices to staff the Constitutional Court.

Matar Matar's other declared goal is a concerted diplomatic drive to convince Bahrain's neighbor, Saudi Arabia, that the tiny nation could become a laboratory for economic and political reform applicable to the kingdom and the Gulf region. Liberalizing the economy by dramatically reducing the state's role could complement any move from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy.

Yemeni activists also recognize the need for a far closer liaison with Saudi leaders to help determine the future of Yemen. Their current deep distress centers on the empowerment of the Houthi rebels, who, according to Baraa Shibani, claim a divine right to rule Yemen. He explains: "It was apparent that the Houthi movement was appearing as a theocracy. The head of the movement was referring to himself as 'the chosen.' According to their doctrine, he's from the descendants of the Prophet...That is an ideology that is based on theocracy, not

democracy." As for the activists of 2011, Shibani puts it this way: "*We want a republic. We will not be going back to a monarchy or a theocracy.*"

Osamah Alfakih, who is monitoring human right violations in Sanaa, and the other Yemeni activists demand accountability for abuses of international law before, during, and after the Arab Spring. He says: "What is required at the moment is to have an international investigative body for Yemen to tackle these issues and go back to the past as far as possible to hold those who are responsible accountable for the abuses and to bring some justice to the victims."

And what do the Syrians want? Perhaps mainly not to give up hope. Majed Abdelnour, the journalist living in Idlib, puts it this way. "Once the Arab peoples revolted, once they broke the fear barrier, once they stopped being scared of tyrants and oppressors, once they knew that freedom is the goal, they will carry on. Yes, the Arab revolutions were suppressed, but there will certainly be a new wave of the Arab Spring. It is coming inevitably, and no one will be able to stop it. The Arab Spring is a train that has already departed, and it will inevitably reach the final station." ❖

## NOTES

1. The crimes for which Soltan was charged include “membership in a terrorist organization, membership in an armed militia, disturbing the peace, falsifying and spreading rumors about the internal affairs of Egypt, and finally, the killing of protesters.” Soltan spent much of his youth in the United States and attended Ohio State University. See Robert Mackey, “American Jailed in Egypt Appeals to Obama for Help,” *New York Times*, June 3, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/04/world/middleeast/american-jailed-in-egypt-appeals-to-obama-for-help.html>.
2. But many in the general public want the United States to champion democratic development. A 2021 poll covering Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates showed that one quarter of respondents feel the top U.S. priority in their region should be promoting human rights and democracy. Equal numbers saw the top U.S. priority as either pushing for a solution to the Palestinian conflict, containing Iran, or ending the wars in Libya and Yemen. David Pollock, “Good News for a Change,” *Fikra Forum*, July 29, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/good-news-gulf-change>.
3. “A Shocking Outcome of the ‘Arab Spring’”: More Than a Quarter of a Million Detainees and Prisoners” (in Arabic), Gulf Research Center, n.d., <https://bit.ly/3fGzOHU>.
4. “Documentation of 72 Torture Methods the Syrian Regime Continues to Practice in Its Detention Centers and Military Hospitals,” Syrian Network for Human Rights, October 21, 2019, <https://sn4hr.org/blog/2019/10/21/54362/>.
5. See, e.g., Amnesty International, “Syria: Secret Campaign of Mass Hangings and Extermination at Saydnaya Prison,” February 7, 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/02/syria-investigation-uncovers-governments-secret-campaign-of-mass-hangings-and-extermiation-at-saydnaya-prison/>.
6. “Official Report Reveals Number of Martyrs over Nine Years” (in Arabic), *al-Mal*, March 9, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3tF44v3>. The National Council for Supporting the Families of Martyrs and the Wounded maintains a Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/NCMIEgypt>.
7. Discontent is widespread in Egypt, according to polling. A June 2020 survey showed that 42 percent of Egyptians view the absence of street demonstrations as seen in other Arab countries as a “good thing,” while 54 percent disagree with the statement. The same poll showed that 85 percent of the public views internal political and economic reform as a higher priority than foreign policy. David Pollock, “Egyptian Public Concerned About Internal Problems, Not Israel,” *Fikra Forum*, June 26, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/egyptian-public-concerned-about-internal-problems-not-israel-government-policies>.
8. Note that Amnesty International, Freedom House, and the annual U.S. government human rights reports do not estimate numbers.
9. See Roy Gutman, “Here’s How We Built ISIS,” *Daily Beast*, December 1, 2016, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/assad-henchman-heres-how-we-built-isis>.
10. But the Muslim Brotherhood remains a force in Egyptian politics, even though it has been banned as a terrorist group. A 2019 poll showed that 28 percent of Egyptians hold a “somewhat positive” opinion about the group, down from 35 percent from the previous year. David Pollock, “Egypt’s Public Backs Israeli-Palestinian Compromise, Wants Good Ties with United States,” *Fikra Forum*, January 21 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/egypts-public-backs-israeli-palestinian-compromise-wants-good-ties-united-states>.
11. Human Rights Watch, “Egypt: U.S. Advocate’s Father Held Incommunicado,” November 21, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/11/15/egypt-us-advocates-father-held-incommunicado>.

## The Author

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## // Interview Highlights



### Matar Matar (Bahrain)

- “On none of the major concerns and stressing issues of the pro-democracy movement did we see any progress.”
- “We [the pro-democracy movement in Bahrain] were talking about democracy as our right, but we didn’t give a lot of attention to whether it was something doable...We overestimated the impact of the human rights community.”
- “I think the most important question is how to come up with a formula related to political change that is not threatening to the Saudis.”
- “Sheikh Ali Salman [a Bahraini Shia cleric and member of the banned al-Wefaq political society] thought that a constitutional monarchy would bring long-term sustainability for all ruling families and that it was the only way for Saudi Arabia to have a sustainable future...I completely agree with Sheikh Ali Salman, and I do believe that Bahrain can be like a small lab for the Saudis to see what works and what doesn’t work.”
- “Stability is more important than democracy.”
- “I don’t want democracy through chaos...I’d prefer to go for gradual reform while avoiding confrontation.”
- “If economic reform is feasible, then let’s just start with that and keep democracy evolving as we have a healthier private sector and a healthier economic environment.”
- “I remember when I was running for election [to the Bahraini parliament] ten years ago, when I met with people, they didn’t ask me a lot about political rights or human rights or political prisoners. Their focus was on housing: ‘What are you going to do for us on housing, schools, education? What are you going to do about jobs?’”
- “The United States should believe that democracy in the Gulf is in its interests...Using the Saudis as a front against Iran while thinking about economic reforms and human rights—those things cannot work together.”
- “I’m optimistic that things will move in the right direction.”



## Alaa al-Shehabi (Bahrain)

- “The crackdown was unlike anything they had imagined...every family has had a family member in prison.”
- “Fifty percent of the protesters were women, and they were open and they were on the street; they were there in large numbers.”
- “There was no possibility that any difference in action, I think, would have changed the outcome.”
- “It really was violence we had never experienced or seen. It wasn’t a joke...I’ve seen a lot of dead bodies.”
- “People know the names of their abusers...it’s such a small place. Everyone you talk to knows the name of the person who interrogated and tortured them.”
- “The government relies on other tools just as much as it does on the violence—it relied a lot on its own media and its own loyalists. There was severe social polarization used to split Sunnis and Shia.”
- “People got to the king’s palace, and I remember standing outside with journalists and I was like, between us and power is this door. If these people weren’t so civilized and broke this door down, we’d effectively take over the throne of the country.”
- “The word *republic* had never been uttered in the Gulf.”
- “I’m a bit disappointed in my generation in the sense that we haven’t come up with alternative political groups. Everyone scattered around the world. Everyone sort of hunkered down and tried to go back to whatever their old job was, to make a living.”
- “As a political project, you need to know what you’re fighting for...We know vague things about freedom and ending repression and ending corruption. But what would you do if you got in power?”
- “So why haven’t the new leaders come up? All of the best thinkers...are in jail right now.”



## Bassam Bahgat (Egypt)

- “There are currently many more people who are interested in having a democratic government than there were before 2011, at least in Egypt.”
- “Don’t demonstrate every week or on every occasion. Demonstrate strategically, protest strategically. Work on building constituencies that are consistent.”
- “I think the people in exile are the people who have some lessons to teach. Many of them are seeking better education and improving their skills. So, there might come a moment where people who are exiled have some influence.”
- “We will take our time, but we will end up with our own literature on how to run a government in a democratic way.”
- “We have two major risk factors: political Islamists, who are becoming victims but still have some street support, and the security forces, which are not easy to estimate.”
- “[Democracy in Egypt] might take ten years [more or less].”
- “The foreign factor is very important in the Egyptian case...It’s actually foreign pressures that keep many people [in Egypt] safe and free.”
- “Being liberal to me means that I accept that Israel is a state and I respect people of all religions.”



## Mohamed Soltan (Egypt)

- “A population of 105 million growing at a 2.3 percent rate—a country like that, with that young energy, you cannot keep it locked up forever.”
- “[The situation in Egypt] is as sh—y as it’s ever been. It’s way worse than it was in the pre–Arab Spring era.”
- “The only people who were allowed in my cell aside from the guards and officials were the jihadists.”
- “These are the same prisons that...gave birth to al-Qaeda, that grandfathered [the Islamic State]. Except the situation now is much worse.”
- “[Syrian president Bashar al-] Assad showed all of these authoritarian regimes how to do it. And literally all of these guys are following some iteration of what Assad did, where, using brute force, you eliminate moderate opposition and you let extremists go, and then you say that you are fighting terrorism.”
- “Assad did it brilliantly, and he’s killed over five hundred thousand Syrians in the name of countering terrorists.”
- “If I had any power at the time and I could go back, I would first and foremost do everything in my power to make sure that the political Islamists were not at the forefront of any sort of political reality.”
- “My dad’s in prison...because of my activism, my human rights activism in Washington.”
- “I’m not naive, I just believe in people, and I think that as people continue to have conversations, share their experiences, and be vulnerable about the pains of the past, we can work toward mitigating any more pain in the future.”
- “We’re working with coalition members and civil society to get \$75 million of the \$1.3 billion [in U.S. military aid to Egypt] to be conditioned on releasing political prisoners.”



## Akram al-Nejar (Libya)

- “Conflicts today are historical conflicts that began in the Libyan civil war in the 1930s.”
- “I haven’t left Libya over the last ten years. I have been through all the difficult circumstances that our people lived through.”
- “It is the destiny of Libyans to live together in one country.”
- “We are seeing rounds of wars and then dialogues that should have taken place in the 1950s, not today.”
- “Active players such as tribes, armed factions, and political parties need to agree on a single project. When they do, it will not be important who carries it out.”
- “There was a need to hold some people responsible for their behavior, not for their affiliations.”
- “I am against copying the experiences of others, but there are many points where we can learn from the experience of Rwanda.”
- “The time is gone for static political identities...The road or the hospital that you are going to build doesn’t need any specific ideology.”
- “I think [al-Qaeda and the Islamic State] are cancers that are alien to our societies and environment...I don’t think there can be any means of contact between somebody who believes in a democratic modern state and such groups.”
- “[My Islamist friend Ibrahim al-Usaifer] and I see Libya from the same perspective. We both believe that there is a need to get rid of this polarization, and we have succeeded in achieving communication between our parties.”



## Ibrahim al-Usaifer (Libya)

- “People are missing the old dictatorial regime because they’ve lost the bare necessities and they’re suffering.”
- “[New intellectual freedoms] may not be seen by average citizens due to the proliferation of arms and the prevalence of chaos and militias, but it is a real achievement of the revolution.”
- “We have to learn the basics of disagreement. We don’t have to go to zero-sum equations. There’s an Arabic proverb that says, ‘What cannot be acquired as a whole must not be ignored completely.’”
- “When we talk about the crisis in Libya, no one can claim innocence. Everyone contributed to the crisis in one way or another.”
- “When we remove arms from the political process, then we can say that the Arab Spring had [borne] fruit [in Libya].”
- “Decisionmaking [in Libya] started to happen in other capitals and other states.”
- “The international community contributed to the success of the revolution, but it didn’t contribute to the success of the state.”
- “I myself am a member of the [Muslim Brotherhood]...However, we are now planning to establish a new party. We call it the Democratic Party... We are from a group of MB who are passing through a real ideological transformation...It is not a religious, ethnic, or ideological party. It is merely a political party that bets on the political process alone to solve the Libyan crisis.”
- “Members of political Islam in general have acquired more political awareness. If we go to a real democratic process, their behavior will be completely different.”
- “I think we need a regime that respects law, whether it’s sharia or not.”



## Majed Abdelnour (Syria)

- “We have a regime built with iron and fire on sixteen different security departments.”
- “I consider breaking the fear barrier to be the biggest achievement for the Syrian revolution, regardless of its outcomes.”
- “Arming the revolution was a catastrophe that made many of the peaceful revolutionaries quit. We missed these people in the revolution.”
- “At a certain stage, however, I accepted militarization because there was danger to our lives.”
- “I would keep the Muslim Brotherhood away from the revolution...We should have expanded alliances and created more balance. We should have established bodies that could have created balance with the MB.”
- “If we had closed Syria and stopped any foreign support—both for the regime and the opposition—the Syrian revolution would have succeeded from the first day.”
- “If the revolution had been peaceful, Bashar [al-Assad] could have defeated it, but without reaching this level of destruction, ruin, and displacement. So, based on our military defeat, I would say that I prefer peaceful revolution.”
- “We all as Arab countries dream of democracy.”
- “There will certainly be a new wave of the Arab Spring...The Arab Spring is a train that has departed, and it will inevitably reach its final destination.”
- “Today, the United States is viewed negatively as a pragmatic state that supports democracy in one place and tyranny in another.”
- “The first thing the United States should have done is to stop looking at the region from the perspective of Israel.”
- “Normalizing relations with Israel isn’t a result of the Arab Spring; it is a result of the Iranian expansion in the region.”
- “Normalization can’t help in bringing democracy because the regimes that are normalizing are dictatorial.”



## Mona al-Fraij (Syria)

- “Early militarization [of the revolution] was...I don’t want to say a mistake, but rather ignorance.”
- “People forgot their original links with one another as friends, neighbors, and colleagues and started to look at themselves as Kurds, Alawites, or Druze.”
- “The international community waited until terrorist extremist groups appeared, then it intervened only because it feared for itself.”
- “Armed factions didn’t have political leaders. The leaders of armed factions were not university graduates, and they were not educated. They didn’t understand what it means to have power.”
- “I was careful to attend demonstrations from the beginning of the revolution, despite the objection of some young men as an expression of patriarchal guardianship. They used to say, ‘You’re a girl and you could be arrested.’”
- “In September [2014], when I decided to stay in Raqqa, [Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-] Baghdadi had already announced the caliphate. I wrote on my Facebook, ‘A caliph, you son of a [dog]?’”
- “IS raided my home at 8 p.m....Women created a barrier with their bodies near the stairs to help me escape. I climbed, and then I jumped into the house of our neighbors. I broke my leg.”
- “Now, the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria is following the course of the regime, using the same oppressive tactics.”
- “Unfortunately, the Americans are helping this oppressive authority [the Autonomous Administration]. The Americans are not demanding that they hold elections, even on the local level.”
- “Women’s Protection Units [Kurdish groups known by the acronym YPJ] are harming women more than helping them.”
- “In the current situation, with the lack of the international will for change in Syria, I think we will continue to be homeless and our dreams will not leave the pages of the social media platforms.”



## Houssein Hajlaoui (Tunisia)

- “Tunisia is a relative success, so it gives hope that this is possible—the idea that democracy can be implemented in an Arab country. That in itself, even if it happens in only one example, is a big deal.”
- “I’m always skeptical of the business of predicting the future.”
- “Arab Spring is a term that is too vague. It describes a wave, but basically that’s it. Motivation, incentives, contexts are so different from country to country that I’ve been very careful about using the term Arab Spring since the beginning, and I never use it in my writings or anything.”
- “I grew up thinking that there was no way to change anything. It was impossible to imagine Tunisia outside the scope of [Ben Ali’s] regime... But that thinking will never come back...Kids growing up today literally don’t know what dictatorship is.”
- “The biggest enemy of any democratic construction is chaos.”
- “Once we had built [Tunisia’s democratic] system, we needed to tackle the socioeconomic issues, but that never happened because of a lack of maturity, the lack of a judiciary, and corruption. People were extremely distracted by many issues at the same time because most of the debates were not settled...When everything is open for debate and everything is on the table, nothing is going to be a priority.”
- “What are the inspirations for our political elites?...We don’t have close relations with free, liberal economies like most of Eastern Europe did during the 1980s.”
- Regarding how the United States can or should support democracy in Tunisia: “Change sometimes has to come from within. You can inspire it or help it, but it has to come from within.”
- “The same timeline that pressured the parliamentary system we built will break [President Kais Saied] up. I can’t wait.”



## Muhammad Amin Saedani (Tunisia)

- “We have seen nine governments in the last ten years.”
- “The leaders of the political parties are weak. They are old in years and consciousness.”
- “Most of those who were nominated as ministers [after the ouster of President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali] had worked in the previous governments. Despite their failures in the past, they ran for more important offices.”
- “There was a shortage of the mechanisms necessary for implementing the articles of the constitution. Human rights violations continued, and the abuse against women and journalists continued as well...From a legislative perspective, the constitution is perfect. However, in practice, there is no commitment to its articles.”
- “I was the first one who started the spark of peaceful, civic, and social protests.”
- “Protests toppled the regime, and then followed a national council and then a new constitution. During all of that, I was only eighteen years old.”
- “I worked with five ministers on different initiatives. After July 25 [2021], our salaries were arbitrarily stopped. There was no explanation given.”
- “I am not the only case here. Salaries [for members of parliament] are stopped. There are other measures taken against them.”
- “I am starting to lose confidence that the Tunisian experience could be different from the experiences of other Arab countries.”
- “I find myself isolated even though there isn’t any official document that terminates my post in the [Ministry of Local Affairs and Environment]. All my privileges were taken from me. I find myself today on the margins of political events, subject to revenge and starvation.”
- “This can only work with Arab and international support.”



## Osamah Alfakih (Yemen)

- “What went right is giving people a platform and the space to speak and to express themselves, so an increased political awareness...and that aspect only—if it’s what went right in the Arab Spring in Yemen, that’s enough for the time being.”
- “The 2011 revolution tested the effectiveness of civil society to lead the transformation that the people demanded. From my point of view, Yemeni civil society failed to help realize those demands and aspirations of society due to significant political, social, and geopolitical factors that had existed long before the revolution.”
- “A big part of what’s been happening in Yemen, even before 2011 but especially with the beginning of the armed conflict, is the lack of accountability.”
- “What is required at the moment is to have an international investigative body for Yemen to tackle these [human rights abuses] and to go as far back in the past as possible to hold those who are responsible accountable for abuses and to bring some justice to victims.”
- “The international community needs to look at Yemen from the humanitarian development lens rather than the security and intelligence lens.”
- “There are no clean hands in Yemen.”
- “Between 2017 and 2020, we [the NGO Mawatana] have contributed to the release of more than six hundred arbitrary detainees and forcibly disappeared persons.”
- “If you walk in the street and ask people what they want, the majority would say they want to have this armed conflict ended. They are very exhausted, very tired, and they want to have an end to the misery.”
- “There have been more than fifteen cases of arbitrary detentions against the [Mawatana] team in the field, with the majority but not all of them committed by the Houthis.”



## Huda al-Sarari (Yemen)

- “Normally, people go to war and then do dialogue. In Yemen, we held dialogue and then went to war.”
- “These days, civil society organizations in Yemen are doing well, to an extent that they are replacing the role of the state.”
- “It is not the Yemenis who are fighting; it is Saudi Arabia and Iran who are fighting on Yemeni soil.”
- All these dialogues held by the international community with the Houthis are useless...If there is no real pressure on the Houthis, there will be no hope for Yemen.”
- “The international community is watching Iran supply the Houthis with money and weapons and is unable to stop it.”
- There is rapprochement now between Iran and the Gulf states...but the Yemen issue is not on the table. If there comes an agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabia will leave Yemen and hand it over to the Houthis.”
- “The army that is fighting the Houthis is not receiving salaries. A big number of civilian employees in the north of Yemen haven’t received their salaries since 2016.”
- “We got to know about a network of secret prisons supported by the United Arab Emirates...We documented thousands of cases of forced disappearances and were able to release more than 250 detainees.”
- “Until today, not a single detainee is tried in court. They are charged with terrorism, but they are not terrorists...they were against the Emirati project in Yemen.”
- “[The detainees] were not referred to investigation or tried in court. They were investigated by American military commanders. We discovered later that these commanders were from [the now-shuttered U.S.-based former private security firm] Blackwater. There were reports about the involvement of this company in the coalition camp in the UAE.”



## Baraa Shiban (Yemen)

- “The story hasn’t ended...it only ends when you give up.”
- “Many observers felt that this era would see the rise of terrorist organizations—radical organizations—but we saw a different generation. We saw a generation that aspired toward democracy, rule of law, good governance, and accountability.”
- “It might be that only Yemenis can resolve the root causes of the conflict, but of course there are many outside actors who might use the existing forces in Yemen for their own agendas.”
- “No one saw that the Houthis had plans of their own; everyone thought they [themselves] would use [the Houthis], but they had their own plans.”
- “It is not simply a proxy war. This is a civil war...If Saudi Arabia decided to fund the Houthis, the war would still have happened.”
- “Whether we like it or not, Saudi Arabia will continue to be our neighbor, and we need to have a form of understanding with Saudi Arabia.”
- “Only after the Houthis took over the capital did [the international community] issue sanctions against [former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah] Saleh and Abdul-Malik al-Houthi...We needed that before the disaster, not after.”
- “The National Dialogue was by far the most comprehensive gathering and most inclusive process that has happened in the history of Yemen...And there was consensus. You needed 75 percent consensus of all parties to pass any resolution in the National Dialogue.”
- “On the day that [former U.S. president Barack] Obama made the decision that he wasn’t going to intervene [in Syria], and it looked like the Russians and the Assad regime were safe from retaliation, that was the day [one of Saleh’s officers] told [Saleh], ‘I think we’re ready to go back to power.’”
- “We [the protesters in Change Square] started having courses, bringing professional photographers to teach photography, and then whenever a protest happened the protesters would come back to the media center and then we would send the material to all the media outlets.”
- “The last Yemeni Jewish family left Yemen after three thousand years in March 2021.”





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