

What Arab Monarchies Should Take Away from their Neighbors' Instability

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Brief Analysis

In the wake of the multiple Arab uprisings since the Tunisian fruit seller Muhammad Bouazizi's heroic act of self-immolation, few instances of democracy have actually emerged. Since 2011, many Arabs have looked back nostalgically at the 'good old days' of pre-Arab Spring dictatorships, when daily bread, safety, and stability seemed assured.

Yet the Arab world must opt for full democracy if this cycle of revolution is to turn into something more stable. Given the Arab world's staggering youth demographics, its leaders should expect a new wave of uprisings led by the youth, the underprivileged, women, and ethnic minorities. Without serious consideration of inclusive, democratic methods to convince these segments of the population that they have a true stake in their country's future, the new uprisings may prove even more destructive than the Arab Spring.

Unstable Republican Regimes

Unfortunately, the current situation of many Arab states is already dismal. It is important to recognize the severity of the consequences of maintaining the status-quo. Take Egypt, once the most important and powerful country in the region and major participant in the Arab Spring. Today, the streets of Cairo are unsafe; Alexandria, historically a city where religions coexisted peacefully, is no longer its tolerant self. In the countryside, people bolt their doors at nightfall and hope for the best, while violent Islamist armed groups terrorize the [Sinai region](#) (<https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/egypt-travel-advisory.html>). And though Egypt's tourism sector is [slowly recovering](#) (<https://af.reuters.com/article/egyptNews/idAFL5N1SU131>) from its collapse in the wake of the Arab spring, Egyptians still struggle to find employment.

In Yemen and Syria, the situation is much worse. In Yemen, people mostly travel in convoys escorted by armed militias due to the return of tribal strife—encouraged by Houthi militias who thrive in insecurity. The civil war has only brought misery and death, with the Saudi-led attacks on the Houthis leading to mass civilian casualties, including the death of many children. Aside the current war, Yemen's ex-communist south still abhors Yemen's central government and would not mind breaking away, even if it is not currently feasible. In the meantime, al-

Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is happy to recruit poor rural Yemenis despite the threat of U.S. drone strikes. Meanwhile, Syria's Bashar al-Assad has destroyed his country, yet Syrian opposition is deeply fragmented; many areas of Syria not under regime control may look more and more like Libya.

There, the situation is utterly opaque. Few outsiders have any idea of what is occurring inside the country. What can be discerned is that militias reign supreme and the elected and internationally-recognized government of Tripoli lacks both will and ability to disarm them. Militia leaders [sell oil \(https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-a-e-backed-militia-leaders-bid-to-take-control-of-libyan-oil-exports-1531474200\)](https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-a-e-backed-militia-leaders-bid-to-take-control-of-libyan-oil-exports-1531474200) to foreign companies without government authorization. In the East, Marshal Haftar appears willing to do anything to rid the country of [Islamists \(https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-27492354\)](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-27492354), including a scorched earth policy. In the south, tribes are grooming the former dictator's son [Saif al-Islam Gaddafi \(https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/03/saif-al-islam-gaddafi-run-libyan-elections-180322134813539.html\)](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/03/saif-al-islam-gaddafi-run-libyan-elections-180322134813539.html) to become the next guide in a hopefully democratic effort to unite the country.

In Algeria, Abdulaziz Bouteflika is politically dead and the country is holding its breath, as the country's political elite struggle to find a replacement. Algeria's belated 'spring' style protests reflect the fact that the country originally did not emulate its Tunisian neighbor in 2010. Algerians have been hesitant to give up the promise of peace due to their experiences during the 'dark decade,' Algeria's [civil war \(https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/2001-03-01/algerian-civil-war-1990-1998\)](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/2001-03-01/algerian-civil-war-1990-1998) that raged from 1990 to 1998. Yet the government's policy of bribing its people into submission through mass subsidies of foods, medicine, transportation and housing are no longer sustainable due to Algeria's economic stagnation. Sudan's similar method of avoiding the first wave of the Arab Spring through generous staple food subsidies and political crackdown also appears to have reached the end of its efficacy, if not now than certainly later.

In both Sudan and Algeria, the youth are seeking an end to [gerontocracy regimes \(https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-historical-precedents-of-the-current-uprising-in-sudan\)](https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-historical-precedents-of-the-current-uprising-in-sudan), a lack of political representation, and dismal economic prospects. These countries that avoided the initial Arab Spring appear poised to enter into a new phase of demanding political representation, which may devolve into violence. In the meantime, everyone is aware of the dismal situation in these Arab countries, yet the purportedly stable Arab monarchies also have cause for concern.

The Mirage of the Arab Monarchy

In contrast to the deep instability facing many Arab countries, the Arab monarchies have so far been spared from tumultuous uprisings. These monarchies can be divided into two sub-groups: traditional monarchies deriving their legitimacy from tribal allegiance and state patriarchy (Jordan) or historical and religious legitimacy (Morocco); and oil monarchies owing their existence and survival to abundant petro-dollars—the Gulf States.

It has erroneously been assumed that these governments were indefinitely safe because they avoided the tumult of the first Arab Spring. Yet, a second wave of a new type of 'Arab spring' could cause chaos if these governments do not enact substantial reforms.

With major protests in Sudan and Algeria, Morocco and Jordan may see similar waves of unrest due to their continuing failure to deliver on promises made during 2011. Both monarchies were somewhat cushioned from the first Arab spring due to the structure of their governments emphasizing models of legitimacy. When Morocco's [mouvement du 20 février \(https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/02/morocco-february-20-movement-demands-alive-170222063934604.html\)](https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/02/morocco-february-20-movement-demands-alive-170222063934604.html) took to the streets to denounce corruption, nepotism, and abuse of power, protesters called for a parliamentary monarchy rather than a full democratic system. Jordanians also appear to genuinely like and respect their monarch.

Moreover, Morocco and Jordan's responses to political unrest focused on similar models. These monarchies retained their essential monarchical structure by implementing important albeit moderate changes and reforms. However, this path towards incremental political inclusion that ultimately subsided once it seemed that the people had been appeased.

In Morocco, the monarchy went back on its promise of reforming power by strengthening its grip on political parties through **polarization** (http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/05/16/why-jordan-and-morocco-are-doubling-down-on-royal-rule/?utm_term=.21c50758eef0), cracking down on the regional uprisings of the poorer regions of **al-Hoceima** (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/27/world/africa/morocco-protest-sentence-zefzafi.html>), Zagora, and **Jerada** (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/06/04/morocco-another-crackdown-protests>), and denying much-wanted **press freedoms** (<https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2018/04/245136/morocco-remains-near-bottom-in-2018-rankings-for-press-freedom/>). In Jordan, stability built upon the shaky foundation of tribal allegiance and patriarchal tradition is not enough to guarantee political continuity. Indeed, recent **political protests** (<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/jordan/.premium-for-the-jordanians-taxes-were-only-the-spark-that-ignited-the-protest-1.6157909>) and street incidents linked to state taxes showed that the population at large can question the monarchy if the people are concerned enough about the accessibility of their daily bread.

More concerning is that the apparent stability of Gulf oil monarchies is artificial. At the height of the Arab uprisings, governments resorted to **distributing cash** (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-10-15/next-arab-uprising>) to the population in order to buy allegiance and time. This is a method of placating public unrest is a short-term fix rather than a long-term solution. With countries like Saudi Arabia understanding the necessity of diversifying its economy and reducing subsidies, the Gulf monarchies will not be able to inject money at the same rates to dampen a desire for democracy and freedom.

In many Gulf states, opposition is not tolerated, criticism is not welcome and feedback is not sought. Women can be treated like furniture: part of the house. Women's freedoms depend on the magnanimity of their male relatives, as the state has removed any legal independence from them. With increasing numbers of Gulf women attending higher education in the West, it is increasingly unlikely that they will tolerate coming back and being locked in golden prisons.

In most of these patriarchal and tribal countries, the population—in spite of wealth and incredible technical modernization—are light years away from modernity. There is stability, but no freedom. There is powerful government, but no checks and balances. There is law and order, but contestation is not allowed. In a word, there is neither freedom of thought, nor freedom of belief, and nor freedom of criticism. People have wealth, but must lead a regimented life, and there is no available alternative and no hope.

In Conclusion

Some of the key lessons of the first Arab Spring was how easily unrest spread from one country to another, and how universal the demands for increased social, political, and economic opportunity were among protestors across the Arab World. Currently, there are vast swaths of the Arab populations that are disenfranchised through a variety of mechanisms. Since the Arab monarchies are currently stable, now is the time to enact major reforms rather than after periods of unrest, which can lead to the type of prolonged chaos and instability visible elsewhere in the Arab world.

Between youth and women, the Arab World disenfranchises a majority of its populations. Unless the Arab World empowers women, they will rise and contest the established social order in an unprecedented manner nobody can predict. And unless the Arab world attends to the immediate needs of the youth, the situation will undoubtedly

become increasingly dangerous.

The Arab world must establish accountability within its governments. Otherwise, national wealth will continue to be wasted on inequalities that trap many of its people in cycles of deep poverty while rewarding corruption. The stark visibility of these inequalities will continue to drive its desperate youth towards strife.

And unless the Arab world institutes clear personal freedoms and allows its minorities—from its wealth of ethnic and religious communities to its LGBT groups, to openly participate in public life—these identities will continue to be seen as at odds with the state and lead to unrest. By failing to recognize the myriad of ethnic and religious groups in the region and their cultural and political demands, social peace will not prevail.

These are major efforts to undertake, yet they are necessary to permanently shift the tide of political unrest that appears to be reemerging and are the best chance at halting a cycle of unrest and repression whose consequences can be seen across the Arab World today. ❖

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