

Monographs

Beyond Islamists and Autocrats: Prospects for Political Reform Post Arab Spring

[Schenker](#), [Feuer](#), [Sakthivel](#), [Entelis](#), [Henderson](#), [Rabkin](#), [al-Sakkaf](#), [Trager](#), [Aldosari](#), [Boghardt](#), [Eljarh](#), [al-Omari](#), [Bowker](#), [Tabler](#), [Pollock](#), and [Mneimneh](#)

The Compiled Papers

2015-2017

The compiled series provides a timely country-by-country guidebook for engaging non-Islamist, pluralistically inclined actors in North Africa, the Gulf, and the Levant.

The optimism that briefly followed the 2010-11 Arab Spring has long since faded, with a string of political crises, internal crackdowns, and wars casting a long shadow over the prospects for true democratization. The formidable threats posed by Iranian adventurism and jihadist onslaught have deepened the region's sectarian divides and spun wars out of disputes that might have remained rhetorical dustups in the past.

Yet these same perils, coupled with low oil prices, have pushed some regional governments to take tentative steps toward moderation, whether through domestic policy changes or quiet engagement with old enemies. Meanwhile, the forces of Islamist authoritarianism that once threatened to topple Arab states like dominoes are now on the run. Against this backdrop, modest opportunities to move toward greater pluralism, representative government, and respect for universal human values have been emerging throughout the region, including in areas where citizens have suffered poor governance or harsh oppression under Islamist authorities.

To address the viability of these non-Islamist, nondictatorial forces, The Washington Institute commenced publication in June 2015 of a series of scholarly papers: *Beyond Islamists and Autocrats: Prospects for Political Reform Post Arab Spring*. Today, with a new administration seemingly aimed at rewriting the rules of certain U.S. relationships in the Middle East, the essays have now been compiled into a timely country-by-country guidebook for engaging non-Islamist, pluralistically inclined actors in North Africa, the Gulf, and the Levant. Each chapter focuses on the particular conditions in one country, detailing the goals, strengths, and weaknesses of the groups in question, exploring their approach to competing with Islamist rivals, and providing suggestions for cultivating and preserving these limited resources. The papers are also available singly in the links below.

THE EDITOR

Sarah Feuer, an expert on politics and religion in North Africa, is a Soref Fellow at The Washington Institute. She is the author of *Regulating Islam: Religion and the State in Contemporary Morocco and Tunisia*, forthcoming from Cambridge University Press. Feuer received a doctorate in politics from Brandeis University's Crown Center for Middle East Studies and a master's degree in Middle East history from Tel Aviv University.

CH 1 | Series Introduction

David Schenker • June 2015

Four years after the Arab Spring, the Middle East is aflame, but the Arab states have not fallen like dominoes to the Islamists. In Egypt, a Muslim Brotherhood electoral victory was reversed by a military coup; in Tunisia, a democratically elected but widely unpopular Islamist-led coalition ceded power to a more secular coalition government. Elsewhere in the region, non-Islamists—individuals, NGOs, and political parties—are also contesting the concept of religiously inspired government. Yet ISIS and other Islamic extremists remain quite powerful in some places, while traditional autocrats claiming various shades of religious legitimacy continue to rule in others...



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Ch 2 | Post-Jasmine Tunisia

[*Sarah Feuer*](#) • June 2015

One of the more dramatic Arab Spring plotlines has been the rapid turn of fortune for Islamist movements throughout the region. If the tumult of 2011 initially paved the way for Islamist parties to assume power in places like Tunisia, Egypt, and Morocco, by 2014 the pendulum had swung decidedly back and Islamists were on the defensive, if not wholly defeated, in most of the affected countries. Tunisia, the birthplace of the Arab uprisings, was no exception. There, the Islamists of the Ennahda Party who swept into power after the 2011 parliamentary elections were, by late 2013, struggling to negotiate a departure from the government that would preserve the party's future political relevance. Ennahda's stinging defeat in the parliamentary election of October 2014, and the election of an avowedly anti-Islamist president two months later, ostensibly spawned an Arab democracy in which non-Islamists are the dominant actors....



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CH 3 | MOROCCO: Prospects for civil society

[*Vish Sakthivel*](#) • August 2015

Despite the upheavals wrought elsewhere in the Middle East by the Arab Spring uprisings, the 2011 protests in Morocco did little to loosen King Mohammed VI's hold on power. Nonetheless, influential civil society organizations have subsequently spoken with a stronger voice, including groups focused on women's and reproductive rights, human rights, Amazigh (Berber) advocacy, and democratic development, along with trade unions. For many citizens, such groups represent the only authentic way to strive for reform on various issues, and are thus well worth examining. In this essay, the second in the Institute series, *Beyond Islamists and Autocrats*, Vish Sakthivel looks closely at obstacles to reform in the Moroccan context, as well as opportunities for CSOs to attain limited but meaningful gains....



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Ch 4 | THE ALGERIAN CONUNDRUM: authoritarian state, democratic society

[*John P. Entelis*](#) • January 2016

The prospects for democratic reform in Algeria are as complex and paradoxical as the country's convoluted history and opaque politics. While civil society has long possessed a democratic spirit rooted in its historic interaction with French republican principles, this orientation is highly disaggregated. For its part, the authoritarian polity maintains its stranglehold on civil society through a military-industrial complex that monopolizes the key coercive, economic, and bureaucratic instruments of the state. No amount of externally derived pressure for democratic reform, whether economic or political, has been able to alter this stalemate in state-society relations. This essay, the third in a series exploring prospects for political reform throughout the region, considers the strengths and limitations of democratic-style reformers in Algeria today. Following an overview of Algeria's political landscape, the paper examines the historical roots and current contours of Algerian civil society, where prospects for democratic-style reform remain in force, however limited. The chapter closes with a cautionary note for U.S. policymakers eager to engage constructively with Algeria.



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Ch 5 | BAHRAIN'S STALLED REFORMS AND THE FUTURE U.S. ROLE

[Simon Henderson](#) • January 2016

With tensions peaking between Iran and the conservative Arab states, the current calm in the island kingdom of Bahrain may prove only temporary. A longtime U.S. ally that hosts the Navy's Fifth Fleet headquarters, Bahrain plays a crucial role in ensuring regional security. Yet reforms of its political system have stalled, with the Sunni royal family refusing to concede a broader role for representatives of the country's substantial Shiite community, a dynamic suggesting an uncertain future. This essay, the fourth in a series exploring prospects for political reform throughout the region, considers Bahrain's outlook, particularly in the context of eventual succession from its king and prime minister. It argues that Washington must be ready to use its influence and local respect to help Bahraini leaders continue avoiding the perils of either harsh dictatorship or revolutionary chaos.



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Ch 6 | Lebanon's [Un]Civil Society

[David Schenker](#) • March 2016

Spillover from the war in Syria has had a profound impact on the region, and perhaps nowhere more so than in Lebanon, where refugees from the conflict now constitute nearly 30 percent of the state's population. In the absence of effective state institutions, Lebanese civil society organizations have played a critical role in providing assistance to the refugees. Nevertheless, while Lebanon's civil society is among the most vibrant in the Middle East, the efficacy of its organizations in influencing change in Beirut has been limited, due in large part to the sectarianism that characterizes Lebanese politics. This essay, the fifth in a series exploring prospects for political reform throughout the Middle East, considers the strengths and limitations of Lebanon's robust civil society. It provides an overview of Lebanon's political landscape, discusses the role of civil society, and assesses this sector's efforts and its prospects for promoting positive change in this historically dysfunctional state.



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Ch 7 | Iraq's imperiled democracy

[Nathaniel Rabkin](#) • June 2016

Iraq's transition from autocracy to multiparty elections has made it something of a test case in the Arab world. Although the Sunni-Shia divide has created difficult obstacles to good governance, it has led to a wider embrace of power sharing, at least as a political principle. Iraq's Islamist parties play a dominant role in politics, but pose less of a threat to democracy than those of other Arab countries, in large part because of the endorsement of free elections by Iraq's most influential Shia religious leaders. At the same time, Iraq's corrupt system of patronage politics illustrates the dangers of democratic electoral politics unrestrained by a strong legal tradition or an independent judiciary. Moreover, Iraq's democracy currently faces a severe threat from radical Shia militias who, despite poor performance in elections, believe they can leverage their role in the fight against IS to gain permanent extralegal powers, with the ultimate aim of hollowing out Iraq's democracy and turning it into a ideological Islamist state based on the Iranian model. In this essay, the sixth in a series exploring prospects for political reform throughout the Middle East, Nathaniel Rabkin analyzes the unique perils facing democratic governance in Iraq and the dangerous alternative of rule by militia gangs paying lip service to Islamist slogans.



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Ch 8 | YEMEN'S RELAPSE INTO TRIBALISM

[Nadia al-Sakkaf](#) • August 2016

In 2011, Yemen astounded the world with its surprisingly democratic response to the Arab Spring. Previously, many had believed that any political instability or uprising in the region's least developed country would result in civil war. Yet, to the contrary, political factions came together in a power-sharing agreement and took significant strides toward reform, including a National Dialogue Conference that produced a modern and ambitious draft constitution. Today, however, the promise of the Arab Spring has become a distant memory for most Yemenis, with years of conflict leaving the country in tatters and forcing many



to lower their expectations of whichever ruling authority they happen to live under. Is there yet hope for putting Yemen back together? In this essay -- the seventh in a series exploring prospects for political reform throughout the Middle East -- Nadia al-Sakkaf, chief editor of the *Yemen Times*, dissects the political machinations, conflicts, and actors responsible for the disintegration of the country's civil society and internal security since the Arab Spring. She then examines various grassroots efforts to rebuild some semblance of democratic structure there, including initiatives supported by the UN and other humanitarian sectors. These domestic efforts, together with robust outside assistance and advice, could help reintegrate a society that has been torn to shreds economically, socially, and literally -- though the question remains whether Yemen's current authorities are willing and able to deal with these huge challenges.

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Ch 9 | EGYPT'S OCCASIONAL NON-ISLAMIST REFORMISTS

[Eric Trager](#) • *September 2016*

Since the January 2011 uprising that ended the rule of longtime president Hosni Mubarak, Egyptian politics has consisted of an increasingly bitter struggle between Islamists and autocrats. This paper, the eighth in a series of essays exploring prospects for reform throughout the Middle East, explains the near absence of a political center within Egypt by examining the failure of non-Islamist reformists to assert themselves as a meaningful political force following Mubarak's overthrow. It traces the weakness of these parties to the Mubarak government's enforcement of certain redlines and argues that the Muslim Brotherhood's exclusivism drove those parties to support the ouster of Egypt's first elected president, Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi, and its brutal aftermath. Eric Trager, the Esther K. Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute, is an expert on Egyptian politics and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. He was in Egypt during the 2011 anti-Mubarak revolts and returns frequently to conduct firsthand interviews with leaders in Egypt's government, military, political parties, media, and civil society.



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Ch 10 | SAUDI ARABIA'S VIRTUAL QUEST FOR CITIZENSHIP AND IDENTITY

[Hala Aldosari](#) • *October 2016*

Inside the Saudi kingdom, political uncertainty often triggers a surge in public demands. Because the privileges and entitlements of citizenship are based on religious affiliation, gender, and loyalty to the king, many resulting reform movements challenge these prescribed aspects of Saudi identity. In this essay, Saudi activist Hala Aldosari addresses two of these sometimes overlapping movements: first, the diverse and inclusive network of human rights activists that encompasses many Shiites, liberals, and women; and second, social entrepreneurs who advocate for a cultural transformation to resist politically forced norms. Dr. Aldosari argues that intensified Saudi conflicts with regional and international actors, coupled with reduced oil revenues and increased public expenditure, have created a unique opportunity for reform. She maintains that reformers can exploit this opportunity by employing the same tactics as the state: creating alliances with national constituencies and harnessing media and supportive organizations as alternative, influential power centers to help institute change.



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Ch 11 | NARRATIVES OF REFORM IN THE UAE

[Lori Plotkin Boghardt](#) • *November 2016*

UAE success stories are legion: Vast oil resources have made the United Arab Emirates one of the wealthiest states per capita in the world. Emirati rulers have pursued economic and social development projects of epic proportions, and citizen support for the country's leadership is believed to be high. Yet, when it comes to political rights and civil liberties, the UAE is one of the most restrictive states in the Middle East. In this essay, Lori Plotkin Boghardt examines the multiple narratives of reform in the UAE.

These range from the government as a driver of reform, to state and societal restrictions on political discourse, to popular support for the UAE's current course regardless of its approach to political inclusiveness. Dr. Boghardt argues that these diverse interpretations add a layer of complexity to the enduring American desire to balance strategic interests with political and other values, and provides specific recommendations to address this



challenge and enhance U.S. influence in the Arab Gulf.

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Ch 12 | STRUGGLING TO ADVANCE IN POST-SPRING LIBYA

[Mohamed Eljarh](#) • January 2017

After the 2011 fall of longtime Libyan dictator Muammar Qadhafi, signs pointed briefly toward a successful transition away from authoritarianism. The oil-rich country saw cause for optimism in a nascent civil society: a negotiated process aimed at creating stable political institutions and a national election indicating broad support for a political leadership that was neither Islamist nor autocratic. But worrying signs soon emerged, highlighted by the September 2012 attack that killed U.S. ambassador Christopher Stevens. In subsequent years, militias have wrested effective power from civilian leaders, and three separate governments now claim legitimacy over the war-riven country. The World Bank warned in its latest economic outlook report that Libya is near failure. In this essay, the eleventh in a series exploring non-Islamist reform actors post-Arab Spring, Mohamed Eljarh explores the prospects for governance in a deeply fragmented, polarized Libya. He emphasizes that while a political culture conducive to democracy may be decades away, Libyan activists can lay the groundwork for such a future by promoting the principles of human security, dignity, and social justice today.



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Ch 13 | GOVERNANCE AS A PATH TO PALESTINIAN POLITICAL REJUVENATION

[Ghaith al-Omari](#) • January 2017

Since the creation of the Palestinian Authority (PA), Palestinian politics has been dominated by two autocratic movements: secular Fatah and Islamist Hamas. Other political movements have failed to establish strong roots, partly due to oppressive policies by the two dominant movements and partly due to their inability to formulate a distinct, convincing platform for achieving Palestinian independence. Palestinian civil society, once touted as one of the most vibrant in the Arab world, is still struggling to define its direction in the anomalous context of Palestinian self-governance without sovereignty. PA governance reform made impressive initial achievements, but ultimately proved vulnerable to attacks from Fatah and Hamas. In this essay, twelfth in a series exploring non-Islamist reform actors post-Arab Spring, Ghaith al-Omari analyzes the dynamics preventing the emergence of new Palestinian political actors and examines ways in which the United States can help support new Palestinian politics. He argues that while U.S. influence on Palestinian party politics may be limited, renewed American focus on governance reform can make a significant impact.



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Ch 14 | THE NARROWING FIELD OF SYRIA'S OPPOSITION

[James Bowker and Andrew J. Tabler](#) • April 2017

Six years after the outbreak of Syria's civil war, the parties involved, whether aligned with the Assad regime, the Sunni jihadists, or others, have increasingly wielded extreme tactics to pursue noninclusive goals. But a number of entities still emphasize—to varying degrees—pluralism, religious tolerance, and individual freedoms. These groups consist primarily of exiles, armed Free Syrian Army formations that defend their communities but still rely on jihadists to take offensive actions, and marginalized opposition blocs tolerated by the Assad regime. In this essay, fourteenth in a series exploring non-Islamist reform groups post-Arab Spring, James Bowker and Andrew Tabler look into groups with which the United States could possibly partner during and after the war. In making such calculations, U.S. officials will likely have to consider factors beyond inclusive rhetoric, including political organization, viability, and control of territory, in seeking a middle ground between autocrats and extremists.



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Ch 15 | KUWAIT: Democracy trumps reform

David Pollock • July 2017

Six years after the Arab Spring, Kuwait presents many political paradoxes. Almost a constitutional monarchy, but with a royal family that rules as well as reigns, it has one of the most active and empowered democratically elected parliaments of any Arab state. Nevertheless, that parliament more frequently blocks rather than bolsters real political, social, or economic reform. Moreover, sectarian tensions between the Sunni majority and the large Shia minority have risen steadily during these years. Still, on the whole, this small country remains, especially compared to so many other Arab societies, a model of "consensual sects." This essay, penultimate in a series exploring non-Islamist reform groups post-Arab Spring, illuminates these paradoxes, and looks ahead to the most plausible prospects for Kuwait's unique future trajectory. The new U.S. guiding principle for dealing with this delicately balanced system should be "America, first, do no harm."



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Ch 16 | THE ARAB SPRING AT SIX YEARS

Hassan Mneimneh • April 2017

Across the Middle East, authoritarianism has found new life in the struggle against ever more radicalized militant groups in a landscape of dire threat. And entrenched in place is the skewed dynamic that simultaneously doomed autocracies to collapse following the Arab Spring uprisings while casting doubt on the long-term prospects of Islamist governance: failure of Arab governments to foster conditions that support social justice, liberty, dignity, and individual empowerment. In this essay, fifteenth in a series exploring non-Islamist reform groups post-Arab Spring, Hassan Mneimneh discusses the challenges the future poses to the region's nonradical Islamists as well as to its non-Islamist citizens, arguing that a new Arab uprising may be imminent, with unknown consequences for the region and beyond.



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