

PROSPECTS FOR POLITICAL
REFORM POST ARAB SPRING



essays by

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SARAH FEUER, SERIES EDITOR

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COVER PHOTO: Demonstrators chant slogans during a protest to support the transformation of the country into a federal state in Benghazi, Libya, 2012 (REUTERS/Asmaa Waguih).

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By the first months of 2015, concern about the political direction of the Middle East had long since eclipsed the ephemeral optimism of the 2010–11 Arab Spring. Many countries in the region appeared to be headed toward either a return of traditional dictators or a new Islamist authoritarianism. Yet despite this, modest opportunities to move toward greater pluralism, more-representative government, and increased respect for human values were still to be found in several Middle East countries.

To address the prospects for the region's non-Islamist, non-dictatorial forces, the Washington Institute announced in June 2015 a new series of scholarly papers, *Beyond Islamists and Autocrats: Prospects for Political Reform Post Arab Spring*, to be published over the following eighteen to twenty-four months.

This volume completes the cycle by bringing together the entire published series, presented, with one exception, chronologically.

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BEYOND
ISLAMISTS
AND
AUTOCRATS



INTRODUCTION

■ DAVID SCHENKER

IN LATE 2010 AND EARLY 2011, the Middle East was rocked by revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria, and by popular protests in a number of other countries. The so-called Arab Spring signaled the end of three Arab authoritarian regimes, and appeared to promise improvements in governance, if not democratic development, in these states and throughout the region. Quickly, though, cautious optimism shifted to concern—not only about the return of traditional secular Arab nationalist dictators but also about the potential for a new Islamist-leaning regional authoritarianism.

By 2013, Islamist governments had come to power in Egypt and Tunisia, Islamist militias had taken hold in a Libya liberated from Muammar Qadhafi's rule, and the secular Syrian revolt had morphed into a rebellion led by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and al-Qaeda. The "spring," from the perspective of both Washington and the Middle East, was starting to feel more like a long winter with little prospect for a positive outcome. While many Arabs signaled their clear opposition to collective sharia-based government, political Islam was ascendant and, many believed, irreversible.

Four years on, 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.

To be sure, few of the non-Islamists are secular, either in the sense of eschewing religion or in supporting a separation of mosque and state. Many adherents or sympathizers are personally religious, and many support some role for religious values in public life. Nor are these non-Islamists all liberals: they comprise traditional elitists, ardent nationalists, leftists, and even varying degrees of constitutional monarchists. But what does unite this group is its rhetorical emphasis on pluralism, religious tolerance, and individual freedoms, and its opposition to Islamist political programs that have promoted exclusivist, intolerant, and sharia-based agendas.

Judging from contemporary Washington discourse, one might gather that the current Arab context represents a contest solely between religious fundamentalism and authoritarianism, some military, some monarchical.

But the reality is more complex: between these two extremes, there are authentic popular Arab forces calling for more representative government and greater individual freedoms. Those forces, encompassed within the non-Islamist camp, are central to determining the future character of the Middle East. Despite the many deficits of the region's non-Islamist political actors, the United States has an abiding interest in seeing them prevail.

To date, much has been written about the headline cases of Egypt and Tunisia, but modest opportunities to move toward greater pluralism, more-representative government, and increased respect for universal human values can be found elsewhere in the region as well. In a sense, Islamists' poor governance record and declining popularity in some quarters have created an opening for non-Islamist alternatives.

Voting data confirms this opening. To cite two examples, liberal, socialist/populist, and even avowedly secular parties won a combined majority of seats in Tunisia's 2011 Constituent Assembly elections, and non-Islamist candidates won 57 percent of the vote in the first round of Egypt's 2012 presidential elections. In many other Arab countries, from Morocco to Libya all the way to Iraq and Kuwait, non-Islamist parties or candidates have tended to outpoll their rivals.

No doubt, ample reason exists for caution about the prospects for the region's non-Islamist political forces. Many of these groups are poorly organized, plagued by infighting, lack a coherent message, and have been targeted by oppressive regimes and Islamists alike. Truth be told, the platforms of some of these groups—whether statist, socialist, former regime elements, or otherwise—are in important respects not consistent with U.S. values, although their opinions are light-years closer to U.S. values than those of the religious fanatics. Thus far, with the possible exception of Tunisia, these parties have been unable to translate Islamist failures into lasting electoral or policy victories. At the most basic level, non-Islamist parties still lack the Islamists' deep social-service networks and the resources to match their outreach to the broader population. Nonetheless, the current regional backlash against extremists and Islamist political overreach constitutes a window of opportunity for these groups.

Although the potential of non-Islamist political actors should not be exaggerated, the group is critical if Middle East states are to progress toward pluralistic, tolerant systems of governance. As such, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy has determined that surveying the ideas, organizational capacity, and domestic and foreign support of these actors would be a productive exercise. A series of scholarly papers, to be published over the next eighteen months, will thus present differing levels of optimism about prospects for the region's non-Islamist, nondictatorial forces. Most contributors, unsurprisingly, are not nearly as hopeful as the *Washington Post's* Jackson Diehl, who wrote on April 27, 2015:

That one country, Tunisia, has succeeded in establishing a working democracy, despite power struggles between secularists and Islamists, and terrorism by jihadists, shows that the goal of democratic transformation was neither a pipe dream nor a Western imposition unsuited for Arab lands.

What the articles will offer are sober assessments of non-Islamist and democratically and pluralistically inclined actors in a dozen or so Middle East states. The analysis focuses on the particular conditions in each country, detailing the goals, strengths, and weaknesses of the groups in question, and exploring their approach in the contest with their Islamist rivals.

Only in recent months have voices in Washington begun to recognize the promise, however limited, of non-Islamist actors, as opposed to focusing solely on the authoritarian-versus-Islamist narrative. The prevailing assumption in Washington over the past four years has been, on the one hand, that Islamists somehow represent the authentic voice of the people and that the non-Islamist opponents are out of touch with the masses. On the other hand, the United States has undermined these actors by pushing too early for national elections, unnecessarily risking empowering a new set of authoritarians.

The Washington Institute's series on non-Islamist, pluralistically inclined political actors aims to shed light on this trend, and provide suggestions for Washington on how best to cultivate and preserve this limited resource. At this critical time of transition, and after decades and millions of U.S. dollars spent on democratization proj-

ects, one would have hoped the Middle East would be populated with more liberal democrats. Alas, in the battle of ideas—and electoral politics—that group in most Arab countries is small. But, for all the differences Americans may have with the larger group of pluralistically inclined Arab non-Islamists, these actors merit U.S. sup-

port. They are beginning the political contest with both the Islamists and the authoritarians with a serious, but perhaps not insurmountable, deficit. As with the developments in Tunisia, U.S. interests would be best served if these non-Islamists elsewhere in the Middle East at least hold their own.



POST-JASMINE TUNISIA

■ SARAH FEUER

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.

The resultant political landscape in Tunisia challenges a prevailing narrative among analysts of the Arab uprisings, according to whom the region faced a choice between non-Islamist autocrats and Islamist democrats. This binary framework captured some dy-

namics at play throughout the region, but it always obscured more than it enlightened the unfolding realities in Tunisia. There, democracy-minded forces emerged on both sides of the Islamist/non-Islamist divide, and autocratic or otherwise illiberal tendencies could be found in Islamist and non-Islamist circles alike.¹ Consider the country's dominant Islamist party: after emerging from the 2011 parliamentary election as a leading political force, Ennahda demonstrated a commitment to key components of a democracy, including the separation of powers and broad participation in elections and office holding; at the same time, the party promoted policies that would have restricted free speech and undermined the country's progressive statutes on women's rights.² In the non-Islamist realm, parties like Ettakatol (Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties) and the Congress for the Republic—members of

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the transitional government alongside Ennahda—had strong democratic credentials, having opposed the regime of former president Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali and advocated human and civil rights for decades before the country's Jasmine uprising. Newer formations like the Nidaa Tounes (Tunisian Call) party brought together remnants of the former regime with little affection for democratic governance and democratic leftists active in opposition politics throughout Ben Ali's tenure. The simple dichotomy of Secular Autocrat versus Islamist Democrat, therefore, does not offer much insight into such configurations. Indeed, one reason Tunisia remains on a recognizable path away from authoritarianism is that reformist actors on both sides of the Islamist/non-Islamist divide have continued to exert pressure on political elites in both camps to abide by their stated commitments to a successful democratic transition.

Tunisia's relative success over the past four years has prompted observers to label the small country a "model" for other Arab states still struggling to shed authoritarian governance. But Tunisia has never really been a model. From the beginning of the uprisings, the country had crucial advantages over many of its Arab peers: a homogeneous (majority Sunni Muslim) population, a relatively well-educated citizenry, and a small and accountable military establishment. Demographically, too, Tunisia had an important edge over its Egyptian, Levantine, and Gulf counterparts: at the time of the uprising, scholars noted that Tunisia's median age of twenty-nine placed it above the "youth bulge" bracket and in the same intermediate bracket as countries like Brazil, Indonesia, Chile, and Taiwan—all of which had successfully transitioned to democracy within five to fifteen years' time.³ Even on the economic front, a 2014 World Bank report highlighting structural obstacles to growth acknowledged that in terms of human capital and basic infrastructure, "Tunisia has everything it needs to become the 'Tiger of the Mediterranean.'"⁴

Despite such advantages, the Tunisia's democratic transition came close to unraveling on several occasions, and today it is grappling with issues such as a severely crippled economy, an insurgency along its border with Algeria, the threat of violence spilling over from neighboring Libya, and a security sector in need of reform. How Tunisia's

political decisionmakers respond to such challenges, and the degree to which allies such as the United States continue to lend constructive support, will determine whether the nascent democracy not only survives but thrives in the coming years. The recent conclusion to the country's transitional period presents a valuable opportunity to identify and assess the emerging political landscape, with a view to assisting U.S. policymakers seeking productive partnerships in post-Spring Tunisia.

This paper, the first in a series exploring non-Islamists throughout the Middle East and North Africa, focuses on the leading non-Islamists in Tunisia's political system and civil society, highlighting their strengths and weaknesses, and offering recommendations for U.S. policymakers seeking to ensure the success of Tunisia's experiment in democracy. The paper proceeds in four parts. Following a recap of the Tunisian transition, the paper delves into non-Islamists in the political system, focusing on the four leading non-Islamist parties. It then turns to non-Islamists in civil society, assessing the opportunities and challenges facing organized labor, women's rights organizations, and groups promoting government transparency. The concluding section summarizes the main findings and considers policy implications.

The Tunisian Transition

Following the January 2011 ouster of Tunisia's autocratic president, Ben Ali, the formerly ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) party was dissolved and a series of interim governments culminated in the election of a National Constituent Assembly (NCA) on October 23, 2011. The NCA was charged with drafting a new constitution and preparing the country for the election of a permanent legislature within one year's time. In a development that would become the regional trend, Tunisia's formerly banned Islamist movement, Ennahda ("Renaissance," in Arabic), emerged from the October 2011 election in a dominant position, capturing 41 percent of the popular vote and obtaining a plurality of seats in the transitional parliament. The remaining 59 percent went to more than a dozen non-Islamist parties and independents. Ennahda entered

into a governing coalition with two secular parties—Congress for the Republic and Ettakatol—and this troika became Tunisia’s new government.

The NCA’s one-year mandate was unrealistic from the outset, given that the elected body had to assume responsibility for day-to-day legislating alongside its work on the new constitution and electoral law. The coalition ended up governing for roughly two and a half years, during which time Tunisians enjoyed broadly expanded political rights; however, the country’s economy continued to deteriorate and the security situation worsened. Following the assassinations of two leftist politicians in February and July of 2013, massive protests that summer brought the NCA to a standstill and the Tunisian transition to the brink of collapse. A national dialogue organized under the auspices of the Tunisian General Labor Union, the Tunisian League for Human Rights, the Tunisian Union of Industry and Commerce, and the National Bar Association facilitated a series of negotiations between the political factions throughout fall 2013. That December, Ennahda yielded to public pressure and agreed to step down, ceding power to an interim government of technocrats. In January 2014, the NCA ratified a new constitution enshrining freedoms of speech, association, and press; gender equality between men and women; and checks and balances between the legislative, executive, and judicial branches.

From January to October 2014, the interim cabinet of Prime Minister Mehdi Jomaa governed to broadly positive reviews as the country’s precarious security situation stabilized somewhat,⁵ and the NCA adopted the long-awaited electoral law to govern future parliamentary and presidential elections. On October 26, 2014, Tunisians went to the polls to elect a new 217-seat legislature, which resulted in a parliament dominated by five blocs: the secularist Nidaa Tounes with 85 seats, the Islamist Ennahda with 69 seats, the anti-Islamist Free Patriotic Union (UPL by its French acronym) with 16 seats, the leftist Popular Front coalition with 15 seats, and the neoliberal Afek Tounes with 8 seats. The remaining 24 seats went to independents. On December 21, 2014, Tunisians elected as their new president Beji Caid Essebsi, an eighty-eight year-old statesman and the leader of Nidaa Tounes. Both elections, widely praised by international and domestic

observers, represented significant achievements for the relatively small country that had sparked the Arab Spring, all the more so given the growing chaos next door in Libya and the overall regional upheaval.

In line with procedures outlined in the new constitution, President Essebsi named as prime minister a member of the leading party in parliament, his own Nidaa Tounes. The party’s choice was Habib Essid, whose portfolio included time in the agriculture and interior ministries under Ben Ali, a stint as interior minister in Essebsi’s 2011 transitional government, and service as a security advisor to Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali (Ennahda) during the first troika government. Following weeks of negotiations, including one failed attempt to form a government, Essid secured parliamentary approval of a broadly representative government on February 2, 2015. Of the twenty-seven ministerial portfolios, six went to Nidaa Tounes, three to UPL, three to Afek Tounes, one to Ennahda, and the rest to independents. Of the fourteen state secretariat (subministerial) posts, three went to Nidaa Tounes, three to Ennahda, and the rest to independents.

The results of the 2014 parliamentary elections and the dominance of Nidaa Tounes, UPL, and Afek Tounes suggest that while the Islamists of Ennahda will continue to occupy an important space in Tunisian politics, they do not represent its principal force. Some have interpreted Ennahda’s loss of twenty parliamentary seats as a severe blow to political Islam in Tunisia. For others, the fact that Ennahda retained one-third of the parliament is remarkable given the rapid descent of Islamists throughout the region, most glaringly in Egypt but elsewhere as well. Both interpretations have merit, but either way, Tunisia’s Islamists face a sizable majority of non-Islamist forces occupying the political landscape today. Some non-Islamist groups, including factions within Nidaa Tounes, the Popular Front, and Afek Tounes, have strong democratic leanings; others, including pockets within Nidaa Tounes and Slim Riahi’s Free Patriotic Union, are either decidedly antidemocratic or have yet to demonstrate a commitment to democratic principles, though they have all opted to participate in a democratic political system. The following section reviews these forces and assesses their near-term prospects.

Non-Islamists in Tunisian Politics

Four main blocs constitute non-Islamist political influence in Tunisia: Nidaa Tounes, the Free Patriotic Union, the Popular Front, and Afek Tounes.

The Secularists of Nidaa Tounes

Following Ennahda's strong performance in the 2011 parliamentary election, Essebsi—who had served as a minister under President Habib Bourguiba (r. 1957–1987), speaker of the parliament under Ben Ali (r. 1987–2011), and interim prime minister following Ben Ali's exit—created a new party and began rallying Tunisians around a broadly anti-Islamist message. As early as March 2012, the party was holding rallies attracting several thousand people, suggesting at least a growing fascination with, if not support for, the emerging rival to Ennahda. By the fall of 2014, Essebsi was pegging the party's membership at 110,000.⁶

Essebsi's rhetoric emphasizing "modernism" (in implied contrast to Islamism), democracy, and the restoration of state prestige (*haibat al-dawla*) attracted three main constituencies: former RCD members, leftists affiliated with a handful of smaller parties that had fared poorly in the 2011 parliamentary election, and secularly oriented academics and other intellectuals who were formerly apolitical but gravitated to Nidaa out of a desire to stop the Islamist ascent. The shared determination to counterbalance the Islamists of Ennahda held together these three otherwise ideologically disparate groups. Of the three, two—the leftist camp and the secular professionals—had democratic bona fides; the ex-RCD faction—a minority—could not properly be termed democratic. In Essebsi, these factions perceived a charismatic leader who could undo the damage of what many had come to view as the troika's lackluster governance, particularly in the economic and security realms.⁷

Nidaa opened regional offices in twenty-four of the country's twenty-seven governorates and established around 200 municipal cells (out of 264 municipalities).⁸ Funding for the party's operations came from four principal sources: donations from business interests, particularly in the tourism and agriculture sectors; private contributions from individual members; public financing

during the campaign period; and donations from foreign governments before and during the campaign period. Foreign funding took various forms, including contributions from the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, a foundation affiliated with the German government, which reportedly paid for Nidaa's headquarters and office materials; and a gift from the government of the United Arab Emirates in the form of two armored cars for Essebsi in July 2014 after he began receiving death threats. The UAE's gift was controversial, as it fed the narrative that Tunisia's anti-Islamists were being funded by the UAE while Ennahda enjoyed financial support from Islamist-friendly governments in Turkey and Qatar.

Public skepticism about foreign funding did little to slow Nidaa's momentum. Instead, frustration with the troika's (mis)management of the political transition, a growing concern that political Islam posed a threat to the country's future, and Essebsi's charisma propelled Nidaa to its October 2014 parliamentary victory and ultimately carried Essebsi to Carthage Palace that December. But Nidaa's "big tent" has also been one of its greatest liabilities, because beyond the shared—and now ostensibly achieved—goal of diminishing Ennahda's clout, the three constituencies drawn to Nidaa diverge considerably in their policy preferences. On economic questions, for example, the leftist wing of Nidaa arguably finds more in common with the socialists and communists of the Popular Front (discussed later) than with their free-market capitalist peers in the party. This diversity likely accounted for the party's reluctance to spell out specific policy prescriptions during the campaign beyond vaguely worded promises to promote job growth and revive Tunisia's economy,⁹ and it almost certainly accounted for Nidaa's decision to put off convening a formal party congress until after the 2014 election cycle. Since January 2015, when Essebsi formally left the party to assume the presidency, the party's competing ideological trends have only become more glaring in their differences, presenting a major future challenge for Nidaa.

A second, related liability for Nidaa has been organizational. The party has at one time or another boasted a founding committee, consisting of individuals within Essebsi's inner circle; a hundred-member executive bureau; a now-defunct national executive council with four

hundred members; and a similarly short-lived thirty-person political bureau. Nidaa members—among both the older generation and younger activists—report that final decisions were consistently taken by Essebsi himself, who remained reluctant to authorize decisionmaking bodies within the party lest they generate competing power bases. The party's lack of a democratic decisionmaking apparatus was partly to blame for a spate of high-level defections in 2014, including the August 2014 resignation of several regional office managers who were angry that they had not been consulted before party lists were disseminated in anticipation of the parliamentary elections. The lack of internal organization also hampered the party's ability to manage more mundane, but no less significant, tasks such as managing its website and maintaining a social media presence.

Nidaa members are aware of the party's structural weaknesses. In March, the party elected a new twenty-member political bureau, and in May, Mohsen Marzouk, Essebsi's fifty-year-old campaign manager, became Nidaa's new secretary general. The party has also created three vice-presidential posts, currently filled by a member of the party's leftist wing, a leading businessman, and Essebsi's son, respectively. In the coming months, a major task confronting the party will be to create viable decisionmaking structures and ensure that those structures allow democratically inclined voices within the party to continue calling Nidaa their political home.

The Anti-Islamists of the Free Patriotic Union

The anti-Islamist sentiment unifying the diverse factions of Nidaa Tounes also permeates the third-place winner of the 2014 parliamentary election, the previously little-known Free Patriotic Union, or UPL (*al-Ittihad al-Watani al-Hurr*). As with Nidaa, UPL is closely associated with its founder, Slim Riahi, a wealthy businessman who grew up in Libya and made his fortune in the energy and real estate sectors. Upon his return to Tunisia in 2011, Riahi began investing in large-scale development projects, became president of a popular Tunisian soccer club, and founded a political party on a platform emphasizing "modernist" values, free market liberalism, and opposition to Islamist movements. In the 2011 legislative election, Riahi portrayed Ennahda as UPL's chief rival,

but his party performed dismally. UPL's strong showing in the most recent election partly reflected the more general souring with Ennahda in the interim.

Still, anti-Islamism alone cannot account for UPL's recent success. Arguably the more salient factor has been Riahi's wealth. Paradoxically, Riahi's fortunes, in addition to bankrolling the party, endeared him to lower-income Tunisians who became convinced he would spread his wealth and be less likely to steal from average citizens. UPL reinforced this narrative through its campaign promises to increase public assistance to underprivileged families, build soccer stadiums in blighted neighborhoods, and establish a ministry responsible for rooting out corruption. Setting aside the viability of such promises, they undoubtedly tapped into economic realities many analysts outside Tunisia failed to acknowledge in the decades preceding the Arab uprisings. Assessments of Tunisia's economy in the 1990s and 2000s tended to highlight the country's impressive performance on macroeconomic indicators such as overall growth rates and poverty reduction. More recent analyses have suggested the traditional focus on macroeconomics obscured deeper and ultimately more consequential trends, such as increases in relative poverty, growing regional disparities, and rampant corruption, that precluded more evenly distributed economic growth.¹⁰ Such trends fueled a growing sense of marginalization among Tunisians living outside the capital and far from the coast, and this marginalization partly explains the appeal of a party like UPL, which otherwise remains largely devoid of ideological affiliation. For Riahi's detractors, however, the populist orientation of UPL's campaign masks the party leader's own perceived corruption, and some have accused the party of buying votes. Now that UPL has emerged as a leading bloc in parliament, it will have to deliver on its promises if it hopes to remain a key political player.

The Leftists of the Popular Front

In early 2013, eleven secular parties formed an electoral bloc in the NCA known as the Popular Front (*al-Jabha al-Shabiyah*). The coalition won the fourth largest number of seats (15) in the most recent legislative election and chose not to join Essid's government, preferring to remain the dominant opposition party. This

decision partly reflected strong pressure from the Popular Front's base not to affiliate with a government of Islamists (i.e., Ennahda) and former regime members (i.e., Nidaa). The Front may have also calculated that it had more to gain from remaining in the opposition, as the new constitution requires that the leader of the parliament's Finance Committee hail from the opposition. Ideologically, the Front's member parties are socialist or communist in orientation, with a strong commitment to social justice and the democratic process. The Front's spokesman, Hama Hammami, is a former communist and longtime labor activist who was imprisoned, tortured, and forced into hiding on numerous occasions throughout the Bourguiba and Ben Ali eras.

The Popular Front's greatest strengths lie in its ideological cohesion and its relatively unified base of support. The roots of Tunisia's leftist politics stretch back to the period surrounding the country's independence in the 1950s, and even as the country tilted toward economic liberalization in the 1980s and 1990s—privatizing state-owned enterprises, cutting public subsidies, and embracing other structural adjustment policies aimed at securing loans from international financial institutions—such shifts left a sour taste for many lower- and middle-income Tunisians. The left may be diminished, but it is still very much alive in Tunisia, lending the Front a hefty dose of legitimacy on which it has sought to capitalize by presenting itself as the leading alternative to both the Islamists of Ennahda and the secularists of Nidaa. In a recent interview, for example, the leader of a Front member party ruled out reconciliation with either Ennahda, which he characterized as a persistent “danger” to Tunisia, or with President Essebsi, whom he accused of lacking a concrete policy agenda and entering into a “pact with the devil” by forming a coalition with Islamists.¹¹

But the strategy exemplified in such statements is not without risks, and the Front has come under criticism for alleged intransigence in its dealings with the other political parties, earning it the nickname “Party of No.” Given the consensus among most parties in the government that deep (read: liberalizing) economic reforms will be necessary to get the country on a path to economic stability, a key challenge facing the Front will be to remain true to its base while not appearing to obstruct economic reforms many have concluded will be necessary, if painful.

The Young Liberals of Afek Tounes

In the wake of the 2011 uprising, a new political party called Afek Tounes (Tunisian Horizons) was created under the leadership of Yassine Brahim, a minister of transportation in Essebsi's interim government who had spent years working in finance and business management in Europe and Tunisia. At forty-nine, he is the youngest party leader to emerge from the Jasmine Revolution, and this youth has characterized much of Afek's leadership and support base. In 2012, Afek briefly merged with nine other democratically oriented parties under a coalition calling itself al-Joumhour (Republican), but the coalition did not last long, and in August 2013 Brahim announced the reconstitution of Afek as its own party. In the 2014 parliamentary election, Afek set a goal of attaining four to five seats. That Afek ultimately won eight, and took control of three crucial ministries, reflected the party's cohesive message and solid organization—Afek's two greatest strengths.

Ideologically, Afek self-identifies as a center-right party and has promoted a platform emphasizing free market economic reforms and liberal social policies. On the matter of religion in public life, Afek falls somewhere between the secularists of Nidaa and the Islamists of Ennahda. The head of a local association of imams sits on Afek's national council, and unlike Nidaa and UPL, Afek does not take an overtly anti-Islamist stance. (Ideological differences make it much more difficult for Afek to contemplate collaboration with the socialists of the Popular Front.) However, unlike Ennahda, Afek's leadership believes religious identity and practice are best left as private affairs. As one member of the party's political bureau expressed, “Islamists believe religion is a duty, while Afek believes it is a right.”¹²

Of the non-Islamist parties, Afek is by far the best organized. In addition to its ten-person political bureau, which oversees the party, Afek boasts its national council, whose hundred members sit on committees responsible for communications, economic policy, and other issue areas. The party also has a strong regional presence. In the 2014 election, Afek fielded candidates in twenty-nine of the country's thirty-three electoral districts, and in all twenty-nine regions the party opened an office, below which were 150 local cells of roughly five

persons each. Through such structures, the party managed to knock on 50,000 doors in the four months leading up to October's parliamentary election, a grassroots operation unmatched by the other secular parties. Afek is also the only non-Islamist party to have implemented a membership fee for those wishing to join, though the actual amount is minimal. The party also relies on private donations. Although the finance background of Afek's leadership produced a widespread impression that the party benefits from wealthy business interests, it is, in fact, one of the poorer parties on the Tunisian political scene. Given its recent electoral successes, and the likelihood that democrats within Nidaa will gravitate to Afek in the coming months, a challenge for the party will be to develop a more comprehensive funding strategy to permit continued growth in its staffing and operations.

Non-Islamists in Tunisian Civil Society

After a brief experiment with political liberalization in the late 1980s, Ben Ali changed course and began clamping down on sources—real and potential—of political opposition. The Islamists of Ennahda became prime regime targets, but Ben Ali also went after non-Islamists, ranging from members of the leading communist party to civil society organizations (CSOs) like the Tunisian League for Human Rights, labor union activists, and student groups on college campuses. The few CSOs that were permitted to continue functioning faced persistent harassment as Ben Ali's Tunisia became a veritable police state.¹³

The 2011 uprising led to the emergence of a vibrant civil society, one that deserves much credit for keeping the democratic transition on track at critical junctures.¹⁴ Key segments of this civil society predated the Jasmine Revolution—and some, like the national labor union, even predated the independent state—but the vast majority of today's roughly 4,000 CSOs emerged after the Ben Ali-era restrictions on free assembly and free association were lifted in 2011. Broadly speaking, five categories of CSOs predominate in Tunisian civil society today: (1) organized labor, (2) women's rights groups, (3) organi-

zations promoting government transparency, (4) student unions, and (5) human rights organizations. In some arenas, like the student unions, Islamists constitute sizable minorities.¹⁵ In others, such as women's rights organizations, Islamists are gradually finding a voice. Still, the aims of Tunisia's CSOs remain largely secular in nature, and to speak of Tunisian civil society is to speak of predominantly non-Islamist groups and individuals pursuing reforms in a public space between family and state that remained elusive for decades. Each category of CSO would merit a study unto itself, but a brief assessment of the main labor union, women's rights groups, and organizations promoting government transparency will shed light on the opportunities and challenges facing non-Islamist democrats in Tunisian civil society today.

Organized Labor

Most contemporary press accounts of the Arab Spring trace the uprisings to the self-immolation of Muhammad Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor, in December of 2010. Compelling as it was, this popular narrative obscured the fact that Bouazizi's suicide had *followed* a period of deep social unrest, the likes of which Tunisia had not seen since the early 1980s. In 2008, a group of unemployed youth and temporary workers at the state-owned phosphate mines in Gafsa, located in the country's midwestern region, launched a series of strikes to protest the lack of access to jobs and unfair hiring practices.¹⁶ Simmering below the surface of the drama in Gafsa and its environs was a dispute between the local affiliates and the regional leadership of the country's largest and oldest labor union, the Tunisian General Labor Union, or UGTT by its French acronym.

This was not the first time the UGTT had been at the center of social unrest in Tunisia. Since its founding in 1946, the UGTT has been more than a simple labor union; it has been the only broad-based, national, and independent organization functioning parallel to—and thus rivaling—the state in its ability to mobilize the Tunisian public. At times, the UGTT enjoyed harmonious relations with the state. In the early days after independence, for example, eleven out of seventeen government ministers hailed from the UGTT's leadership. In other periods, however, the UGTT's insistence on preserving

its autonomy brought it into conflict with the regimes of Bourguiba and Ben Ali, which alternately sought to repress and co-opt the organization in an attempt to bring it to heel. The 2008 Gafsa protests, sparked partly by tensions between a co-opted regional leadership and oppositional local affiliates, spoke to the Ben Ali regime's success in weakening the UGTT's internal coherence. Still, by the time protests spread from Gafsa and Sidi Bouzid to the outskirts of Tunis in 2010 and 2011, the UGTT was firmly in the emerging anti-regime camp. Indeed, it was the UGTT's call for a national strike that precipitated the decisive protests of January 14, 2011. The ensuing mobilization demonstrated the union's widespread national legitimacy, local disputes in Gafsa notwithstanding, and this legitimacy enabled the UGTT to serve as a crucial arbiter in disputes between the political parties in 2013.

Reinforcing the UGTT's legitimacy is its extensive organizational structure. The union encompasses forty-six sectorial syndicates in areas such as telecommunications, agriculture, education, and finance/banking, and twenty-four regional syndicates reporting to an executive bureau comprising the secretary-general and twelve additional members who are elected to five-year terms. UGTT leaders report that total membership across the country is between 800,000 and 900,000, of whom the majority (roughly 500,000) are public sector employees who pay monthly union dues directly out of their paychecks. There is also an à la carte membership option, popular among private sector employees, which requires a lower monthly contribution but does not grant full voting rights at the national congresses.¹⁷

The UGTT's high legitimacy and solid organizational foundation ensure that it will remain a powerful social force in post-Spring Tunisia. It recently concluded negotiations with the Essid government over public sector salaries, and it will undoubtedly be a key player in policy discussions concerning issues such as the informal economy, tax code, solvency of public sector pension funds, and corruption. Much like its leftist allies in the Popular Front, however, the UGTT will operate under the constraints of a political climate that increasingly favors economic austerity and liberalizing reforms anathema to much of its base. In the coming months, a central

challenge facing the UGTT will be to choose its political battles wisely as the country continues to navigate rough economic waters. An additional challenge will be to contend with new syndicates that have sprung up since the 2011 uprising. In February and May 2011, two former UGTT leaders announced the establishment of the General Confederation of Tunisian Workers and the Union of Tunisian Workers, respectively.¹⁸ These newer syndicates do not yet rival the UGTT's broad base, but they have broken the UGTT's longstanding monopoly on organized labor in Tunisia—a monopoly effectively mandated by the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes' refusal to legalize any other syndicates. Insofar as the Jasmine Revolution has opened up a space for labor pluralism in Tunisia, the 2011 uprising may yet prove to be a mixed blessing for the UGTT.

Women's Rights

Well before the events of 2011, women in Tunisia enjoyed legal protections unparalleled in the Arab world.¹⁹ Two key developments accounted for Tunisian women's relatively advanced legal status. The first was the 1956 promulgation of a Personal Status Code that outlawed polygamy, granted women the right to sue for divorce, established alimony, and increased women's rights to child custody.²⁰ The second was the emergence in the late 1980s of women's rights groups—chief among them the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (TADW) and the Association of Tunisian Women for Research and Development (ATWRD)—which successfully lobbied the government on various women's issues. For example, in the early 1990s these groups compelled the Ben Ali regime to reform the country's citizenship code and grant women the right to pass their Tunisian nationality on to their children, a right previously reserved to Tunisian fathers.²¹

The older generation of Tunisia's women's rights movement has remained active since the 2011 uprising. In the months following Ben Ali's exit, veteran groups such as the TADW were instrumental in urging the 2011 transitional government to adopt a gender parity law that required candidate lists in that year's parliamentary election to alternate between men and women. Likewise, following a 2012 proposal by several Ennahda parliament members to include a constitutional provision defining wom-

en as “complementary” rather than “equal” to men, the TADW and others mobilized public protests that ultimately defeated the proposed measure.²² With an increase in freedom, however, veteran women’s rights groups face a challenge of adapting their goals and purposes from those conceived in the context of political authoritarianism to those more suited to an emerging democracy.

A related challenge for the older generation of women’s advocacy groups has been to contend with younger potential rivals in post-Spring Tunisia. A 2014 report by the government-affiliated Center for Research, Study, Documentation and Information on Women listed 244 local CSOs employing some 2,000 Tunisians and working on issues related to gender equality.²³ At the local and national levels, three kinds of women’s advocacy CSOs dominate the scene: (1) those inspired by the older generation of groups like the TADW and ATWRD, (2) Islamist women’s groups, and (3) collaborative groups eschewing ideological affiliation and emphasizing the use of technology to engage women in reform efforts. A prominent example of the third is *Aswat Nissa* (Women’s Voices), a nonpartisan CSO created in 2011 with the mission of empowering Tunisian women to combat discrimination through initiatives ranging from local workshops to national lobbying efforts.²⁴ CSOs like *Aswat Nissa*, which rely on funding from international donors such as Oxfam and the United Nations, and on support from the United States and various European governments, represent a new branch of the Tunisian women’s movement. Though led by non-Islamists, they tend to eschew the anti-Islamist rhetoric and policy focus that characterize some veteran groups. Groups like *Aswat Nissa* in Tunisia’s emerging civil society carry tremendous promise for the women’s movement, because as inclusive organizations they stand a greater chance of reaching and mobilizing larger numbers of women. However, a challenge for all these groups—old and new—will be to coexist without risking redundancy or destructive competition, both of which could undermine the broader cause of women’s advancement in a democratic Tunisia.

Government Transparency

Yet another bright spot in the Tunisian transition has been the creation of CSOs promoting government

transparency. Whether established as Tunisian affiliates of international transparency organizations or founded as wholly indigenous operations, these CSOs have vigilantly monitored various aspects of the political process over the past four years and deserve much of the credit for keeping Tunisia’s transition on track. Often founded by young adults, and relying largely on funding from international donors, they will likely remain critical to ensuring that the seeds of government transparency and accountability planted in 2011 take root over time.

Consider the example of *Mourakiboun* (Observers), an organization founded in 2011 to monitor the country’s first legislative election following Ben Ali’s departure. On October 23, 2011, *Mourakiboun* dispatched 4,000 volunteer observers around the country; three years later, the group managed to send 6,000 observers around the country for both the legislative and presidential elections. In the interim, *Mourakiboun* had become a leading pressure group on all matters electoral, issuing periodic assessments—including critical ones—of the Independent High Commission for Elections, and proving instrumental in shaping the emerging electoral law. It was largely *Mourakiboun*’s lobbying efforts, for example, that produced the law’s accommodations for illiterate voters.

In a similar vein, *I Watch*—a Tunisian branch of Transparency International founded in 2011—tackled three primary issues in the 2011 and 2014 election cycles: vote buying, illegal influence on voters, and campaign finance. By 2014, the group had created an online platform for citizens to obtain accreditation as election observers; launched a website through which citizens could report on instances of corruption; trained and dispatched 750 fixed-location election monitors; and issued recommendations to the NCA concerning the electoral code. With assistance from the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, the group also began tracking the expenditures of political parties with a view to ensuring that these parties respected campaign finance laws.²⁵

Or consider *Al Bawsala* (Compass), a watchdog CSO established in 2012 to monitor and publicize NCA members’ attendance, debates, voting, and other forms of participation in parliament. *Al Bawsala* also published the evolving drafts of the constitution, encouraging and enabling citizens to remain engaged in the process. More

recently, the group has launched projects monitoring the national budget negotiations in parliament and tracking the activities of municipal authorities, all while continuing to publish transcripts—often in real time—of debates in parliament over proposed legislation. Such projects have brought unprecedented government transparency to Tunisia, and organizations like Al Bawsala are to thank for the widespread perception that, challenges to democratic consolidation notwithstanding, there is no turning back in Tunisia. These organizations will require continued domestic and international support if they are to survive.

Non-Islamists, Democratic Consolidation, and U.S. Policy

The small country that sparked the Arab Spring has had its share of tumult since 2011, and it faces formidable challenges, particularly in the economic and security realms. If the country's democratic stakeholders—among non-Islamists and Islamists alike—remain vigilant and invested in the current process, there is reason for optimism about Tunisia's transition from a nascent to a consolidated democracy, one in which public institutions uphold and abide by the rule of law and in which citizens are free to pursue a dignified life. The March 18, 2015, attack on the Bardo National Museum in Tunis underscored the terrorist threat confronting the fragile democracy. Still, Tunisia's long-term prospects remain relatively positive, in no small part because sizable segments of the population have demonstrated a determination and an ability to keep the country on a path toward democracy. In the coming years, the country's main Islamist movement will remain a key player, but as this paper has shown, Ennahda will share the stage with a host of non-Islamist parties and civil society groups that together arguably command greater popular support.

For U.S. policymakers eager to see the Tunisian experiment succeed, the challenge is to broaden the assistance package to help strengthen the country's antiauthoritarian trends. Thus far, the bulk of U.S. assistance has targeted the economic and security sectors, partly because these are the arenas in which the country has most suffered and partly because these are the primary forms of

assistance Tunisians have requested. In both realms, U.S. support has been constructive, but limited resources and the fires (literal and figurative) burning in other parts of the Middle East will likely continue to limit U.S. attention and assistance to success stories like Tunisia. Still, the Obama administration's recent designation of Tunisia as a major non-NATO ally signaled an ongoing desire to strengthen the U.S.-Tunisia partnership. To that end, even small amounts of assistance, if thoughtfully conceived, can make a difference. Policymakers would do well to keep the following considerations in mind when crafting this assistance in the months and years ahead.

Economics and Politics

On the economic front, most American assistance has come in the form of loan guarantees, investments in entrepreneurship programs, and grants for programs targeting small- and medium-sized businesses. All are worthy recipients, but in light of the Obama administration's request that Congress more than double assistance to Tunisia for 2016, a strong case can be made for reprogramming or augmenting current U.S. assistance to the benefit of political parties and civil society groups, including ones cited in this paper, that have demonstrated a commitment to implanting and nurturing the country's democratic roots. In civil society, for example, CSOs such as those highlighted earlier often report that the most effective assistance would come not in high dollar amounts but in targeted capacity-building programs aimed at imparting skills related to nonprofit management such as program evaluation, fundraising, and communications. Channeling assistance into capacity building for existing organizations, rather than into seed funds that can remain dormant for long periods, would increase the likelihood these groups can continue to grow and help safeguard the country's delicate democracy. In politics, lending assistance that would enable members of parliament to perform such mundane but crucial tasks as renting office space and hiring staff—currently luxuries that too few members enjoy—would go a long way. So, too, might the establishment of a Tunisian version of the U.S. Congressional Research Service, providing nonpartisan research and information to lawmakers.

Security

In the security realm, Tunisia offers something of an exception to the regional rule that has so often found the United States engaging in security cooperation with Arab regimes that share strategic interests but remain decidedly undemocratic. If Tunisia continues along its current trajectory—and pressures continue to be exerted on the government to avoid returning to the pre-2011 days of a heavy-handed police state—then U.S. policymakers can and should continue to provide security assistance to the new democracy on the Mediterranean without facing a heavy moral dilemma. This assistance would ideally continue to focus on helping Tunisia secure its borders; root out the insurgency in the country's western mountain region; keep close track of the thousands of Tunisian citizens fighting for jihadist groups, including the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS); and reform the country's security sector in a manner that allows the country's leaders to attend to the pressing economic and political demands that fueled the 2011 uprising.

Even if U.S. security assistance to Tunisia is not as mor-

ally fraught as elsewhere, the prospect of lending such aid does present a challenging paradox because the institutions with the greatest functional capacities and thus the greatest ability to absorb assistance (e.g., the police and Ministry of Interior) also suffer the greatest legitimacy deficit, while those enjoying high public esteem and therefore presenting ideal recipients of U.S. security assistance (e.g., the armed forces and Ministry of Defense) are sometimes the most poorly equipped to absorb this assistance. U.S. policymakers will need to remain cognizant of this paradox in the months ahead, particularly in light of the Obama administration's announcement following the Bardo attack that it will increase military aid to Tunisia. Alongside the "harder" forms of security assistance, such as equipment and training, American policymakers should continue to think broadly about security sector reform in Tunisia. In this vein, programs like the Security Governance Initiative—a \$65 million program launched in August 2014 to help countries like Tunisia reform their security sectors while maintaining transparent, accountable governance—are promising and deserve to be expanded in future years.

Notes

1. The paper adopts a broad definition of democracy to include not only the familiar procedural mechanisms of power sharing, such as regular elections and open contestation for political office, but also attendant freedoms of expression, association, and press, and legal protections for minorities.
2. For more on Ennahda's democratic credentials, see Sarah J. Feuer, *Islam and Democracy in Practice: Tunisia's Ennahda Nine Months In*, Middle East Brief 66 (Waltham, MA: Crown Center for Middle East Studies, August 2012), <http://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/meb66.html>.
3. Richard Cincotta, "Tunisia's Shot at Democracy: What Demographics and Recent History Tell Us," *NewSecurityBeat*, Wilson Center, January 25, 2011, <http://www.newsecuritybeat.org/2011/01/tunisia-shot-at-democracy-what-demographics-and-recent-history-tell-us/>.
4. Antonio Nucifora and Bob Rijkers, "The Unfinished Revolution: Bringing Opportunity, Good Jobs and Greater Wealth to All Tunisians," World Bank, *Development Policy Review* (May 2014), p. 300.
5. An August 2014 poll conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) found that 67 percent of Tunisians believed the security situation had improved under the Jomaa government. See "IRI Poll: Tunisia's Democratic Transition at a Crossroads," August 19, 2014, <http://www.iri.org/resource/iri-poll-tunisia%E2%80%99s-democratic-transition-crossroads>. Indeed, an October 2014 International Crisis Group (ICG) report noted that the Jomaa government had "practically eradicated" Ansar al-Sharia from the country, although violent confrontations between jihadist groups and security forces continued along the border with Algeria. See ICG, "Update Briefing," Middle East and North Africa Briefing 41 (Tunis/Brussels, October 21, 2014): p. 2.
6. Membership numbers for Nidaa Tounes are difficult to independently verify. For Essebsi's remarks, see "L'interview integrale de Beji Caid Essebsi à Leaders: J'irai jusqu'au bout!" *Leaders*, September 1, 2014, <http://www.leaders.com.tn/article/14929-l-interview-integrale-de-beji-caid-essebsi-a-leaders-j-irai-jusqu-au-bout>.
7. Throughout 2013, IRI polling data revealed that 77–79 percent of Tunisians believed the country was headed in the wrong direction. These percentages would drop to 48 percent with the appointment of Jomaa's interim government in February 2014 and rise again to 67 percent by the eve of the 2014 parliamentary elections. See "IRI Poll: Tunisia's Democratic Transition at a Crossroads," August 19, 2014, <http://www.iri.org/resource/iri-poll-tunisia%E2%80%99s-democratic-transition-crossroads>.

8. Ennahda is the only party that maintains regional offices in all twenty-seven provinces, and cells in all 264 municipalities.
9. For more on Nidaa's economic platform released during the campaign, see Sarah Feuer, "Tunisia's Economic Challenges," *Fikra Forum*, October 24, 2014, <http://fikraforum.org/?p=5835>.
10. See, for example, the World Bank's mea culpa in Antonio Nucifora and Bob Rijkers, "The Unfinished Revolution: Bringing Opportunity, Good Jobs and Greater Wealth to All Tunisians," *Development Policy Review* (May 2014), p. 26; see also African Development Bank, *Poverty and Inequality in Tunisia, Morocco and Mauritania*, Economic Brief (2011), <http://washin.st/2e2dmNc>.
11. The statements were made by Zuhair Hamdi, the head of the Popular Current, a left-leaning party in the Popular Front. (*al-Tayar al-Shabi*). See "Zuhair Hamdi (Al-Jabha Al-Shabiya): Essebsi Lacks a Program, Ennahda is a Danger to Tunisia, and We Reject Calls for Reconciliation." *Al-Sabah News*, April 3, 2015, <http://washin.st/1H9RGVi>.
12. Kabil Daoud, member of Afek Tounes's Political Bureau, interview by author, February 3, 2015.
13. For more on Ben Ali's contentious relationship with civil society, see Christopher Alexander, "Authoritarianism and Civil Society in Tunisia: Back from the Democratic Brink," *Middle East Research and Information Project* 205 (Winter 1997), <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer205/authoritarianism-civil-society-tunisia>.
14. For more on civil society's role in keeping Tunisia's democratic transition on track, see Shelley Deane, *Transforming Tunisia: The Role of Civil Society in Tunisia's Transition* (International Alert, February 2013), <http://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/publications/Tunisia2013EN.pdf>; and Hamadi Redissi, *What Role for Tunisia's National Dialogue under the Interim Unity Government?* (Arab Reform Initiative, July 2014), <http://www.arab-reform.net/what-role-tunisia%E2%80%99s-national-dialogue-under-interim-unity-government>.
15. Whereas in 2012 the leading non-Islamist student union captured 88 percent of seats on the country's roughly forty university scientific councils, by early 2015 the main Islamist student union had nearly caught up, garnering 46 percent of seats. See "L'UGET, Grande Vainqueur des Elections dans les Conseils Scientifiques," *Leaders*, March 16, 2012, <http://www.leaders.com.tn/article/7947-l-uget-grand-vainqueur-des-elections-dans-les-conseils-scientifiques>.
16. For more on the 2008 revolt in Gafsa, see Eric Gobe, "The Gafsa Mining Basin between Riots and a Social Movement: Meaning and Significance of a Protest Movement in Ben Ali's Tunisia," working paper, HAL (archive), 2010, https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/file/index/docid/557826/filename/Tunisia_The_Gafsa_mining_basin_between_Riots_and_Social_Movement.pdf.
17. The membership dues are minimal, at roughly 2 Tunisian dinars (about 4 U.S. dollars) per month. Mohamed Mongi Ben M'barek, secretary-general of the telecommunications syndicate, interview by author, October 29, 2014. For more on UGTT's historical significance and organizational structure, see Eva Bellin, *Stalled Democracy: Capital, Labor, and the Paradox of State-Sponsored Development* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), especially chapter 4.
18. Habib Guiza's General Confederation of Tunisian Workers (CGTT by its French acronym) was founded in 2006 but remained largely inactive until after Ben Ali's departure in 2011.
19. The progressive status of Tunisian women was especially visible in the urban coastal areas, but in many parts of the country the society has remained profoundly conservative. (CSOs report, e.g., that practices such as polygamy persist, especially in the country's southern regions.)
20. Mounira Charrad, "Family Law Reforms in the Arab World: Tunisia and Morocco," United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Division for Social Policy and Development (May 2012), p. 4, <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/family/docs/egm12/PAPER-CHARRAD.pdf>. For a history of family law reforms in Tunisia, see also Mounira Charrad, *States and Women's Rights: The Making of Postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
21. Mounira Charrad, "Family Law Reforms in the Arab World: Tunisia and Morocco," United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Division for Social Policy and Development (May 2012), pp. 5–6.
22. See also Sarah J. Feuer, *Islam and Democracy in Practice: Tunisia's Ennahda Nine Months In*, Middle East Brief 66 (Waltham, MA: Crown Center for Middle East Studies, August 2012), pp. 3–4, <http://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/meb66.html>.
23. Center for Research, Study, Documentation and Information on Women, "Tunisian Associations Working for Equality of Opportunity Between Women and Men" [Dalil Jam'iat Takafu' al-Fars Bayna al-Nisa' wa'l-Rijal fi Tunis], 2014, http://www.credif.org.tn/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=64:projet-who-is-she-en-tunisiecredif-kvinfoen-cooperation-avec-le-centre-danois-d-information-sur-le-genre-l-egalite-et-la-diversite-kvinfo-le-centre-d-etudes-de-recherches-de-documentation-et-d-informations-sur-la-femme-credif-est-en-cours-de-mise&catid=17&Itemid=305&lang=ar-AA.
24. See the Aswat Nissa website: <http://www.aswatnissa.org/>.
25. By most accounts, the country's campaign finance laws have been overly restrictive, practically inviting violations. On the matter of public funding for campaigns, for example, a representative of I Watch noted that "the laws should be realistic to be respected." Moueb Garoui, interview by author, October 23, 2014.



MOROCCO

Prospects for Civil Society

■ VISH SAKTHIVEL

THIS PAPER, the second in a series exploring reformist actors among non-Islamists throughout the region, examines prospects for political reform in Morocco. The paper defines democratic/reformist actors as individuals or groups supporting the familiar procedural mechanisms of power sharing, such as regular elections and open contestation for political office, and also possibly working to strengthen the attendant freedoms of expression, association, and press; legal protections for minorities; and social conditions, such as literacy, widely acknowledged to be necessary components of a democracy. Religious or Muslim democrats—or those seeing a role for religion in public life—are included in this definition. Islamists—who can be defined as holding the primary agenda of establishing a new Islamic order in the country, or as looking to implement religious mandates through political avenues—are not.¹ Given that Islamists have attracted a great deal of attention in academia and the policy world, this report seeks to shed light on other, often overlooked democratic and reformist actors.

Morocco's current political landscape presents something of a paradox. While political parties have been competing through more or less free and fair elections for parliamentary and governmental positions since 1956, when the country established independence from French rule, arguably the greatest prospects for democratic reform can be found not in traditional political institutions but in the country's civil society. As this paper demonstrates, civil society entities such as trade unions and organizations working on democratic development, women's empowerment, human rights, and the rights of the Berber (*Amazigh*) minority carry promise for Morocco's democratic prospects, even as the political system remains dominated by the monarchy. Indeed, since the constitutional reforms of 2011, many Moroccan political groups, including those counterdemocratic strains with strong links to the regime, portray themselves as reform-oriented, democratic actors and may, in certain ways, serve as facilitators for reform groups. But their primary role is to facilitate continued le-

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gitimacy for the regime, often taking up the ancillary role of patronage distributor. When considering prospects for deeper political reform in Morocco, therefore, observers would do well to look beyond the political realm.

Following an overview of the contemporary political system, the paper delves into Morocco's leading democratic and reformist groups, reviewing their constituencies and outlining their policy agendas. A concluding section discusses the prospects for greater reform efforts and persistent challenges to democratic development in Morocco.

Morocco's Political Landscape

Morocco's prevailing political environment has its roots in King Hassan II's reign, which began in 1961, five years after independence, and was marked by repression in the face of relative instability. Under Hassan, the government was characterized by only nominal separation of powers and a climate of notable authoritarianism, particularly after two attempted coups in 1971 and 1972. The executive and legislative branches were consolidated under the king's control, and the country was under a state of emergency from 1965 to 1970. Dissent was met with severe repression. In spite of these serious challenges, the palace rebounded in the mid-1970s. The struggle over the disputed territories south of Morocco's internationally recognized borders, known as Western Sahara, along with Hassan's decision to send troops to support its fellow Arab states in the 1973 war against Israel, helped renew the Moroccan people's support for the king.

As for Morocco's expansion into Western Sahara, this was achieved through a highly visible settlement campaign known as the Green March. Thereafter, Hassan lifted the state of emergency and started allowing political participation from groups formerly viewed as threatening. His efforts intensified through the 1980s as economic and unemployment crises provoked popular unrest. In 1993, Hassan proposed a power-sharing system known as *Alternance*, whereby the king would appoint a prime minister from an opposition party if it won a majority of parliamentary seats.² In 1996, Moroccan voters elected a majority coalition led by socialist and

secular opposition parties, with the leader of the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP) taking the premiership.

After Hassan's death in 1999, Mohammed VI came to power and undertook several dramatic changes, including dismissing his father's harem, sacking various publicly despised members of his father's inner circle, and marrying just one wife, who would accompany him publicly—in contrast to Hassan's wives, who were hidden away in the harem. Mohammed VI's efforts toward modernization included introducing protections for women, ethnolinguistic minorities, and political opponents. The king continues to be seen by most Moroccan citizens as a unifying national symbol, while his designation as Amir al-Mouminin, or "commander of the faithful," gives him a powerful religious mandate domestically.

The following section briefly outlines the dominant institutions of Morocco's political landscape.

Makhzen

The term *makhzen*³ is used to describe Morocco's ruling elite, consisting of the king, his advisors, religious scholars, and other members of government close to the palace. The notion is rather amorphous, however, with the king its lone certain element, while all other "members" are not agreed upon in the popular imagination and are subject to much speculation—an enigma likely preferred by the *makhzen* in order to preserve the requisite imagery surrounding the throne and the attendant workings of the deep state. Beyond its symbolic political-religious legitimacy and power, the *makhzen* controls the key economic sectors of agriculture, banking, telecommunications, real estate, and food processing.

Parliament

Morocco has a bicameral legislature consisting of a lower house, or House of Representatives (Majlis al-Nawab), to which 395 members are directly elected for five-year terms; and an upper house, or House of Councilors (Majlis al-Mustasharin), to which 270 representatives are indirectly elected for six-year terms. Members of parliament (MPs) represent the various regions of the country, including the disputed Western Sahara. The king has the authority to dissolve the parliament at any time, but unlike

his father, Mohammed VI has never exercised this power. He retains the right to approve cabinet appointments, although since 2011 the prime minister must come from the party obtaining the most parliamentary seats. Such appointments typically reflect a coalition government of three political parties. The current cabinet consists of the Islamist, majority Justice and Development Party (PJD), the National Rally of Independents (RNI), the Party for Progress and Socialism (PPS), the Amazigh-associated Popular Movement (MP), and various independent technocrats. Morocco has universal suffrage for citizens eighteen and older, although access to voting is sometimes challenged and apathy is high.

Parliamentary elections were last held in 2011, moved up from 2012 as a response to the popular uprisings earlier that year. However, observers cite persistent problems, including single-term limits for women and youth (representatives age thirty-nine or younger), no independent election commission, and a “districting system that skews representation.”⁴ In addition, the judiciary, while nominally independent according to the constitution, continues to fall under the king’s purview, with provincial *walis* (governors) and local judges beholden to the king to secure reappointment and maintain their salaries.

In May 2014, the Moroccan government announced that municipal elections, last held in 2009, would occur in mid-2015. (The vote has since been postponed from June to September.) At the municipal level, problems include occasional bribery—whereby candidates pay voters—preferential treatment given by local officials or notables to certain candidates, and the intimidation of voters and candidates alike. Plans to devolve more power to state- and provincial-level authorities remain laggard.

Political Parties

More than thirty political parties are represented in Morocco’s parliament, with dozens more lacking parliamentary representation. A handful of banned parties also exist, including radical Marxist groups and Islamist groups opposed to the monarchical framework. At the national level, institutionalized parties in Morocco primarily battle for parliamentary clout and royal favor, disagreeing on details of policy implementation while

agreeing on the king’s centrality and the monarchical system. The quarreling and subsequent inertia characteristic of parliament since the early 1990s, when the political system was opened up, has strengthened the king’s hand as a mediator, reinforced his veto power, staggered the parties’ standing, and delayed democratic and economic reforms. At the same time, the king and the *makhzen* have continued Hassan’s practice of co-opting political parties, targeting both Islamists and leftists. In today’s scenario, the type of repression seen under Hassan II becomes unnecessary.⁵

Key non-Islamist parties, such as the Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM), Istiqlal (meaning “independence”), RNI, and USFP are also largely undemocratic in their decisionmaking apparatuses, and suffer from gerontocracy and limited mobility for rank-and-file members. They are widely seen as extensions of the palace with limited ideological independence.⁶ Along these lines, what follows is a brief overview of those non-Islamist parties with a strong contemporary political presence—either in parliament, among the electorate, or in palace proximity.

In the current governing coalition, the non-Islamist parties are the RNI, PPS, and MP. The RNI, established in 1978 by King Hassan’s brother-in-law, Ahmed Osman, who was then serving as prime minister, is historically close to the palace and was cofounded by independent ministers and politicians with entrenched political and business interests who were keen to maintain the status quo. Having refrained from introducing any significant legislation since its founding, the RNI is widely seen as a nonideological, platformless “placeholder” party, existing primarily to serve the palace’s interests, countering socialist and Islamist trends and presenting a potential alternative to the wider electorate.

The PPS was founded in 1974 by Ali Yata, a communist leader formerly of the Moroccan Communist Party. Like many other parties represented in government, the PPS has more recently distanced itself from hardline views in the interests of political participation, self-identifying now as a socialist-nationalist party that respects religious principles and Morocco’s Islamic history.

The MP, much like the PPS, has far fewer parliamentary seats and less popular support than the RNI, PJD, USFP,

and other behemoths. In its 1958 founding by Mahjoubi Aherdane, an Amazigh notable, the party followed the trend whereby many such notables helped consolidate the Alaouite dynasty's power just after independence, thus entrenching their position as a counterweight to the Istiqlal. The MP has maintained its royalist stance, and despite having a strong Amazigh membership, its policies and platforms are not necessarily pro-Amazigh. The party has abandoned any corresponding "Berberist" rhetoric and, similar to other royalist parties, it is thus no longer identifiably ideological.

The main non-Islamist parties outside the governing coalition at the time of writing included Istiqlal, the USFP, and the PAM. Istiqlal, founded in 1944 by Ahmed Balafrej, was a leader in Morocco's nationalist movement against the French in the 1950s. For decades, it was a significant political force and, thus, a threat to King Mohammed V's power at independence. To this day, the party continues to use nationalist rhetoric, and remains conservative in its political positioning while mostly nonideological on social issues. Through the 1970s, it was supported by the palace as a counterweight to labor and, during the Alternance opening, as a counterweight to the socialists and, later, to the Islamists. For instance, in 2013, Istiqlal's departure from the governing coalition with the PJD was widely perceived to be orchestrated by the *makhzen*.⁷

In 1975, the USFP was one of several breakaways from the Istiqlal Party—from which the National Union of Popular Forces (UNFP) itself had broken in the late 1950s. The former's history of staunch opposition has, much like Istiqlal's, been tempered by co-optation, with USFP figures accepting higher salaries and attractive ministerial portfolios over the past twenty years. In 1981, for example, the party backed mass riots in Casablanca against IMF reforms. Such a stance would be politically impossible for the party today. Thus, while it entered politics with the goal of pursuing democratization and redistributive economic policies, it is now little more than a tool for regime legitimization. In the late 2000s, members committed to democratic principles defected, leaving the party with only its pro-palace thrust and a dwindling popularity. Much like Istiqlal, the USFP's current "opposition" standing must be un-

derstood as occurring against the PJD coalition, not against the regime.⁸

Founded in 2008 by Fouad Ali el-Himma, Mohammed VI's confidant, the PAM claimed fifty-five House of Representatives members "practically overnight" upon its founding.⁹ Effectively representing the palace in parliament, it initially won just a few seats in the vote, but soon became the largest parliamentary bloc when many pro-palace parliamentarians, affiliated and unaffiliated alike, joined the party.

Business Community

In Morocco, large businesses and holding companies have some level of policy veto, while their financial success and access to markets depend largely on closed-door elite decisions. By and large, successful companies have business interests that complement, and do not compete with, those of the palace.¹⁰ In turn, these businesses can exert some level of pressure on the regime to maintain their interests. For example, YNNA Holding, an independent, family-run company, has successfully stemmed U.S. investment in industries that represent competition, and the director of BMCE bank has also pressured the regime to limit U.S. companies' access to Morocco's insurance sector. Businesses also can work more officially, through business associations, to collectively influence regulation in trade practice, pricing, and production.¹¹ The most well-known such association is the Confederation Generale Economique du Maroc (CGEM).

Many business figures, who consolidated their economic clout during the Hassan years, have entrenched their position by entering politics and even serving as cabinet ministers. Thus, many use these connections to fund their party of membership and enhance its bargaining power and positions vis-à-vis the regime. Such business interests are uniformly present across monarchist, socialist, secularist, and even Islamist parties.¹² Moreover, certain business elites such as Mounir Majidi and Fouad Ali el-Himma are understood to be within the *makhzen*, directly advising the king, and his partners, in his own businesses. Ultimately, however, these companies and individuals exert only limited pressure, or attempts to halt reform, regarding social issues central to this paper.

Civil Society

Despite the absence of full democracy, Morocco's civil society is strong and dynamic, and has managed to bring important issues to the government's attention.¹³ These groups—the most effectual being the single-issue organizations (SIOs)—include various women's movements, human rights organizations, Amazigh-related movements, democratic development groups, and trade unions, among others. In addition, given that the Moroccan regime is not ideological, it is typically amenable to interest groups as long as their goals do not challenge the regime's position. In this way, civil society organizations (CSOs), especially SIOs, can make progress on a given issue, appealing to a particular constituency, even to a palace aim, without necessarily challenging the palace. As such, even those who do not call for systemic reform can be part of these groups and effect change.

Given this background, the next section examines Morocco's CSOs and SIOs in greater detail, assessing their prospects as agents of democratic reform.

Democracy and Reform Since 2011

The 2011 uprisings took hold in Morocco following those in Egypt, Tunisia, and other parts of the Arab world. For most of 2011, the pro-democracy movement, known as the February 20 Movement or M20F—so named to mark the country's first protests—called for greater devolution of power from the king to parliament. In response, Mohammed VI quickly subdued protests and preempted further unrest by announcing a referendum to reform the constitution. Revisions that followed brought direct election of the parliament's lower chamber and required the king to appoint the prime minister from the political party garnering a plurality in parliament. The PJD, Morocco's leading Islamist party, won a majority and put forth the country's first Islamist prime minister, Abdelilah Benkirane.¹⁴

Still, reforms since the 2011 uprising have done little to loosen the king's control over many sectors of the economy, military, judiciary, and even parliament.

The M20F, meanwhile, floundered due to internal fragmentation—largely over disagreements regarding the group's methods of resistance and choice of allies—general lack of leadership and mission, and the regime's aforementioned preemption of greater protests. In addition, some M20F members' call for the end of monarchy, mimicking “down with the regime” cries elsewhere in the region, would prove untimely and ill-suited to the Moroccan context.¹⁵

Since the 2011 uprisings, Mohammed VI has seen fewer serious challenges to his power than what his father and inner circle faced, in part due to an increased voice for CSOs and opposition groups, and to a semblance of democratization via parliament and the multi-party system. But even if full-blown democratization is not applicable to the current Moroccan context, the country's CSOs and SIOs are worth examining, given that they represent for many citizens the only viable way to authentically implement further reform on a given issue. Indeed, most of the groups to be highlighted are not necessarily established, organized, pro-democracy political parties ready and able to govern tomorrow; indeed, such readiness would require some level of abandonment of their mission, absent any systemic overhaul. Because they have greater political leeway than their counterparts in the political parties or formal government bodies, independent CSOs have, while proving to be key catalysts for issue-based reform, maintained symbolic benefits, including popular credibility and general protection from elite appropriation. Furthermore, CSOs and SIOs linked to, or born from, existing political parties are included in the sketch of democratic actors to follow because, as readers will see, they can typically exercise a degree of autonomy from, and often even oppose the policies of, their respective parties. Whereas tens of thousands of such SIOs and CSOs operate in the country, the following section outlines the most prominent of them and the broader categories into which they fall.

Democratic Development Organizations

Two prominent examples of such umbrella groups are the Espace Associatif (EA)¹⁶ and the Forum des Alternatives Maroc.¹⁷ Each has approximately five hundred professional members.

Instead of calling explicitly for democratization, these groups focus on offering expertise, support, and training to various CSOs and SIOs. They do so by helping groups refine their mission and strategies, use legal frameworks to achieve goals, and effectively communicate these goals to the relevant local or national government entities; facilitating networking among various groups; and taking stock of related best practices. While on occasion these umbrella groups may cooperate with larger-scale human rights or women's rights organizations, they often offer assistance to small or fledgling local-level CSOs and SIOs. On occasion, they put pressure on local or provincial governments regarding reforms proposed by a group that has sought their counsel. However, as the Moroccan government remains highly centralized, these province-level appeals usually result in minimal steps.

As with any NGO culture, some level of competition will naturally exist between such organizations. However, they do not differ on any strategic or ideological level, and they do not actively compete with similar organizations for membership, although they must compete at some level for foreign funds. Because they do not charge a fee for services, they are mostly reliant on donations or grants. Such groups often partner with, and receive funding from, foreign sources such as Oxfam, La Fondation de France, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, and other such international NGOs (INGOs), as well as from the European Union.

Women's Rights & Reproductive Health Groups

Women's rights groups are a prime example of SIOs typically welcomed by the Moroccan regime—even if this has not always been the case. In carefully advocating reforms on certain women's issues, these groups pose little challenge to the state. In addition, meeting the demands of these groups helps bolster the regime's standing abroad and among certain domestic constituencies. Some examples of reforms to women's status during Mohammed VI's reign include the enhanced role of women in the public religious sphere, the 2004 revision of the *Moudawana* (personal status law),¹⁸ and a road map for an enhanced women's role in the Moroccan economy. The mobilization of parts of the Moroccan citizenry and government elements behind the *Moudawana* reform pushed issues

of women's rights, and thus the attendant rights groups, to the fore.¹⁹ This campaign was first led by the Union for Feminine Action (UAF), then by the Democratic Association of Moroccan Women (ADFM), the former founded by Latifa Jbabdi in 1987 and the latter by Amina Lamrini out of the PPS in 1985. Over time, these groups and their originator parties have drawn closer to the authorities and have thus had legitimate access to state coffers. By some accounts, this has compromised their impartiality.²⁰

The Democratic League for Women's Rights (LDDF), founded in 1993, is another group that, to a limited extent, works toward reform, focused primarily on community outreach through women's shelters, literacy classes, domestic violence hotlines, and traveling from town to town to give talks out of its van. The group is well known for these "caravans." While the UAF and ADFM are typically well funded owing to party links, the LDDF has followed a rockier path, having previously acquired grants from Spain's Oxfam chapter but typically enduring insecure funding. Because of its political and ideological independence, the LDDF has failed to gain access to state monies through the National Initiative for Human Development (INDH), which distributes patronage to the human rights and women's rights groups linked to palace-friendly parties. In aiming to speak the language of the citizen, the LDDF eschews the socialist-leftist or secular bent of other women's groups, making it more palatable for Moroccan women who do not wish to subordinate their faith. Many women within the group wear the hijab—less common in other women's groups—and this openness allows women from various social strata to feel welcome. Some religious Moroccan women who have opted not to use Islamist groups' social services owing to their focus on scripture have instead joined the LDDF.²¹ At the same time, the LDDF leadership is pursuing the complete abolishment of polygamy, and has vigorously criticized Islamist parties' policies concerning women.

Working with the groups just mentioned is the Moroccan Association for the Fight against AIDS (ALCS). Because AIDS management is not generally a politically contentious issue, ALCS's independent work was eventually commissioned by the state. Like the LDDF, it focuses on community outreach and offering free testing, as well

as free talks at schools, youth centers, and women's centers, and working closely and anonymously with sex workers and members of the LGBTQ community. As the next section will show, resistance to some of these methods by the *ulama* and Islamist actors has made it harder for the king to take a leadership role—in a sense allowing ALCS to maintain its independence and limiting the palace's ability to then co-opt it.

Human Rights Groups

Compared to women's groups, human rights groups tend to be slightly more challenging for the regime, given that some look to highlight transgressions committed by state authorities. The three largest more or less independent human rights groups, the Moroccan League for the Defense of Human Rights (LMDDH), the Moroccan Association for Human Rights (AMDH), and the Moroccan Organization for Human Rights (OMDH), have taken divergent paths in this regard.²² In the early 1970s, while also countering related stirrings from the left, the monarchist Istiqlal Party formed the LMDDH (sometimes referred to as the LMDH) to address the demand for human rights monitoring. While the group, Morocco's first human rights organization, relies on Istiqlal for funds and headquarters, it has maintained some ideological and political distance from the party.²³ For instance, in November 2014 the LMDDH, despite Istiqlal's proximity to the palace, denounced the latter's hosting of an international human rights forum as a "farce" on the grounds that the country has yet to improve its own record. It has also worked intermittently with the more "radical" AMDH.

During the 1980s, most of the AMDH's membership came from the radical wing of the USFP. Gradually, as the party's more mainstream, regime-aligned wing ascended, links with the AMDH foundered and briefly weakened the group's voice. In the late 1980s, a committee formed the OMDH. Whereas the AMDH maintained a hardline stance regarding cooperation with the state, the OMDH, characterized by more elite members, established the palace's centrality in addressing human rights. Thus, while both are technically independent, the OMDH is widely viewed as close to the regime.

These three groups tend to compete with one another,

despite periods of selective cooperation. During periods of particular hostility, the groups will often look to discredit one another, whether in terms of authenticity, proximity to the regime, or for other reasons. Because their constituencies overlap somewhat, they are often seen as competing for this reason as well.

The Adala Association is an example of a single-issue human rights organization, focusing primarily on judiciary reform. Established in 2005, its mission is to collaborate with INGOs to ensure Moroccan citizens' right to a fair trial and the judiciary's independence through constitutional and legal reforms, to recruit judges and lawyers in these processes, and to produce research and reports. The group does not take a position on working with the Moroccan government.

The Karama Forum, yet another SIO, was founded by the PJD but does not espouse a religious agenda. A justice-focused organization, it seeks to reopen the cases of imprisoned Islamists who might have been wrongly accused of violence or radicalism. The organization also works to rehabilitate the wrongfully accused, given their susceptibility to radicalization owing to injustices endured or their experience in prisons. Even as the Karama Forum receives some funding from the PJD, its relative autonomy from the party grants it a measure of latitude. Indeed, some hold skepticism about the PJD's motives in backing such services, which can be perceived as means of recruitment or simply polishing the party's image. Still, one could allege the same of the USFP's AMDH, Istiqlal's LMDDH, or the regime's National Human Rights Council (CNDH). Karama alleges that Islamists are often inadequately served by even the most progressive human rights groups and lawyers and that Karama must then fill this service gap.

Amazighist Groups

Over the decades, Amazigh-linked movements have been seen by the palace and *makhzen*, alternatively, as unwelcome threats to domestic unity and favorable bulwarks against Islamism. With respect to Morocco's territorial integrity, Amazigh cultural activists and rights groups tend not to pose an overt threat, considering that secessionist strains are mostly limited, especially when compared to Amazigh movements in neighboring countries.

Such activists usually remain focused on achieving greater recognition within the state and preserving Amazigh history and culture. This is especially true since the region's "Amazigh Spring" of 2001—notably that of the Kabylie in Algeria, who revolted violently against the ban on Berber languages and the marginalization of Kabyle intellectuals and activists—and the regional uprisings of 2011, both of which allowed Amazighist groups to successfully campaign for officially equal recognition of their native language, Tamazight, and its various dialects. The state has also recently adopted restorative policies in the realms of education, economic, and cultural-social policy. The broad Amazigh Cultural Movement (MCA), and its attendant campus organizations, political movements, and local cultural associations, played a central role in bringing about these reforms.²⁴ Hundreds of such Amazigh service organizations operate at the local level, most notably in the Souss-Massa-Draa region, tending to overshadow the larger national NGOs, Islamist groups, and other social service providers.

The most tangible results of last decade's reforms include the state's formation, in 2001, of the Royal Institute of the Amazigh Culture (IRCAM) and the corresponding institutionalization of the Amazigh language—to be taught in schools, with its Tifinagh alphabet included on state buildings and in signage. In effect a palace-funded think tank, the IRCAM is charged with promoting Amazigh literature, art, folklore, history, and culture in the areas of education and public media.

The province-level Rifi Association for Human Rights (ARDH) campaigns on behalf of African migrants through the Rif region, in Morocco's far north, and seeks the reversal of laws and policies that harm the Rifi Amazigh. For example, the organization has pressured the government to change a corrupt policy environment that allows authorities to sometimes benefit from the Rif's hashish trade while small-scale Rifi Amazigh peddlers are selectively arrested, as well as to provide reparations to African migrants abused by Moroccan and Spanish security officials.

Tamaynut, or the New Association for Amazigh Arts and Culture, founded in 1978, primarily has its support base in the Souss region, particularly with university students. In addition to resisting Arabization and

Islamization, Tamaynut focuses on issues of land rights, water scarcity, and climate change that adversely affect Amazigh farmers, including mountain farmers. It receives funds from INGOs and works at the grassroots level.

The Moroccan Association for Research and Cultural Exchange (AMREC), founded in 1967, has worked to collect, archive, and spread Amazigh folklore. Widely seen as "moderate" given its focus on history and story collection—as opposed to the Tamaynut's perceived recasting of history or militant promotion of Amazigh identity—AMREC's members and supporters mainly consist of urban intellectual elites who take no explicit stance on royalism.²⁵ Its grassroots support can be found among the population of the Middle Atlas range.

For these Amazighist groups, political differences and differing approaches to the state have generated tension, but the groups' varying missions, constituents, and donors have prevented large-scale competition. More notable are the IRCAM's effects on the other groups. While IRCAM-initiated reforms have helped bring Amazigh culture and history to the fore, the group is also seen as having co-opted the Amazigh movements by dissolving and amalgamating their divergent tendencies. These include those of the royalist camp, including the Amazigh parties; the moderate, history-focused camps like the AMREC; and the leftist university groups of the Souss, such as Tamaynut. Various activists from all camps came to be employed at the IRCAM, but "many Amazigh militants view the [state's adoption of Tifinagh as the official Amazigh alphabet] as a thinly veiled ploy to separate Moroccan Amazighs from those in Kabylia or diaspora France, where Amazigh language (Tamazight) is written in the Latin alphabet."²⁶ These militants also see the IRCAM as having monopolized expression of Amazigh culture, to the detriment of smaller groups. Finally, the IRCAM's presence has damaged these smaller groups' ability to seek public funds, with many shutting down as a result. The subregional groups already discussed in this section have continued to operate despite such political dynamics.

Trade Unions

In Morocco, trade unions usually get their funding from the political parties with which they are affiliated, and

thus tend to be highly politicized, with some leaning toward greater cooperation with the state than others. Much like the other types of groups analyzed here, the unions' party affiliations reflect on their credibility. Labor unions in Morocco date back to the 1930s, during the protectorate period, when the first ones comprised both French and Moroccan members. The subsequent Moroccan-only labor movement was active in the 1950s liberation struggle, and still derives popular credibility and legitimacy from its association with this period.

While about seventeen nationally recognized unions are active in Morocco, the largest trade union federations, with the most associated unions, are the Union Marocaine du Travail (UMT), the Confederation Democratique du Travail (CDT), and the Union Generale des Travailleurs du Maroc (UGTM).

The UMT, a key player in Morocco's independence movement, is the country's oldest and largest labor federation, with more than 300,000 members.²⁷ Founded in 1955 by a railway employee, Mahjoub Ben Seddiq, the UMT was only permitted to operate openly a year later, after the country gained its independence. Ben Seddiq remained UMT secretary-general until his death in 2010, when Miloudi Moukhariq took over the secretariat. The federation, while still the largest, has been weakened by internal divisions and breakaway groups,²⁸ and over time has come to be seen as the union closest to the regime. Indeed, the regime funds its national headquarters, providing the incentive for a broader rhetorical focus on employment as opposed to implicating the regime in the country's labor issues. Its constituent unions, moreover, are more diverse than those of the other two major federations.

The UGTM was founded in 1960 following a split within the UMT. That year, UMT defector Abdel Razzaq Afilal founded the new federation with funds provided by the Istiqlal Party. While the UGTM is still linked to Istiqlal, the union's political platforms have diverged from those of the party. According to some accounts, UGTM rank-and-file members are typically either Istiqlal-associated nationalists who have joined the union or UMT malcontents.²⁹

In 1978, the CDT was founded by the USFP as a breakaway from the UMT in response to internal USFP complaints that the UMT's Ben Seddiq was working too

intimately with the regime.³⁰ The CDT's power base remains mainly employees of public-private enterprises and the public sector. Phosphate miners, schoolteachers, health workers, and railway employees have come to form the union's main support base, and the CDT maintains relations with the Socialist Party while to an extent relying on it for funding. Largely seen as one of the more radical unions thanks to its long history of protest and willingness to "stand up" to the *makhzen*—particularly after the austerity measures of the early 1980s—it enjoys substantial popular support and legitimacy. Its founder, Noubir Amaoui, still serves as secretary-general.

In addition to these national unions, syndicates and unions exist for various specific professions, the most well-known being the public-sector teachers' and health workers' unions. Such entities are occasionally affiliated with the national unions, and the unaffiliated have at the very least been able to ride on the coattails of mobilizations by the national unions.

Competition among unions and federations typically stems from an overlap in supporters, where fractiousness tends to be along lines of closeness to the institutional power brokers—that is, to the *makhzen*. Despite such tensions, the federations also tend to unite during times of strategic necessity. For instance, in 2011, the unions coalesced and profited from the momentum of the uprisings to advance their material and political aims with respect to the regime. For example, they used the uprisings by "joining street protests, exaggerating material demands, and threatening negotiation walkouts," and the regime largely acquiesced due to a heightened sense of vulnerability.³¹

While the unions may agitate for greater pluralism on the outside, they are generally lacking in internal democratic procedures. Leaders have not been elected in any of these federations and are typically chosen through elite vetting processes.

Prospects for Democratic Reform

As an earlier section of this paper argued, near-term traditional democratization is unlikely in Morocco, placing the focus instead on civil society activism and the

reform efforts of SIOs and unions. Barriers to a more dynamic civil society, however, can still be usefully addressed and areas of potential promise identified.

Three obstacles to deeper democratic reform bear mention. The first is the monarchy's continued reluctance to delegate greater political authority to elected bodies. The 2011 reforms, while significant in some respects, are criticized by pro-democracy institutions outside the country, and by certain internal democracy advocates,³² as having been stalled or disingenuous. For instance, many argue that Article 19 of the constitution, which confers unchecked religious authority on the monarch, was only superficially relaxed in 2011, such that the king retains veto power and sole authority over the religious realm.

A second, related obstacle concerns the regime's approach to civil society. Despite the relative strength of the Moroccan civil society landscape, CSOs contend with regime co-optation and, in many cases, coercion. It is useful in this regard to note that many Moroccan CSOs have state-produced "clones." While these clone groups produce valuable research, they also promulgate a counternarrative to that of the grassroots CSOs, one that maintains the king as the ultimate guarantor of the given CSO's mission, whether that mission concerns women's rights, general human rights, Sahrawi rights, or Amazigh issues.

For instance, after the formation of the independent Moroccan Association for Human Rights (AMDH), the Moroccan government formed its own versions of the group, the Consultative Council on Human Rights (CCDH) and the National Human Rights Council (CNDH). Both have become government arms responsible for reporting on domestic human rights abuses. The manner in which staff and directors are hired and appointed presents clear conflicts of interest that undermine an intended democratic nature or purpose. The state's establishment of the IRCAM as a foil to grassroots Amazigh-rights groups is a mixed picture: while it has produced important literature and generated awareness on Amazigh politics, history, culture, oral tradition, and art, it is simultaneously seen as an attempt to co-opt the Amazigh opposition, and may have even had the ancillary effect of fragmenting Morocco's opposition groups (Islamists, Marxists, and Amazigh).³³

Because an issue can be used to rally citizens behind a state-spearheaded project, the most autonomous SIOs are those whose issues are simultaneously of concern to the Moroccan regime, Moroccan public, and international bodies but are also opposed by an important domestic constituency. This prevents the palace from fully appropriating the interests and rhetoric of a given group and thereby co-opting it. The palace's inability to take a leading role on women's reforms and AIDS management, the latter noted earlier, is a prime example. Due to resistance from the *ulama* and Islamists³⁴ more broadly, groups such as ADFM, focusing on women's rights, and ALCS, focusing on AIDS, independently took the lead, with only the king's tacit backing.

A third obstacle to continued democratization concerns Morocco's Islamist-secularist divide. At the official level, leftist opposition parties have long seen Islamism's rise as a threat to the modernizing agenda. Because this perception aligns with palace interests, such leftist parties have long participated in the political process with few guarantees and little power. What is more, fear of an Islamist rise has dampened leftist-secularist enthusiasm for political openness and democratization. For their part, Islamist parties, while tending toward strategic cooperation with secular parties, see the leftists as anathema to Morocco's Islamic character. The tug-of-war has served the palace, which has remained above the fray. As the previous section showed, this divide has had implications for the ability of CSOs and SIOs, often linked to one party or another, to collaboratively make progress on a given issue. More gravely, the continuing violence between radical leftists and Islamists on university campuses—Dhar el-Mehraz in Fez is a key example—has led to intermittent bouts of militarization of these spaces.

Such obstacles notwithstanding, certain areas of potential promise are worth highlighting. From time to time, for instance, palace-aligned parties such as the USFP and Istiqlal have put forward platforms calling for a transition to "authentic democracy."³⁵ While these steps often do not exceed rhetoric and sloganeering during election seasons, the USFP, as early as the mid-2000s, attempted to present specific amendments to the constitution that would increase parliament's power

while decreasing that of the king.³⁶ As the USFP's co-optation was further solidified in the late 2000s, the amendments were not passed and the effort lost momentum until 2011. Still, in spite of their low political capacity and low public legitimacy, the potential of reform-oriented groups within the political system may be harnessed should a real process of systemic reform get under way.

During moments of political opportunity, these groups, if astute and trained, can use the limited time and space available to negotiate for reform. Furthermore, at the local level, the groups discussed in the preceding sections may be able to circumvent national politics, palace-linked nepotism, and elite patronage networks to provide services and implement locally specific social policy, even if through informal means. Of course, while the issues of corruption and nepotism are indeed replicated at the micro level, groups may be similarly empowered to navigate these networks according to local dynamics.

Potential promise is also found in those democratic development umbrella NGOs positioned to facilitate cooperation among otherwise ideologically divergent groups on a given social issue, such that groups may collectively introduce progressive reforms on which they agree. Along these lines, the Democracy and Modernity Collective (CDM), founded in 2003, is a promising group that, while not serving as an advisory hub, is a

pro-democracy organization. CDM works closely with U.S. and European democracy-promotion efforts, seeking to bridge the Islamist-secular divide, and promoting "democratic culture," which it asserts is a necessary antecedent to procedural democracy. Despite actively looking to include Moroccan Jews and other religious minorities in the political or civil society sphere, CDM retains an "Islamic reference" and works also with local religious groups so as not to isolate vast swaths of Moroccan society. CDM has tried to pressure political parties toward constitutional reform and also monitors parliamentary elections.

Finally, many CSO activists cite the march of time as their greatest ally. One activist, who asked to remain anonymous, explained as follows:

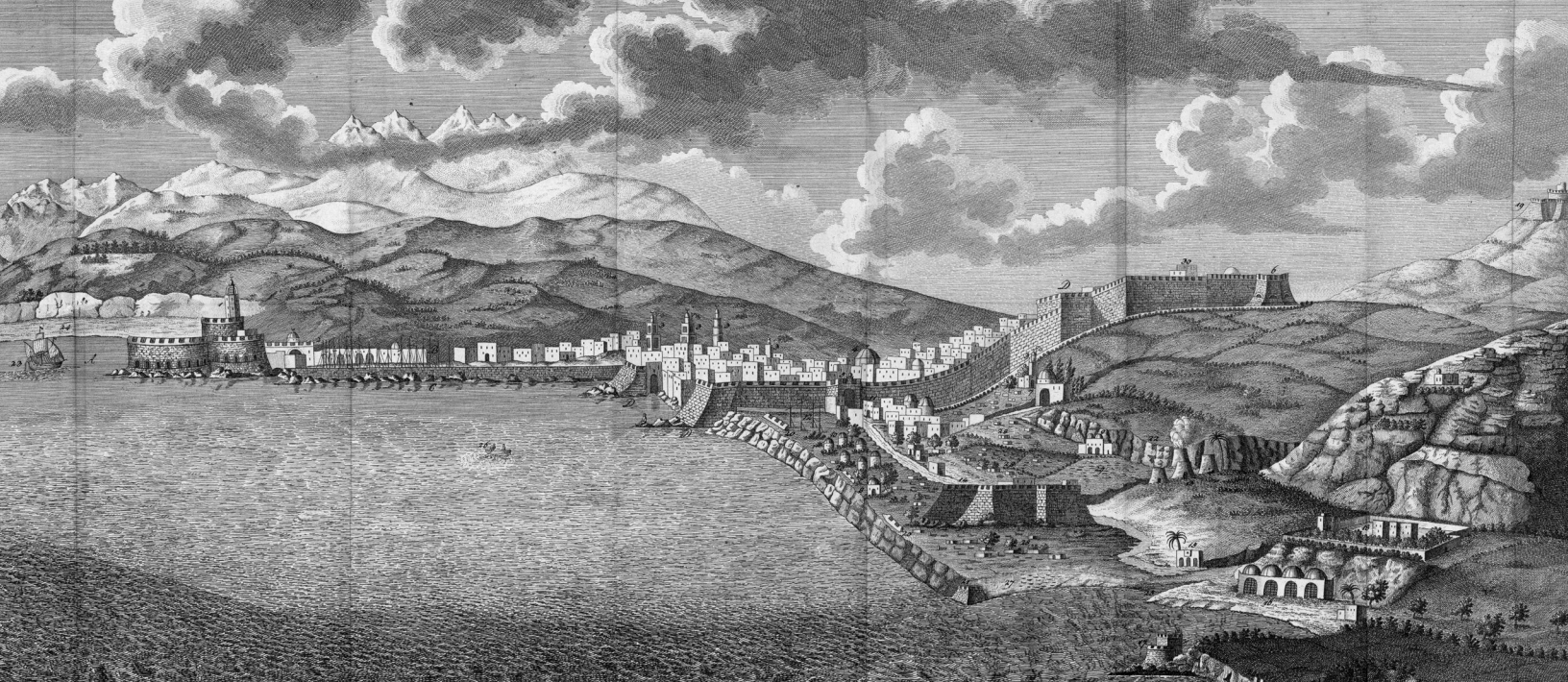
We hope that, as the world modernizes, we can further democratic efforts and increase pressure on the elites. But as activists, we don't have any control of the rises and dips in political will for reform. One day, there are democratic protests in the region, the next, regimes, citing stability purposes, reverse the progress made originally. We are casualties in such processes, and must ride the waves as they come. In terms of our future, we can only continue our work, and reassess our strategies if there are turning points at the top. One thing is sure: absent some unforeseen violent occurrence, Morocco will move forward, and we will too.³⁷

Notes

1. Some Islamist groups, including the governing Justice and Development Party (PJD), have demonstrated a commitment to certain democratic procedures and principles. The debate continues over the "true" end goal of Islamists and over the authenticity of Islamist moderation—that is, whether Islamist groups use reform to reach Islamic ends or use Islamic principles to reach reformist ends. That debate lies beyond the scope of this paper, which remains focused on non-Islamist reformists in Morocco.
2. The king retained most powers. See Vish Sakhivel, *Al-Adl wal-Ihsan: Inside Morocco's Islamist Challenge*, Policy Focus 135 (Washington DC: Washington Institute, 2014), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/al-adl-wal-ihsan-inside-moroccos-islamist-challenge>.
3. Arabic for "storehouse."
4. "Morocco," National Democratic Institute, <https://www.ndi.org/morocco>.
5. Still, many forms of repression endure. Despite the closure of Morocco's infamous Tazmamart prison, black sites still exist around the country, journalism is heavily circumscribed, Sahrawi activists are at risk, and Islamist figures—typically preachers and other religious figures—face imprisonment, asset seizure, and at times violence.

6. As opposed to these non-Islamist parties, the Islamist PJD, arguably the only legal major party that allows open expressions of internal dissent, provides opportunities for upward mobility to rank-and-file members, youth, and women, and has transparent internal decisionmaking processes, many of which are made public.
7. Today, Istiqlal is seen by many as an arm of the makhzen, pursuing incentives toward royalism and garnering a reputation for corruption.
8. For more on the USFP's co-optation and its inability to push progressive legislation, see Marina Ottaway and Meredith Riley, *Morocco: From Top-Down Reform to Democratic Transition?* Carnegie Papers: Middle East Series 71 (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment, 2006), http://carnegieendowment.org/files/cp71_ottaway_final.pdf; Maati Monjib, "The USFP and the Moroccan Monarchy: The Power of Patronage," *Sada*, May 4, 2010, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2010/05/04/usfp-and-moroccan-monarchy-power-of-patronage/fmsf>; Vish Sakthivel, *Al-Adl wal-Ihsan: Inside Morocco's Islamist Challenge*, Policy Focus 135 (Washington DC: Washington Institute, 2014), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/al-adl-wal-ihsan-inside-moroccos-islamist-challenge>.
9. Maati Monjib, "The USFP and the Moroccan Monarchy: The Power of Patronage," *Sada*, May 4, 2010, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2010/05/04/usfp-and-moroccan-monarchy-power-of-patronage/fmsf>.
10. For instance, YNNA must adjust for its potential competition with ONA, the royal holdings company, by doing most of its banking with a majority-ONA-owned bank, Attijariwafa.
11. See Azzedine Layachi, *State, Society, and Democracy in Morocco: The Limits of Associative Life* (Washington DC: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, 1998), <http://ccas.georgetown.edu/story/1242687316313.html>.
12. The YNNA family business, for instance, is said to adhere to Islamic business practices (e.g., refusing to sell alcohol at the grocery stores it owns, refusing interest), and its patriarch is a PJD supporter.
13. This influence often manifests itself in bargaining power, whereby civil society organizations with high domestic support or strong international backing, or both, use their popularity to successfully lobby the regime to implement reforms.
14. For more, see Vish Sakthivel, *Al-Adl wal-Ihsan: Inside Morocco's Islamist Challenge*, Policy Focus 135 (Washington DC: Washington Institute, 2014), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/al-adl-wal-ihsan-inside-moroccos-islamist-challenge>.
15. *Ibid.*
16. "Espace Associatif: Nos Objectifs," accessed January 23, 2015, <http://www.espace-associatif.ma/Nos-Objectifs?lang=fr>.
17. "Forum des Alternatives Maroc," Anna Lindh Foundation, accessed January 22, 2015, <http://www.annalindhfoundation.org/members/forum-des-alternatives-maroc>.
18. Originally based on the Maliki *madhab* (doctrine) of Sunni jurisprudence, the Moudawana—which adjudicates on issues ranging from marriage rights to polygamy to child custody—was made law after Morocco's independence in 1956. Its most recent revision, in 2004, was praised by international onlookers for addressing women's rights and gender equality, but the changes stirred internal controversy.
19. Eve Sandberg and Kenza Aqertit, *Moroccan Women, Activists, and Gender Politics: An Institutional Analysis* (London: Lexington Books, 2014).
20. For more, see Oriana Wuerth (2005), "The Reform of the Moudawana: The Role of Women's Civil Society Organizations in Changing the Personal Status Code of Morocco," *Hawwa* 3, no. 3 (2005): 309–33. State-led bodies are not considered viable sources of democratic pressure on the government, and are therefore left out of the present study. For example, the National Union of Morocco Women (UNFM), founded in 1969 by King Hassan II, is not included in this discussion. The UNFM focuses mainly on vocational and professional training for women, rather than on legal reform.
21. For more on LDDF constituents, see Doris H. Gray, "Feminism, Islamism, and a Third Way," in *Contemporary Morocco: State, Politics and Society under Mohammed VI*, ed. Bruce Maddy-Weitzman and Daniel Zisenwine (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 136–46.
22. James N. Sater, *Civil Society and Political Change in Morocco* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 105.
23. Abdelaziz Nouaydi, "Morocco: The Imperative of Democratic Transition," in *Human Rights under African Constitutions*, ed. Abdullahi Ahmed an-Naim (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 173.
24. Paul Silverstein and David Crawford, "Amazigh Activism and the Moroccan State," *Middle East Review* 34, no. 233 (2004): 44–48, <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer233/amazigh-activism-moroccan-state>.
25. Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, *The Berber Identity Movement and the Challenge to North African States* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).

26. Paul Silverstein and David Crawford, "Amazigh Activism and the Moroccan State," *Middle East Review* 34, no. 233 (2004): 44–48, <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer233/amazigh-activism-moroccan-state>.
27. It is difficult to quantify overall union membership because individuals within a given union may be personally affiliated with one or another or many at once. In addition, many claiming to be members do not pay dues.
28. Shortly after independence, pro-Istiqlal teachers and miners broke away from the UMT to form their own profession-based unions, and Istiqlal formed its own union, the UGTM.
29. International Labor Affairs Bureau, *Foreign Labor Trends: Morocco* (Washington DC, 1995), 1–11.
30. The UMT considered it best to deal directly with the regime to win concessions, especially among a few amenable Istiqlal ministers. For more, see J. F. Clement and J. Paul, "Trade Unions and Moroccan Politics," *Middle East Report*, no. 127 (1984), 19–24.
31. Matt Buehler, "Labour Demands, Regime Concessions: Moroccan Unions and the Arab Uprising," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 1 (2015): 90, http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13530194.2015.973189#.Vdi3z_IVhBe. For a full discussion of the federations' demands and concessions gained, see the full Buehler text (88–103).
32. These include the February 20 Movement (M20F), the socialist democratic *al-Nahj al-Dimocrati* (Democratic Way Party), and Freedom Now, to name a few.
33. For more, see Paul Silverstein and David Crawford, "Amazigh Activism and the Moroccan State," *Middle East Review* 34, no. 233 (2004): 44–48, <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer233/amazigh-activism-moroccan-state>.
34. The *ulama* and the monarch have a mutually reinforcing relationship, wherein the latter is relatively dependent on the former for religious legitimacy, and neither typically finds it favorable to oppose the other on a given issue.
35. See Marina Ottaway and Meredith Riley, *Morocco: From Top-Down Reform to Democratic Transition?* Carnegie Papers: Middle East Series 71 (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment, 2006), http://carnegieendowment.org/files/cp71_ottaway_final.pdf.
36. *Ibid.*
37. Anonymous activist, Skype interview with author, January 22, 2015.



THE ALGERIAN CONUNDRUM

Authoritarian State, Democratic Society

■ JOHN P. ENTELIS

OBSERVERS OF the political upheaval sweeping the Arab world since 2011 have often asked why Algeria remains ostensibly untouched by the so-called Arab Spring. The question betrays a truncated view of Algerian history, since the largest country in the Arab world arguably experienced the first, if short-lived, “spring” roughly twenty years before the latest uprisings. Following legislative elections in December 1991, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) emerged in a dominant position, and the Algerian authorities, fearful of an Islamist takeover, canceled the election results and banned the movement. The armed faction of the FIS responded by launching an insurgency, and in the ensuing civil war nearly 200,000 Algerians lost their lives. Also lost in the “dark decade” was momentum toward political democratization.

Today, the prospects for democratic-style reformers 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, if not a democratic political culture, rooted in its historic interaction with French republican principles, this democratic

orientation is disaggregated and diffuse. Associational life is widespread but limited in its capacity to articulate reformist principles, however much individual Algerians aspire to a democratic future. 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 paper, the third in a series exploring prospects for political reform throughout the region, considers the strengths and limitations of democratic-style reformers in

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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 paper concludes with a cautionary note for U.S. policymakers eager to engage constructively with Algeria.

Overstating the Algerian State

The Algerian state has long been considered institutionally "strong," if not legitimate, vis-à-vis society, maintaining its hegemony by maximizing its economic advantages and coercive capabilities to ensure societal compliance. Yet the maintenance of state control masks a more vulnerable dynamic in which society is forever struggling to assert its political primacy in the face of a "fierce" state, one willing and able to enforce its authority through a combination of cooptation and coercion. Thus, a putatively strong state, itself internally divided, sits atop a fragile yet highly contentious society forever on the verge of disrupting the political balancing act so purposively constructed over these many decades.

Independent Algeria has long been riddled with conflict, contradiction, and discontinuity within all its relevant sociopolitical and socioeconomic parts. Only during its nearly eight-year war of national liberation (1954–62) against French colonial occupation (1830–1962) did state and society possess a semblance of national coherence and ideological purpose. Yet even that protracted struggle could not eliminate the bitter differences among individuals, parties, and other social movements, as each projected an ideologically different post-independence future. The victory of the National Liberation Front (FLN)¹ and its assumption of single-party power provided no guarantee of stability for state and society. Indeed, the war of independence provided the structural context that allowed the military wing of the incipient Algerian government to assert its dominance over the country's political destiny. The primacy of the military over the political became obvious virtually at independence. Three years into his presidency, Ahmed Ben Bella was overthrown in a military coup d'état on June 19, 1965, by Col. Houari Bou-

mediene, Ben Bella's defense minister and former head of the revolutionary Algerian Liberation Army. Whatever pretense of civilian rule at the hands of a Marxist-Leninist-type single party was permanently set aside once the military took over in 1965, a position it has yet to relinquish whether operating overtly or behind the scenes.

Until recently, presidential incumbency and executive authority have remained prerogatives of high army officers and their intelligence counterparts. In both the selection of Chadli Bendjedid as Boumediene's successor in 1979 and the forced removal of the former in 1992, the military-security establishment—or *le pouvoir*, as it is commonly described—has been the determinative and decisive actor. This became particularly pronounced during the dark decade, 1992–2002, when the military was engaged in a brutal civil war against an Islamist insurgency that left nearly 200,000 dead and thousands more wounded. Successive national leaders—Mohamed Boudiaf (January–June 1992), Ali Kafi (1992–94), Liamine Zeroual (1994–99), and Abdelaziz Bouteflika (1999–present)—were all selected by *le pouvoir* with the aim of securing state interests as defined by a narrow band of army elites and their allies in Algeria's military-industrial complex.

A triumvirate of state-level interests, as follows, serves as the coercive, financial, and bureaucratic instrument of state control:

1. the high army command and the security services, especially the dreaded Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité (Intelligence and Security Department), or DRS;
2. the national oil and gas behemoth, Sonatrach; and
3. the presidential office sitting atop the expansive patronage network provided by the ruling FLN and its coalition partners.

Yet that state control is itself riddled with internal cleavages, factions, and fissures that find resolution through a cyclical process of cooptation and coercion, rendering state hegemony vulnerable to unpredictable power shifts among the key strategic actors. The current alteration in the balance of power between the presidential clan and its counterpart in the intelligence services is but the latest iteration of this cycle.

For its part, civil society sees itself manipulated, marginalized, or otherwise exploited by this military-industrial complex. Despite the existence of ample hydrocarbon revenues, a manageable foreign debt, and a massive sovereign wealth fund estimated at over \$150 billion, Algeria has been described as a wealthy state with an impoverished society. One result is a permanent condition of social unrest throughout the country in which key groups in society—labor unions, students, farmers, industrial workers, opinionmakers, and community activists—are frequently engaged in wildcat strikes, street demonstrations, violent clashes, and public protests. While much of this militancy is motivated by a desire to acquire local public goods and services otherwise being denied or ignored by state-level officials, the overall effect is to create at the national level an environment of social turbulence and civil discontent that challenges the regime’s legitimacy and political efficacy.

While wide and pronounced cleavages separate state and society, similar fault lines exist within each of the broader groupings. At the state level, tensions and divisions have long characterized inter- and intra-elite behavior. Today those tensions revolve around the question of presidential succession, the direction and control of the country’s hydrocarbon resources (including the issue of whether or not to explore for and develop shale oil), and the degree to which socioeconomic opportunities and political freedoms should be sacrificed in the name of combating terrorism. At the level of the mass public, fault lines penetrate virtually all aspects of Algerian society—Berbers vs. Arabs, Islamists vs. secularists, urban vs. rural, north vs. south, east vs. west, Francophones vs Arabophones, and so forth. These cleavages within the state-society divide prevent the state from collapsing yet simultaneously create a society forever on the brink of revolutionary upheaval.

The Roots of Algerian Civil Society

Because of its distinctive and often traumatic experiences, Algeria holds a unique place in the political history of the Arab-Islamic world. The Algerian experience has affected several areas of civil society devel-

opment, including the emergence of political pluralism and the establishment of proto-democratic institutions and practices. No understanding of today’s Algeria can be had without first appreciating that country’s complex political evolution. This historical complexity informs the coexistence of two powerful yet diametrically opposed tendencies within Algerian political culture: political authoritarianism (the tendency toward centralized governance) and political democracy (the desire for choice and autonomy).

From Algeria’s early modern history, the process of promoting harmony and political unanimity in its quest for freedom and autonomy has created a bifurcated political culture that can inspire both political authoritarianism and political democracy. The long period of colonial domination and the need to maintain a sense of identity at all costs, compounded by the war of independence’s need to foster cooperation and solidarity in the face of a more powerful enemy, engendered an enduring sense of national identity and political purpose—so essential for the development of civil society and political legitimacy. In addition, it created a tendency to justify political control from above as necessary to combat “enemies” of the state, whether external or internal in origin.

The exposure to the Western world during the colonial and post-colonial eras introduced more modern forms of social activism and political participation. Specifically, intensive and sustained periods of travel, study, work, and personal interaction between Algerian and European societies, along with the creation of an advanced system of telecommunications and broadcasting, introduced Algerians to alternative forms of political expression. These developments challenged the authoritarian political order of the state while invigorating preexisting populist and proto-democratic tendencies.

Politicized Algerian civil society owes its origins to the pre-revolutionary period, when it absorbed much from the French notions of associational life and state-society relations. Algerians in France, and to a lesser extent in colonial Algeria, were allowed to participate in French professional and trade unions and other mass organizations. Yet this associational experience was not allowed to flower in Algeria after independence, when

civil society and mass organizations were subordinated to the state-party apparatus and relegated to roles of recruitment and propaganda. Under FLN control, political activity was moderate and public demonstrations kept to a minimum. The persistence of highly centralized control of society was facilitated by a political trade-off whereby the population at large had bargained away legal political participation and autonomy in return for a guarantee of economic opportunity and standardized welfare provisions.

This social contract began to unravel with the dramatic fall of oil prices in the late 1980s. The subsequent deterioration of socioeconomic conditions ultimately led to the October 1988 protest movement that resulted in the death of hundreds, possibly thousands, of Algerian civilians at the hands of the military. The political crisis that followed radically altered the balance between state and society, with the latter reasserting its political presence. With the approval of an amended constitution in 1989 that eliminated one-party rule in favor of a multiparty electoral system, civil society reemerged as “associations of a political character” were legalized and allowed to organize, recruit, propagate, and demonstrate. As a result, a large number of independent interest groups evolved into political parties, reflecting the pervasive associational aspect of Algerian political culture despite efforts at depoliticization and heavy government supervision. Literally thousands of independent associations, professional groupings, and political parties appeared in the next two years. It is no exaggeration to describe this period as the point where Algeria’s democratic political culture found institutional expression in a democratic political system, one in which the full range of ideological tendencies adhered to a contested and pluralistic political order, both in principle and in practice.

That Algeria was able to embark on a democratic process in a spontaneous and comprehensive way reflects the long and tortuous evolution of its nationhood, political identity, socialist consciousness, and international stature. Without these preconditions, it is unlikely that pluralist politics would have developed so quickly or as widely. As such, Algeria’s experiment in democracy went beyond anything undertaken in the region prior to the Arab Spring. The success of Islamism in such a

pluralist milieu speaks primarily to the underlying participatory environment and only secondarily to the role of religion in politics, the religious state, or the rise of Islamic fundamentalism.

Algerian Civil Society Today

No organizations or professional groups have been as active or as integral to the vitality of civil society and promotion of democracy as journalists, feminists, Berberists, and human rights activists. Even today, these groups remain at the forefront of promoting democratic values and practices. Despite the fractured and fragmented civil sphere, the democratic imperative remains the central concern of these organizations, however much their representation now takes the form of individual actions operating outside formal institutional channels.

Established at independence, groups like the Union Nationale des Femmes Algériennes (UNFA), the Union Générale des Travailleurs Algériens (UGTA), and the Ligue Algérienne pour la Défense des Droits de l’Homme (Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights, LADDH) have given voice to women, workers, and human rights activists through formal institutional channels originally under FLN auspices. Today, these and similar associations are distancing themselves from state control, though for the most part they remain supporters of government policies. The UGTA is especially militant when it feels its workers are being threatened by neoliberal policies and other efforts to privatize key strategic sectors of the economy. The LADDH has never been formally legalized: it views itself as an independent human rights organization critical of the government for its failure to uphold international human rights standards.

Still, the state’s efforts to coopt long-established civic associations such as the UNFA, UGTA, and LADDH have hindered the ability of autonomous organizations to develop broad-based populist support. One result is the individualization of democratic demands, in which high-profile Algerian activists such as Abdennour Ali Yahia (human rights), Khalida Toumi (feminism), and Kamel Daoud (journalism) assume the voice of reform-

ism, if not democracy. The nonformal, highly individualized way in which Algeria's democratic sphere seeks to impact public discourse and policy was on display this past November, when nineteen distinguished intellectuals, political figures, former combatants in the war of independence, human rights supporters, and feminist activists issued a public letter to President Bouteflika. Written on the sixty-first anniversary of the start of Algeria's war of national liberation, the letter demanded government accountability, political transparency, judicial integrity, and overall state responsiveness to public needs and demands.²

Despite the individualization of democratic expression in the country, one should not automatically assume that all "secularists" are "democrats," either in belief or in practice. For example, among the nineteen signatories to the Bouteflika letter are such high-profile historic personalities, political figures, and public intellectuals as Zohra Drif-Bitad, Louisa Hanoune, and Rachid Boudjedra, who are intensely secular if not vehemently anti-Islamist but barely qualify as "democratic" in any universal sense. Yet it is testimony to the fractured character of Algerian civil society that even such problematic figures are given the democratic label.

The Limits of Reform

Broadly speaking, reform prospects in Algeria face two principal hurdles, the first attitudinal and the second institutional.

Attitudinal Obstacles

Whatever else Algerian "democrats" may aspire to, relatively few would identify with the full meaning of liberal democracy, one that not only includes the usual procedural practices of contestation and participation but also provides legal guarantees of freedom of expression, association, press, and belief as well as legal protection for minorities. Moreover, while a number of individuals may hold progressive if not liberal democratic ideals, collective bodies like the UGTA share the regime's socialist and state-centered orientation, one whose commitment to pluralistic politics is tepid at best.

Even more problematic is the broader social context within which democratic reformers operate. One large-scale survey of Arab public opinion, including Algerian opinion, found that "while few people reject democracy generally, a large proportion opposes it in their country."³ Throughout the region, citizens tend to prioritize safety, economic well-being, and cultural authenticity over initiatives aimed at implanting democratic procedures like free and fair multiparty elections. But in Algeria especially, where elections in the early 1990s resulted in widespread violence, attitudes about democracy are strongly correlated with the perceived effects of elections on the stability of the country, and even Algeria's reformists demonstrate ambivalence toward democracy. These attitudinal conditions speak to the challenges of building broad support for democracy against a backdrop of economic strife, corruption, and general instability.⁴

Institutional Obstacles

While an elite-level struggle takes place among aged power brokers in the army (Gaid Salah, b. 1940), intelligence services (Mohamed "Toufik" Mediene, b. 1939), and presidency (Bouteflika, b. 1937), the mass public seethes with discontent as the chasm separating state and society deepens and widens. The uncertainty of presidential succession is playing out against a backdrop of chronic social unrest, civil turmoil, terrorist threats, decaying social services, pervasive corruption, ethnic violence, and reduced oil and gas revenues. Autonomous institutional life is frozen. Opposition parties are powerless, the legislature impotent, the judiciary feeble, and the bureaucracy incompetent and corrupt. The electorate is deeply alienated and dismissive of the formal political process, believing that the real decisionmaking takes place behind closed doors.

Deep-seated inter- and intra-elite struggles that date back decades have never been resolved through transparent or accountable public institutions. As a result, Algerian decisionmaking in the twenty-first century is little different than it was in the twentieth: a cabal of shadowy figures within the state's military-industrial complex, operating at times cooperatively and at other times conflictually, serves as the final arbiter of national policymaking

and selections to high office. While the process is purposely opaque, the decisionmaking instruments are not; they range from political assassinations (Boudiaf, Ali Tounsi) to corruption charges (Chakib Khelil), arrests and imprisonments (Abdelkader Ait-Ouarab, aka General Hassan; Hocine Benhadid), forced retirements (Amara Benyouène, Abdelkader “Fawzi” Lounis), dismissals for insubordination (Ali Bendaoud), ambassadorial reassignments, and “car accidents.”

The Bouteflika counteroffensive has aimed directly at the security and intelligence services formerly led by Mediene, the world’s longest incumbent head of a country’s intelligence services until his forced retirement in September 2015. Without explanation or justification, the heads of the internal security department within the DRS, the presidential guard, and the republican guard were all summarily dismissed. More significant was the dissolution of the Groupe d’Intervention Spéciale, the special forces counterterrorism unit within the DRS charged with combating Islamist militancy. Spreading special forces functions across different army, navy, and national guard units is clearly intended to undermine the independent coercive capacity of the DRS. A case could be made that with the disastrous failure of the GIS to prevent the terrorist attack at the In Amenas gas facilities in 2013, sufficient reason existed to disband the DRS unit. Still, the timing two years later raises suspicion that political calculations were as important as security considerations in explaining the presidential actions. The culmination of this sustained executive offensive, Toufik’s removal, was accomplished in the opaque and conspiratorial style so long associated with decisionmaking at the highest level of Algerian politics.

The behind-the-scenes struggle for political dominance atop of the military-industrial pyramid comes at a particularly difficult time for the country as it confronts an ongoing Islamist insurgency, declining hydrocarbon revenues, violence between Arabs and Berbers in the Mزاب region, and recurring socioeconomic grievances expressed through often violent mass protests across a wide swath of localities and regions.

Key questions remain. Given the current political, security, and socioeconomic crises facing the country, does the regime still have the capacity to co-opt

opposition and buy social peace in the manner and style once considered “routine” for regime elites? Additionally, is the pressure for fundamental institutional reform from high-profile individuals and civil society movements sufficiently comprehensive and sustained to transition Algeria from its current “competitive authoritarian” mode of governance to a genuine democracy? Finally, does the demilitarization of the Algerian polity serve as a fundamental precondition for the advent of law-bound government, or is civilian rule as devoid of democratic propensities as its military counterpart? A glance at one measure of law-bound government, Bouteflika’s one-sided electoral victories—73.79% in 1999, 85% in 2004, 90.24% in 2009, 81.53% in 2014—suggests “competitive authoritarianism” in Algeria remains alive and well. Such “victories” also reaffirm the skepticism found in the attitudinal surveys cited above regarding the general distrust shared by masses and elites toward elections as an instrument of democratic legitimacy.

The general conclusion regarding the status of democratic reformers in Algeria is that while democratic ideals and liberal attitudes pervade civil society, however ambiguous their articulation, they remain highly disaggregated, particularly among public intellectuals and other opinionmakers. These ideological cleavages reflect the broader fault lines that have characterized state-society relations in Algeria since the war of independence. In the absence of a broad consensus on the interpretation of “democracy” and “liberalism,” it will be very difficult to construct a meaningful platform for democratic reform that can attract both the mass public and autonomous associations. For its part, the Algerian state remains impenetrable to societal demands for democratic reform. Any reform must be conceived, constructed, and commanded by the regime itself.

U.S. Policy Choices

Beyond the hydrocarbon trade and counterterrorism efforts, the United States shares little with Algeria. Given the anti-market culture that dictates Algeria’s domestic economic policy, American business presence in the

country is minimal. Corruption and extensive bureaucratic hurdles also limit U.S. private-sector involvement in the economy.

Since 9/11, U.S.-Algeria relations have centered on global counterterrorism; arms transfers, intelligence sharing, and coordinated military exercises are now regular features of this exchange. However, while these security arrangements may have prevented a bad security environment from becoming worse, they may also have diminished any hesitation by Algeria's leaders about limiting political freedom in order to maintain a monopoly of power. Algerian democratic reformers, whether individually or collectively, have had little influence on altering this state-society dynamic, and many view the U.S.

role in critical if not hostile terms. Indeed, many Algerian "liberals" denounce America's democratic pretensions, arguing that Washington's democracy-promotion agenda is little more than a cover for more hegemonic ambitions in the region.

Given these structural limitations, U.S. policy should avoid public promotion of democratization, human rights, and political pluralism, since Algerians believe they are already "democratic," "promote human rights," and "advance political pluralism," however compromised or incomplete each of these areas may be in practice. As noted earlier, Algerians are extremely protective of their national sovereignty and distrustful of those who seek to interfere in their domestic affairs.

Notes

1. The *Front de Libération Nationale* (National Liberation Front) successfully overthrew French colonial rule and assumed power at independence. While its single-party status was overturned with the amended 1989 constitution that recognized a multiparty system, it remains today the dominant political party in parliament, with President Abdelaziz Bouteflika serving as party head.
2. The letter appeared in the Algerian daily *El Watan* on November 7, 2015.
3. Lindsay J. Benstead, "Why Do Some Arab Citizens See Democracy as Unsuitable for Their Country?" *Democratization*, September 3, 2014, p. 8. Synopsis available at <http://bakerinstitute.org/research/why-do-some-arab-citizens-see-democracy-unsuitable-their-country/>.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 20.



BAHRAIN

Stalled Reforms & Future U.S. Role

■ SIMON HENDERSON

AMONG THE PERSIAN GULF STATES, Bahrain has been most affected by the events known as the Arab Spring. Of the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Oman—only the island nation of Bahrain and Oman, as well as, briefly, Kuwait, experienced street demonstrations. But tensions in Bahrain, which first erupted into violence in early 2011, have persisted. Until late 2015, the U.S. embassy website continued to show a map indicating areas in and around the capital, Manama, that are off-limits to U.S. personnel because of the danger of civil strife. Meanwhile, a political transition has taken place, but not in the direction of greater social equality. Although depicted by the Bahraini government as leading to a more pluralistic society, the changes have also reinforced the political role of the Khalifa ruling family.

The overall context of Bahrain's domestic politics is overshadowed by Iran, whose history is intertwined. Occasionally, Iranian politicians revive a territorial claim to the island, which has a large population of Shiite Muslims, coreligionists of most Iranians. Ominously, tensions with

Iran have increased since the July 2015 nuclear accord between Tehran and the P5+1. In October 2015, after discovering a reportedly Iran-linked bomb-making factory south of Manama, Bahrain accused the Islamic Republic of being a state sponsor of terrorism, expelling the Iranian ambassador and recalling its own envoy from Tehran. In late November 2015, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei called for democracy in Bahrain, describing the country's government as a tyrant minority, and so prompting a further Bahraini diplomatic protest. In January 2016, following the sacking of the Saudi embassy in Tehran prompted by the execution Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, Bahrain followed Saudi Arabia and broke off diplomatic relations with Iran. At least until that point, Shiite moderates in Bahrain had seen Iran as a potential ally and had sought its support in their quest for political reform.

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Despite the tensions, Bahrainis across much of the political spectrum are proud of their country's hosting of the U.S. Fifth Fleet and the headquarters of NAVCENT, the naval component of U.S. Central Command. This gives Washington an opportunity, perhaps even a responsibility, to help guide Bahrain's political evolution. Indeed, in addition to the challenges posed by Iran, some young Bahraini Sunnis are attracted to the ideology of the Islamic State. Yet the most predictable event that could break the Bahraini political logjam is the eventual transition from power of Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, the head of government for the last forty-five years, who has come to represent the royal family's essential caution and conservatism. His departure will prompt a realignment in the power structure. In such circumstances, Washington cannot be indifferent to Bahraini politics but must balance carefully the roles of conciliator and facilitator.

The Political System in Theory...

Bahrain is a constitutional monarchy under King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, a hereditary monarch. Nevertheless, his father styled himself Ruler of Bahrain and Hamad declared himself king in a 2001 constitutional amendment, which after a referendum took effect in 2002. The king appoints the prime minister, who for the last forty-five years has been, without interruption, his uncle Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, the brother of the late ruler. The cabinet is also appointed by the king.¹ In May 2015, twelve of the twenty-five cabinet members were from the Khalifa ruling family. A September 2015 reshuffle led to a slightly smaller cabinet, although one still dominated by the Khalifa clan. The bicameral national assembly consists of two houses with forty members each. The upper house, known as the Consultative Assembly, is appointed by the king, and each member of the lower house, the Council of Representatives, is directly elected to a constituency. The last elections to the lower house were held in November 2014, and the next are due in November 2018. In Bahrain, no political parties are allowed as such, but there are political societies (discussed below) that back certain candidates.

Among the GCC states, this level of political development is equaled only in Kuwait.

...and in Practice

The true division of Bahrain's power and influence is very different from what the government's theoretical structure suggests. As billboards all over Manama and photographs in government offices make clear, the country is run by a triumvirate: the king, age sixty-five, is central but his eighty-year-old uncle, the prime minister, remains a key influence. The third member is the crown prince, the king's eldest son, Sheikh Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa, who at forty-six is perceived by the Shiite opposition and local diplomatic community as a moderating force. Despite his advanced age, the prime minister retains a firm grip on everyday government and economic decisions. The power of the king, seen as a vacillating character, is further diminished by royal family hardliners who oppose any concession toward the country's Shiite community and are deeply suspicious of neighboring Iran. Of particular note are the three ministers assigned to the royal court, all Khalifa family members, as well as the commander-in-chief of the Bahrain Defense Force. Although the crown prince is considered a relative liberal because of his apparent willingness to make concessions to the Shiite opposition, his standing with his father, the king, may be diminishing with the rising status of two younger sons, half-brothers of the crown prince—Sheikh Nasser, twenty-eight, and Sheikh Khalid, twenty-six—who hold command positions in the elite Bahraini Royal Guard unit. Senior figures in the royal family are reported to be deeply involved in Bahrain's economy, sometimes controversially, as in sales of land reclaimed from the sea, which is made available for commercial and upmarket residential development.²

Like other Gulf countries, Bahrain has a substantial number of expatriates, often long-term. Government officials estimate the country's total population at around 2 million, though the CIA World Factbook cites 1.35 million, of whom only 45 percent, or just over 600,000, are estimated to be citizens.³ Of the resident population—that is, including noncitizens—around 70 percent

are Muslim, more than 14 percent are Christian, nearly 10 percent are Hindu, and 2.5 percent are Buddhist. The most vexatious ratio, though, is the narrowing divide between Sunni and Shiite citizens. Officially, the Bahraini government does not distinguish between Sunnis and Shiites, but the reality is far starker. By granting citizenship to Sunnis from Pakistan and Jordan, many of whom have been recruited into the Bahraini security forces, the government has been steadily shifting the ratio. Some non-Muslims, including Western expatriates, have also become citizens. What was clearly a Shiite citizen majority more than thirty years ago is now much more equal and may even be approaching a Sunni majority. Although individual Shiites prosper in Bahrain, collectively Bahraini Shiites live in poorer areas and allege government discrimination. (A Bahraini opposition leader once told the author that he would consider it progress if Bahraini Shiites had the same local standing as Saudi Shiites had achieved in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, less than an hour's drive across the causeway connecting the two countries.) Few, if any, Bahraini Shiites are entrusted to be members of the security forces. Several thousand Shiites are reportedly still in detention after being arrested during street disturbances in the last four years.

Background

In historical terms, Shiite Bahrainis perceive themselves as the country's indigenous people and regard the Khalifa clan, which came to the island in 1783 from the Arabian Peninsula mainland, as intruders and usurpers. The island's colonial legacy is also important. In 1830, the Khalifa ruling family signed a treaty with Britain making itself a protectorate. In 1967, Britain moved its main regional naval base from Aden to Bahrain, but a year later the British declared they would close their bases east of the Suez Canal by 1971. That year, Bahrain declared independence and signed a treaty of friendship with Britain. Agreement was also reached with the United States, permitting U.S. rental of naval and military facilities.

Economically, Bahrain was the first site of oil discovery in the southern Gulf, and although those small reserves

are almost entirely depleted, the island developed an industrial base with a refinery, aluminum smelter, and dry dock, as well as establishing itself as a financial center. Since the 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq War, the U.S. military presence on Bahrain, through the Fifth Fleet headquarters, has expanded considerably to around eight thousand personnel. In 2014, Bahrain announced that it would fund the construction of a smaller British naval base, which began in 2015. The unstated purpose of both bases is to counter any threat, particularly Iranian, to the oil exports of the GCC member states, which are crucial to the world economy.

The History of Election Politics

Important to understanding the evolution of Bahrain's electoral system and the current situation are the main inflections of the modern historical time line—principally, independence from Britain in 1971, the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the 2002 declaration of a constitutional monarchy, and the 2011 Arab Spring demonstrations.

Elections for a National Assembly were first held two years after independence, in 1973, when the membership was forty-four, made up of fourteen cabinet members and thirty members elected by male voters ages twenty and older. In 1975, the emir dissolved the National Assembly after the prime minister complained that it was impeding the government's work. In 1992, the emir appointed a thirty-member Consultative Council for a four-year term. Three years later, a Shiite cleric, Sheikh Ali Salman, was deported after calling for the restoration of the (elected) National Assembly. In 1996, the appointed membership of the Consultative Council was increased from thirty to forty. In 2000, the new emir, Sheikh Hamad, who had succeeded his father, Sheikh Isa, after his death in 1999, appointed four women to the Consultative Council, one of whom was a Christian, and a Jewish businessman.

In 2001, a referendum was held to determine whether Bahrain would become a constitutional monarchy, to include the National Assembly serving as the elected lower house as well as an independent judiciary. Approved overwhelmingly, the transition took place in early 2002.

ELECTION	CANDIDATES	FEMALE CANDIDATES	FEMALES ELECTED	% VOTER TURNOUT
2002	177	8	0	53.48
2006	206	19	1	73.6
2010	127	9	1	67.7
2014	419	22	3	52.8

Adapted from "A Journey of Progress: Bahrain's Political Achievements" (accessed 2015).

In October 2002, following local elections in May, Bahrain held its first parliamentary elections since 1973. Women were allowed to vote and stand as candidates, although none won any of the forty seats. Because women had been included, Sunni Islamists called for a boycott of the vote. Elections were also held in 2006, 2010, and 2014. In early 2011, the eighteen members of the main Shiite opposition political society, al-Wefaq (Accord), and one secular ally resigned in protest at the government security forces' crackdown on demonstrations prompted by the Arab Spring events in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere. Later in 2011, special elections, boycotted by al-Wefaq, were held to fill the vacant seats. In 2014, al-Wefaq again boycotted the elections.

In the chart shown above, the Bahraini government gives an overview of the elections held since 2002. The presentation emphasizes an increasing number of candidates after the Arab Spring events of 2011, and a record number of women candidates and elected women, all evidence of a developing political system. But the presentation also highlights, bizarrely, a drastic slump in voter turnout, which in the eyes of many readers is likely to cancel any notion of progress.

Unstated is the almost certainly correct implication that the turnout volatility is attributable to Shiite participation levels. From the Shiite perspective, an early and persistent complaint has been districting. Although the Shiites constitute a probable and certainly self-perceived majority, the drawing of electoral boundaries meant that Shiites, most of whom are affiliated with al-Wefaq, could never win a majority of the forty constituencies. Some redistricting occurred before the 2014 polls, but this was insufficient to change Shiite perceptions of unfairness, thus contributing to al-Wefaq's boycott decision and the

year's low turnout. The relatively high turnout for 2006 and 2010 reflects the comparative enthusiasm for participation by Bahraini Shiites and their sense that these earlier votes had some meaning.

Template for Reform

The Bahraini political spectrum is very wide. Some Shiites regard involvement in any formal political process as useless and seek the overthrow of the Khalifa regime. Others regard the regime with contempt but say they are against violence. In the approximate middle is al-Wefaq, which is still legal despite its supporters' boycott of the 2014 elections. On the other end of the spectrum is the Khalifa royal family, representing varying degrees of readiness to accommodate the organized political participation of the island's Shiites. Crown Prince Salman is the most moderate, with the reported support of Foreign Minister Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed al-Khalifa. His uncle, the prime minister, Sheikh Khalifa, is seen as the godfather of hardliners opposed to any organized Shiite political participation and transfer of real power. King Hamad juggles his position so as to maintain the respect of all sides of the royal family while avoiding any ultimate decision. Additionally, a range of non-Khalifa Sunni opinion prevails, which includes the Muslim Brotherhood, tolerated in Bahrain, and extremist Sunnis, from which at least seventy adherents are reported to have left the country to join the Islamic State, fighting in Syria and Iraq.

No apparent agreement exists on the definition of the word "reform" in the Bahraini political lexicon. From al-Wefaq's perspective, the lack of hope for any real reform prompted its mass resignation from the National Assembly in 2011 and its boycott of the 2014 elections. Less politically active Shiites as well as members of Bahrain's Sunni community probably fear any reform that will further empower the Shiites organized into al-Wefaq, possibly causing a political crisis and jeopardizing the position of more moderate Shiites. Within the ruling family, there is resistance to any development that may weaken its control.

Yet the ruling family has, in effect, already conceded what amounts to a reform agenda. In a bid to quiet the growing unrest in March 2011, Crown Prince Salman

set forth seven principles to guide a national dialogue, including a parliament with full authority, a government that meets the will of the people, and fair voting districts. The initiative came to nothing, however, because of a security clampdown, backed by reinforcements from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which ended demonstrators' occupation of the Pearl Roundabout, a renowned local landmark; the site was subsequently bulldozed into oblivion and renamed al-Farouq Junction, a reference to a historical figure revered by Sunnis. The ensuing attempts to stabilize the political situation involved a commission of inquiry and meetings of a so-called national dialogue, though the king, under pressure from hardliners and apparently Saudi Arabia, resisted moving toward establishing a parliament with "full authority." Lack of agreement resulted in government suspension of the dialogue in January 2014.

Nevertheless, in September 2014, Crown Prince Salman produced a five-point "framework" for a new national dialogue, centering on redefined electoral districts, a revised process for appointing the Consultative Council, powers for the elected Council of Representatives to approve or reject a new cabinet, judicial reforms, and new codes of conduct for the security services. The opposition rejected the proposals because they did not satisfy the core demand that the elected Council of Representatives, rather than the king, select the prime minister.

As for the government, it apparently prefers that the National Assembly comprise members who act as individuals rather than in groups. Apart from al-Wefaq, the only other unbanned political society is Waad (Promise), a left-leaning secular group whose membership includes both Sunnis and Shiites.⁴ At the end of 2015, the government was pushing for amendments to the Political Societies Law that would outlaw active religious clerics from membership in political societies. An obvious target of this "ban on turbans," as it is known in the diplomatic community, is the currently incarcerated al-Wefaq leader, Sheikh Ali Salman, who has dominated Shiite politics since returning from exile in 2001 after being found guilty of making a seditious speech allegedly advocating the government's violent overthrow, a charge he disputes. Another target is Sheikh Isa Qassim, often seen as al-Wefaq's spiritual leader.

Bahrain's principal reformist actors are

- *Crown Prince Salman*, heir apparent to King Hamad, who has negotiated with al-Wefaq and at times seemed to accept a significant Shiite political role, albeit at the cost of his own personal credibility with the Sunni community; and
- *Khalil al-Marzouq*, deputy leader of al-Wefaq and effective leader while the secretary-general, Sheikh Ali Salman, serves out his prison term. Marzouq has had his own legal problems, having been acquitted in 2014 of the charge of criticizing the government.

Future Prospects and the U.S. Role

Despite its large naval base, the United States has been perceived neutrally by both the Sunni leadership and Shiite opposition. Demonstrating this perception, al-Wefaq has not called for the closure of the base. The government, though sometimes frustrated by U.S. administration and congressional expressions of dissatisfaction over Bahraini human rights violations, has not retaliated against U.S. forces, maintaining instead arguably the loosest restrictions on U.S. military activities of any GCC state. Although it must be utilized judiciously, this respect gives the United States potentially great influence over a future transition.

When, in 1999, Emir Sheikh Isa died of a sudden heart attack at sixty-five, shortly after meeting with U.S. defense secretary William Cohen, it was Cohen's fortuitous continued presence on the island that was seen as ensuring that Isa's son, Hamad, took over rather than Isa's brother, Khalifa, then, as now, the prime minister and the real power center.

Two predictable eventualities loom in at least the middle distance: the death of King Hamad and the death or at least retirement from public life of the prime minister, Sheikh Khalifa. (In November 2015, Sheikh Khalifa spent three nights in a hospital for unspecified tests.) Either event will prompt a royal or even a larger crisis, with the Khalifa hardliners likely unwilling to concede a transfer of power or authority to Crown Prince Salman.

Sandwiched between the Islamic Republic of Iran, which defines itself as anti-American, and Saudi Arabia, which has tensions within its own ruling royal family, Bahrain's continued stability and pro-U.S. stance are in Washington's interest. Widespread Bahraini respect for the United States must be leveraged into ensuring a peaceful transition to dominant power for Crown Prince Salman, either as king or, as long as King Hamad lives, as heir apparent. King Hamad sees himself as a consti-

titutional monarch, in the style of Britain's Queen Elizabeth, although the latter has only authority rather than power. Bahrain needs to move along that continuum so that its king, too, at least shares power. The alternative is either revolutionary chaos or harsh oppression by a ruling elite that despises much of its population. The U.S. interest is best satisfied by encouraging cautious reform and marginalizing hardliners at both ends of the political spectrum.

Notes

1. "Bahrain," *CIA World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/world-leaders-1/BA.html>.
2. "Bahrain Land Deals Highlight Alchemy of Making Money from Sand," *Financial Times*, December 10, 2014, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/b6d081a2-74b8-11e4-8321-00144feabdc0.html>.
3. "Bahrain," *CIA World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/geos/ba.html>.
4. Kenneth Katzman, *Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy* (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 2015), <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/95-1013.pdf>.



LEBANON'S [UN]CIVIL SOCIETY

■ DAVID SCHENKER

FIVE YEARS AFTER the first uprising, the impact of the so-called Arab Spring continues to reverberate from Tunisia to Syria to Bahrain. While Lebanon lies at the geographic epicenter of this regional storm, the political unrest that has consumed so much of the Middle East has notably eluded the state. To be sure, Lebanon has experienced the profound effects of spillover from the war in Syria and continues to serve as a battleground for a longstanding sectarian proxy war between Riyadh and Tehran. Unlike so many other Middle East states, however, Lebanon has, by and large, avoided the kind of national political introspection and discussion of reform that has preoccupied so much of the region in recent years.

The absence of serious and sustained political ferment in Lebanon is in many ways unsurprising. Despite widespread dissatisfaction with governance, both history and demography—the population is composed largely of Shiites, Sunnis, and Christians—have disinclined Lebanese to press for sweeping political change. With memories of the bloody fifteen-year civil war still fresh, many are no doubt wary of radical modifications to the current system. In addition, the stultifying postwar

Syrian military occupation of Lebanon (1990–2005) constrained the development of civil society, which is generally viewed as an agent of change.

Meanwhile, the 1989 Taif Accord, which helped end the war and established a powersharing arrangement, produced a system of government that reinforced sectarian patronage networks and loyalties above all else. According to one recent academic analysis, the result was a dysfunctional political system “that redirects individual loyalties away from state institutions and symbols and towards sectarian communities, and their political and religious elite....[This] makes it difficult for most people to even think of viable alternatives.”¹

Much has changed since 2005, when former Lebanese premier—and leader of the local Sunni Muslim commu-

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nity—Rafiq Hariri was assassinated. The crime, believed to have been perpetrated by Syria's Assad regime in tandem with the Lebanese Shiite militia cum political party, Hezbollah, sparked mass protests that ended the Syrian occupation of Lebanon. While the departure of the Syrian military did not eliminate the intelligence presence or the enduring influence of the Assad regime in Lebanon, it did open space for civil society, which began to flourish.

Today, Lebanon's civil society is among the most vibrant in the Middle East. Yet the efficacy of its organizations in influencing change remains limited, with the confessional nature of Lebanon's political system continuing to hinder democratic reform.² Entrenched sectarian interests fostered by the current system effectively oppose, stymie, and coopt a range of civil society activities aimed at undermining the status quo.

Unlike other states discussed in this series, Lebanon's current political dynamic is not best characterized as a contest between Islamists and autocrats. Certainly, Iran-backed Hezbollah—which operates both inside and outside the country's political framework—represents an Islamist and authoritarian ideology that leverages its arms, and at times its clerics, to intimidate opponents. But Hezbollah's political and ideological adversaries—represented by the March 14 coalition—are not autocrats. To some, they are freedom fighters pushing back against Iranian hegemonic regional ambitions; to others, they are stumbling plutocrats or, worse, sectarian zealots of their own type.

The war in Syria has stirred fears of Sunni radicalization, and combinations of local and foreign Sunni Muslims have perpetrated several significant terrorist acts in Lebanon. Nevertheless, apart from Hezbollah—whose prospects for total domination of a state with a 60 to 65 percent non-Shiite majority are somewhat limited—Islamists have limited local appeal. The good news, then, for advocates of liberty and better governance is that Lebanon has a deep bench of non-Islamist actors. The bad news is that their impact on the system is marginal.

Political Landscape

As mentioned, Lebanon's political environment today is the legacy of the Taif Accord, which was brokered by

regional powers. Before Taif, the state's political system was based on the 1943 National Pact, which relied on 1932 census results showing a Christian majority. Accordingly, Christians were afforded a strong presidency and a six-to-five ratio of parliament seats, which equated to 55 percent of the ninety-nine-seat parliament.

While Lebanon had not undergone a census since 1932, presumed demographic changes were incorporated into Taif. The accord preserved the allocation of senior portfolios—for example, a Maronite president, Sunni prime minister, and Shiite speaker of parliament—but downgraded the prerogatives of the chief executive and reallocated evenly between Christians and Muslims the seats in an expanded parliament of 120 members.

Lebanon's electoral laws remain the subject of serious debate, and malapportionment and gerrymandering of districts are endemic and perennial. Nonetheless, in the absence of consensus, Lebanese lawmakers of all persuasions have generally not sought to fundamentally change the system. While some members of parliament have tried to tinker at the margins, the concern has been that significant changes would politically disadvantage one sect or another and destabilize the tenuous postwar detente.

Since the Hariri assassination, Lebanese have twice voted to elect parliaments. In 2005 and again in 2009, the pro-West March 14 coalition, led by Saad Hariri of the (Sunni) Mustaqbal Party, (Maronite Christian) Samir Geagea of the Lebanese Forces, and Walid Jumblatt of the (Druze) Progressive Socialist Party, won slim parliamentary majorities. This loose alliance narrowly defeated the Iran-aligned March 8 coalition headed by Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement led by (Maronite Christian) Michel Aoun. In neither 2005 nor 2009, however, did the electoral victory translate into anything resembling a mandate.

Indeed, because Lebanese society and politics are so polarized, the legislature and government have been unable to pursue initiatives, controversial or otherwise, for the past decade. The lone attempt by the government resulted in disaster. In 2008, when the March 14 cabinet decided to remove Hezbollah's dedicated fiber-optic network in Beirut and fire the Hezbollah-affiliated official in charge of security at Rafiq Hariri International

Airport, Hezbollah responded with a military invasion of the capital, killing one hundred people and forcing the government to stand down. Near-total governmental paralysis ensued and has persisted to this day.

The most visible sign of this dysfunction has been parliament's inability, since May 2014, to elect a president—a process that requires a broad consensus, with two-thirds of the legislature agreeing to a candidate on the first round of balloting. But the impotence has also extended to dealing with miscellaneous crises, large and small.

Non-Islamist Actors and Activities

Today, more than 8,000 civil society organizations (CSOs) in Lebanon are registered with the Ministry of Interior. According to the Lebanese Center for Human Rights, that amounts to 1.3 associations per 1,000 inhabitants—about six times the number per capita in Egypt. (These registration regulations do not govern trade unions and syndicates, which fall under the purview of the Ministry of Labor.) Sporadically, elements of this vibrant civil society appear on the stage, organizing demonstrations and workshops, and preparing position papers and lobbying on controversial issues. The war in Syria, which deepened parliamentary gridlock and heightened sectarian tensions, has diminished, if temporarily, the advocacy role of Lebanese civil society organizations. Despite obstacles, however, their humanitarian activities and advocacy continue to have an impact on politics in the state. Some issues on which Lebanese civil society has intervened are briefly described below.

Electoral Law

In 1989, the Taif Accords enshrined as the basis for Lebanese politics the confessional system, in which voters elect candidates—including in parliamentary elections—according to their sects. While not particularly popular, the system nonetheless endures, in large part due to the backing of leading political parties. Indeed, the Lebanese daily *Al-Akhbar* reported in 2013 that former interior minister and erstwhile civil society activist

Ziad Baroud was “pessimistic about [the] acceptance [of proportional representation] among Lebanon’s political elite. He predicts that the prevailing political groups will never agree to such electoral reforms, because their direct or indirect interests are heavily vested in the status quo.”³

Back in 2012, an editorial in the *New York Times* reported that “a loose coalition of civil society groups, independent politicians and Lebanon’s president [Michel Suleiman]” had proposed “implementing a system of proportional representation to replace the current majoritarian, or ‘winner-take-all,’ model.”⁴ One of the more prominent CSOs pursuing this change has been the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE), whose stated goal is to “reform the administrative and electoral systems to ensure an accurate representation and effective participation.” LADE hopes to advance this goal by proposing “alternative systems and laws in the field of elections, decentralization, and the laws leading to the abolition of political sectarianism, and advocate to adopt these reforms.”⁵ In 2006, LADE, along with the Lebanese Transparency Association and the Center for Lebanese Studies, launched the Civil Campaign for Electoral Reform (CCER), and eighty-five civil society organizations have since signed on.⁶

Also in 2012, while parliamentarians were discussing changes in the electoral law, CCER organized a protest in Beirut, demanding a “more developed and just electoral law,” including the adoption of proportional representation.⁷ Two protestors were injured—with one hospitalized—when the police broke up the demonstration. Three years on, and with the war in Syria well into its fifth year, Lebanon is more politically polarized than ever, making significant changes in the electoral law unlikely anytime soon.

Personal Status Law

According to Lebanese personal status law, religious marriage, divorce, and annulment are the only option for adherents of Lebanon’s eighteen recognized sects. For Christian men hoping to marry Muslim women, for example, or couples seeking civil marriage, nuptials in Cyprus have traditionally served as the preferred work-around. This system has been reinforced by the Higher

Shia Council and the Sunni Mufti, institutions that profit from state referrals. In 2008, after years of effort, lobbying by civil society organizations and committed individuals led to a change in the law that allowed “sect” to be removed from government registry records, theoretically opening a path to civil marriage.⁸ In 2014, however, the changeover of ministers of the interior signaled a reversal of the policy, as the new minister refused to sign off on these contracts.⁹ Today, in practice, civil marriage in Lebanon remains a challenge.

Human Rights, Domestic Violence, and Human Trafficking

During the Syrian occupation, effective interactions of civil society with state security were limited. In 2010, draft legislation on domestic violence penned by the Lebanese nongovernmental organization KAFA (“Enough”) was submitted to parliament and became the basis of the law passed in 2014. Though subsequently criticized for its shortcomings—including failing to criminalize marital rape—the legislation was unprecedented. KAFA subsequently provided training to the Internal Security Force on the new legislation, and launched a media campaign to advertise the role of police in preventing and prosecuting this violence.¹⁰

Along similar lines, in 2013, a CSO called the Caritas Lebanon Migrant Center (CLMC) signed a memorandum of understanding with the General Security Directorate allowing it to provide support in matters of human trafficking, including social, medical, and legal aid for detainees, as well as accommodation at CLMC safe houses for victims upon their release from GS custody.¹¹

The Lebanese Center for Human Rights is representative of several Lebanese CSOs that work in the field of human rights. In addition to offering free psychological treatment and counseling to victims of torture in Lebanon, CLDH provides free legal aid to prisoners and the underserved, including victims of torture, refugees, low-income Lebanese, the LGBT community, and migrant workers.¹²

Refugees

Because Lebanon’s government is gridlocked and has not signed the International Convention for Refugees,

civil society organizations are playing a disproportionately large role vis-à-vis Beirut in providing services to Syrian refugees. A cursory glance at the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) website under the heading “Who’s doing what where?”¹³ gives a sense of the extensiveness of local CSO involvement in aiding refugees. Lebanese CSO activities encompass food security, education, community services, gender-based violence, child protection, water and sanitation, and health, among other sectors. In Lebanon, dozens of CSOs—eighty-three according to one source¹⁴—implement projects funded by UNHCR, USAID, and other aid agencies and states to provide humanitarian assistance to the impoverished refugee community. Refugees are officially prohibited from working in Lebanon.

Illiteracy and Poverty

Much like the support they provide to Syrian refugees, local CSOs also render significant assistance to impoverished and underserved Lebanese. A large part of this work is funded and implemented by organizations with a decidedly sectarian bent. Charity organizations such as the Rafiq Hariri Foundation and the Makhzoumi Foundation, for example, work primarily in Sunni areas; the Rene Mouwad Foundation provides its assistance in Maronite Christian areas; and the Hezbollah and Amal parties offer their aid to Shiites, as does the late Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah’s charity wing. To be sure, many Lebanese NGOs are more ecumenical in their approach to charity. Because charity is so closely tied to politics and constituent service, however, the tendency toward sectarian-based humanitarian assistance is likely to remain ingrained in Lebanon for some time.

Environment

Lebanon is home to dozens of registered environmental organizations. Among the less political sectors, environmental NGOs were green lighted during the years of the Syrian occupation. Today, the government of Lebanon has institutionalized cooperation with these groups. Indeed, Lebanese law stipulates that the Ministry of the Environment maintain a National Council for the Envi-

ronment, on which a CSO representative is a permanent member, to help shape national policy.¹⁵

These groups engage in advocacy and awareness raising, as well as other activities that are more typically the purview of the state, such as environmental cleanup, conservation, trail blazing and clearing, and tree planting. In August 2006, for example, in the aftermath of the war between Israel and Hezbollah, the local CSO Bahr Loubnan (Lebanese Ocean) usurped the traditional role of the central government by organizing, implementing, and paying for the cleanup of 15,000 tons of heavy fuel oil covering more than 160 kilometers of Lebanon's beaches and sea floor.¹⁶ While Beirut approved Bahr Loubnan's plan, the project was completed by nongovernmental actors.

#YouStink

Perhaps ironically, Lebanese environmental CSOs were not at the forefront of the state's biggest environmental issue in recent memory, the 2015 Garbage Crisis. That summer, after Lebanon's principle landfill in Naameh closed, thousands of tons of trash started to accumulate on the streets of Beirut and throughout Lebanon, spurring large-scale popular protests, some of which were dispersed with violence. The demonstrations were led by a small cadre of CSO actors who called themselves #YouStink, joined by a disparate group of leftist groups, such as Bidna Nuhasib, Helu Ana, Ashab Yourid, Itihad al-Shabab al-Dimokrati, and Jay al-Taghir,¹⁷ under the banner of what was called al-Hirak al-Shabi—the Popular Movement. Some sixty environmental NGOs, some of which existed only on paper, also joined the movement.¹⁸

For weeks, this nonsectarian coalition brought large crowds to Beirut to protest the inadequate government response to the crisis. The group initially unified around four demands:

1. A sustainable solution to the garbage, including the resignation of the minister of the environment
2. Decentralization of revenue streams—such as revenue from cell phone towers—to municipalities, enabling waste management to be dealt with on the local level

3. An end to the monopoly contract between the government of Lebanon and Sukleen, the private company responsible for trash disposal, an arrangement widely viewed as corrupt
4. Parliamentary elections to hold politicians accountable for the crisis (back in November 2014, MPs had voted to extend their terms by two years)

The #YouStink movement did not succeed in compelling Beirut to meet its demands, but it eventually pressured the government into taking some positive steps. While the minister of the environment wasn't fired, for example, the garbage crisis portfolio was transferred to minister of agriculture Akram Shahayib, who developed a credible action plan to solve the problem in coordination with the CSO community. Some policemen were also disciplined for shooting rubber bullets at demonstrators.

More important than the garbage crisis itself, however, was the brief optimism that surrounded the #YouStink protests. The crisis mobilized, in an unusual if not unprecedented fashion, various segments of Lebanese society focused on a substantive, nonsectarian issue. For two to three months, #YouStink brought together communists, secularists, LGBT activists, Sunnis, Shiites, Christians, and Druze to translate frustration into action. By fall 2015, though, as the movement became more diverse, its focus broadened, diluting #YouStink's concise message and undermining the cohesion of the group.

Corruption

Public corruption, both real and perceived, is an enormous problem in Lebanon. Indeed, according to Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, Lebanon ranks 123rd out of 168 states.¹⁹ It's not difficult to see why; according to the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness ratings, public institutions in the state rank 127th out of 140—worse than Pakistan.²⁰ Corruption in Lebanon generates substantial popular anger and cynicism, and not everyone is resigned to the problem. In 1999, a Lebanese chapter of Transparency International, known as La Fasad, opened its doors in Beirut.

These days, La Fasad focuses on pushing laws to provide access to information—Lebanon's version of the U.S. Freedom of Information Act—through parliament. The effort is meeting with resistance from some quarters, but, as one lawyer involved in the initiative recently asked, "If they don't want to steal, why don't they let us watch?"²¹ For a time, as part of the agreement between #YouStink and the government, the organization was allowed to attend Shahayib's subministerial meetings dealing with the implementation of the trash plan. At this writing, La Fasad is working on developing a crowd-sourced monitoring website to keep tabs on how the garbage is being handled in the governorates. In the longer term, the organization is hoping to develop a transparent governance plan for Lebanon's promising gas sector.

March 14

While Lebanese civil society organizations represent a prominent non-Islamist bloc, the leading non-Islamist actors in Lebanon today are the remnants of the March 14 parliamentary coalition. This loose alliance of the Sunni Mustaqbal party and Christian parties, including the Lebanese Forces and the Kataib as well as some smaller groups, saw its heyday from 2005 to 2008. While March 14 counts among its bloc al-Gamaa al-Islamiyah—a Sunni Islamist party considered to be the Lebanese chapter of the Muslim Brotherhood²²—the coalition supports a vague, but generally moderate, pro-West agenda that includes in its platform, at least rhetorically, the disarming of Hezbollah. Ten years after the Cedar Revolution, this coalition is a waning force in Lebanese politics, increasingly divided and ineffective. Saad Hariri, who leads Mustaqbal, the largest party in the bloc, hasn't resided in Lebanon since 2011.

Neither Islamists nor Autocrats

To be sure, Lebanon has its share of Islamists. From the Shiite side, Hezbollah for a time staked out extremely aggressive sectarian positions. In 1985, for example, the organization urged Lebanese Christians to convert—"We call upon you to embrace Islam," read its manifesto. Since 2009, however, Hezbollah has conspicuously

adopted more conciliatory language toward Christian Lebanese. Still, the organization, which maintains its political allegiance to Tehran, remains hostile to its local Sunni rivals and has actively supported the slaughter of Sunni Muslims in Syria by the latter's nominally Shiite Assad regime. In fear of Sunni militants, Lebanon's Shiites have largely embraced Hezbollah's role there.²³

As for the Sunnis, despite a long tradition of moderation in the community militant Lebanese Sunni Islamist clerics persist, which has prompted rising fears of growing domestic support for ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. In 2007, an al-Qaeda affiliate took over a Palestinian refugee camp south of Tripoli called Nahr al-Bared, killing dozens of Lebanese Armed Forces soldiers. Ultimately, the LAF had to destroy the camp to save it. Reports of interdicted Sunni Islamist terrorist plots—targeting Shiites and the central government—are now ubiquitous in the Lebanese press.

Despite the existence of Sunni and Shiite militants, the state is not at present threatened by an Islamist takeover. Yes, some are concerned that Hezbollah's military preeminence in Lebanon could tempt the militia into a repeat performance of its 2008 invasion of Beirut. And fears endure that ISIS terrorist attacks will provoke a sectarian civil war. Fortunately, while many Shiites sympathize with Hezbollah and some Lebanese support Sunni Islamists fighting the Assad regime, the vast majority appear to reject religious extremism and embrace "democracy," such as it is in Lebanon.

The civil war in Syria is contributing to growing sectarianism in the region to which Lebanon is not immune—a situation only being exacerbated by the longstanding proxy war in Lebanon, joined by Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran.²⁴ The continued presence of the region's second largest Christian community and a relatively moderate Sunni population, however, serves for now as a firewall against a Hezbollah takeover of the state. Notwithstanding Lebanon's robust civil society, this dynamic promises continued political stagnation in the state.

Lebanon's healthy, secular, civil society is active both in providing services and policy advocacy and in promoting democratic values in the state, including calling for profound changes in the electoral law. While the CSOs are enthusiastic, however, local political elites and

vested sectarian interests have, until now, stymied hopes for systemic changes in the Lebanon's political system and will likely continue to do so.

Unlike the George W. Bush Administration, which openly supported the March 14 coalition vis-à-vis the Hezbollah-led March 8 bloc following the 2005 assassination of Premier Rafiq Hariri, the Obama Administration has, in recent years, taken a hands-off approach to internal Lebanese politics. In part, Washington's distancing is related to fissures within March 14 that have diluted the coalition's local impact, but the shift may have also been influenced by the administration's outreach to Iran with respect to the 2015 nuclear agreement.

Regardless of the reasons, the ongoing war in Syria all but assures the United States will continue to eschew bold policy initiatives in Lebanon. Indeed, the sole rem-

nant of Washington's once forceful Lebanon policy is the provision of \$80 million per year to the Lebanese Armed Forces and internal security agencies, some limited US-AID humanitarian assistance work, and refugee support. While the United States continues to target Hezbollah financing, it is no longer taking steps to try to undermine the militia's ground game in Lebanon. Indeed, in 2015, the State Department cut its only program to cultivate "independent moderate" Shiites in the country.²⁵

For now, at least, Washington's focus is on security. Given the regional deterioration since 2011, maintaining the status quo of neither Islamists nor autocrats in Lebanon, while not an ambitious strategy, would seem prudent. Should the Assad regime emerge from the war intact, however, Hezbollah will be emboldened, and Washington will have to revise this tentative approach.

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IRAQ'S IMPERILED DEMOCRACY

■ NATHANIEL RABKIN

THE REPUBLIC OF IRAQ is the largest democratically governed country in the Arab world,¹ yet Iraq's democracy is a troubled one, and its survival continues to hang in the balance. Iraqis' commitment to democratic ideals remains strong, but confidence in the current political system is weak. Without urgent and drastic action, both by Iraq and its friends, the country's political system is unlikely to remain democratic beyond 2020. The United States is seen in Iraq and in the wider region as the midwife of Iraq's flawed democracy. Regardless of how America evaluates its past decisions with regard to Iraq, its regional prestige depends in no small part on the future of the Iraqi democratic political system it helped create.

The challenges faced by non-Islamist and democratically and pluralistically inclined actors in Iraq are very different from those in other Arab countries. Indeed, the "Islamists or autocrats" dilemma is felt less acutely in Iraq, where power is divided among numerous parties, most of them at least nominally Islamist or religiously oriented but all of which are committed, at least nominally, to continued free elections and the right of non-Islamists to participate in the political process. Finding

avowed advocates of democracy in Iraq is an easy task. The challenge is to identify which of those advocates are sincere, and then to identify what kind of support they need to fix the country's flawed political system.

Democracy by Consensus

The democratic order created by Iraq's 2005 constitution survives largely thanks to a vibrant multiparty system and a culture of inclusive politics. Every Iraqi cabinet since the country's first post-Baath elections has included Sunni, Shiite, and Kurdish ministers, not just as tokens but as actual representatives chosen by each of these communities' elected members of parliament. There is also competition within each community: each of Iraq's three main ethnosectarian components contains a multiplicity of political actors.

Eschewing winner-take-all competition, Iraq's political system currently seeks to distribute power among the political representatives of each ethnosectarian component in a way that ensures a continued broad base of support for the post-2003 political order, so as to protect the republic from violent challenges by Sunni

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and Shiite militants while also containing demands for Kurdish separatism. Cross-sectarian political alliances are common, although these generally take the form of tactical deals on issues of shared interest. Only a handful of mostly marginal parties have true cross-sectarian appeal.

In Iraq, as in Lebanon, deep sectarian divisions coexist with a shared sense of patriotism and a belief, at least in principle, in cross-sectarian cooperation for the common good. But on the whole, Iraq's system of sectarian power sharing is less intricate than Lebanon's, and this is probably a blessing. Since 2005, every Iraqi prime minister has been a Shiite, while the parliament speaker has invariably been a Sunni and the president, largely a ceremonial position, has been a Kurd. Beyond this, few hard-and-fast rules determine allocation of positions, and there are no formal quotas or reserved seats for Shiites, Sunnis, or Kurds, whether in parliament or on the provincial councils—although such quotas do exist for some of the religious minorities: Christians, Yazidis, Shabak, and Mandaeans.

Iraq's electoral process on the whole remains free and competitive, despite being marred by occasional local abuses, mostly voter suppression in a few of the most war-stricken areas. Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission, which contains representatives from multiple parties, has managed to remain impartial even in hotly contested races.² A decentralized system of local government, with elected provincial councils and governors, has helped prevent any one party from dominating national politics, and has also helped spread the political culture of democracy down to the grassroots level, even in remote and underdeveloped areas. At both the national and provincial levels, intensely competitive elections are generally followed by the formation of broad coalitions, in which the losing faction is given significant power-sharing concessions that maintain the broad, cross-communal consensus needed to fight off the violent enemies of the post-Baath political order.

The downside of Iraq's system of democracy by consensus is the entrenchment of corrupt political patronage networks within every agency of government. Political parties compete more over control of executive positions

than over the legislative agenda. Civil service appointments, and often even government contracts, are treated as spoils to be divided among the parties and given out as rewards to activists and supporters. Iraq's public sector, which employs 2.9 million of the country's roughly 30 million citizens, is like a series of overlapping fiefdoms of the various political parties. Partisan disputes prevent government agencies from disentangling overlapping areas of authority and impede efforts to prevent or punish corruption. Furthermore, such efforts are inevitably seen as targeting whichever party the accused are affiliated with.

The dysfunction of Iraq's political competition is exacerbated by weak rule of law and chaotic violence. Alongside the struggle against Islamic State militants, Iraq has been dealing for years with more widespread kinds of low-level political violence: intimidation of journalists and political opponents, mobs ransacking political party offices, and assassinations targeting even the most minor local political activists and government officials. These challenges resemble those faced by other struggling democracies around the world, from Ukraine to Nigeria, but their manifestations in Iraq are especially severe.

Sectarianism and Misrule

The inherent weaknesses of Iraq's political system were further exacerbated by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's approach to politics during his second term in 2010–2014. Maliki centralized power in his own office, in particular stymying parliamentary oversight of the security services and subverting the military chain of command. During this period, corrupt security forces officers, many of whom had attained their commands through bribery, made it a standard practice to arrest Sunni citizens on baseless terrorism charges in order to extort money from their families for their release.³

Maliki arguably exploited the sectarian divide for partisan purposes, making selective use of counterterrorism laws to intimidate Sunni political opponents and stoke the paranoia of some Shiites, who saw neo-Baathist plots behind every Sunni attempt at political organization. The result of all this was a Sunni protest movement

that began in January 2013 and escalated through Maliki's mishandling and deliberate political exploitation until Fallujah fell to insurgent forces that December. This set the stage for the Islamic State (IS) to escalate its mafia-style campaign of intimidation against government officials and security services in Sunni areas, culminating in the collapse of security forces in Mosul and much of central Iraq in June 2014.⁴ That, in the midst of this descent, Maliki came as close he did to winning a third term in office after the April 2014 elections attests to the weakness and fragility of Iraqi democracy—especially in the face of sectarian polarization

Reforming the political environment is not a second priority to defeating IS: it is a necessary step to restoring state control in those Sunni areas still held by the group and to preventing the reemergence of similar groups in the future. The connection between reform and defeating IS is accepted by Iraqi leaders: Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi often associates corruption with terrorism in his speeches, sometimes going so far as to describe them as two fronts in a single war for Iraq's future.⁵

The Protest Movement, Muqtada al-Sadr, and the Present Crisis

Iraq's political system is facing a serious crisis in public confidence, which may worsen during the summer, traditionally Iraq's season of political protests. In July 2015, demonstrations over electric blackouts in Basra escalated into a wave of nationwide protests against government corruption. Abadi responded by promising a major reform initiative, including a downsizing of the cabinet, the end of partisan and sectarian quotas in senior government posts, and a major new anticorruption drive.⁶ Although at first well received by most parties and the media, Abadi's reform package quickly stalled, as his rivals began blocking his agenda and accusing him of consolidating power in his own hands under the pretext of reform. By early fall, disheartened pro-reform demonstrators had taken to chanting "Where is your promise, Abadi?"⁷

In March 2016, Abadi's effort to restore the momentum of his reform agenda by appointing a new nonpar-

tisan cabinet of expert professionals ("technocrats," in Iraqi parlance) failed to win support from the political parties and was therefore not brought to a parliamentary vote. An effort to revise the plan only worsened matters. Some of Abadi's erstwhile allies, notably the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq and the Kurdish parliamentary bloc, argued that the parties should have greater say in forming the new cabinet. Other parties, including the Sadrists, Ayad Allawi's al-Wataniya bloc, and followers of former prime minister Maliki, insisted Abadi not back down, although this was more cynical grandstanding than a genuine effort to advance Abadi's agenda. Meanwhile, followers of Muqtada al-Sadr began sit-in demonstrations outside the Green Zone, where parliament and the prime minister's office are located.

An April 13 session of parliament descended into fisticuffs, putting the legislative process in danger of a real breakdown. The following day, the Sadrist-Maliki-Allawi gathering held an emergency session to elect a new parliament speaker, a move whose legality was questionable at best. For a few days, Iraq faced the specter of a parliament split into two rival chambers with competing legal claims. An April 26 session confirmed five new cabinet members proposed by Abadi, but when an April 30 session failed to assemble a quorum, Sadr ordered his followers to break through the Green Zone's perimeter, which they proceeded to do, briefly occupying the parliament building and sending parliamentarians fleeing, some under a barrage of insults and projectiles.

The Sadrist protestors' assault on the parliament building shows that political dysfunction is a dire and imminent threat to Iraqi democracy. But the system still appears more likely than not to survive the present crisis. Neither Sadr nor any other leader has the popular support or organizational capability to install a new government through extralegal means, and all major parties would like to avoid a prolonged deadlock, which would undermine the state apparatus on which their patronage networks depend, and might even risk sapping the morale of the armed forces arrayed against the Islamic State.

Yet the risk to Iraqi democracy will not disappear even if the present parliamentary crisis is resolved. For now, Iraqis' commitment to democracy remains strong,

both at the popular level and among political elites. But this commitment will wane if the democratic system remains so plagued by corruption and infighting that it cannot deliver security, stability, and development for the Iraqi people.

Islamists and Secularists in Politics

As already suggested, Iraq's multiparty system makes its politics more complex than a contest between autocrats and Islamists. The governing coalition, broadly defined, is made up of a wide array of parties, most of which proclaim some sort of religious agenda but are very different from the revolutionary Islamist movements seen in other Arab countries.

Even on a religious level, Iraq is suited to a very different kind of Islamic politics than that seen in Egypt or Tunisia. For the Shiite majority, democracy has become something bordering on a religious commitment. Iraq's leading Shiite cleric, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, has been a relentless advocate of democratic elections since 2003, and his position is supported by other leading Najaf ayatollahs as well. Religious politicians may have ideas for how to make Iraq's government better adhere to their values, but, unlike Islamists elsewhere, they generally do not envision replacing existing state structures with new, ostensibly sharia-based authoritarian ones.

For most of the past decade, the largest of the Shiite political blocs, built around the Islamic Dawa Party, has called itself the State of Law Coalition, a name meant to downplay its Islamist origins. Even Iraq's more radical Shiite religious politicians generally support the democratic constitutional order, at least in principle. Muqtada al-Sadr, long famous for his militant anti-American rhetoric and cultlike following, told an interviewer in 2013 that "we need to make ourselves protectors of the democratic path," adding, "I want not so much to Islamize the civic advocates, but rather to teach civic politics to the Islamist current."⁸

Iraq's unique form of political Islam is in some ways a product of its recent history. To start with, the bitter experience of Saddam Hussein's rule has imparted Iraqis with a strong aversion to authoritarianism or one-party rule,

and on top of this, the competition among Shiite Islamist parties since 2003 has been so intense as to preclude any one of them from dominating the state. At the same time, the experience of participating in government since 2003 has taught the Shiite Islamists that seizing the levers of power is not sufficient to achieve their vision for Iraqi society, and that rebuilding a new Iraq is a slow, tedious process in which functioning institutions, not revolutionary slogans, are the key building blocks.

Religious Sunni politicians in Iraq are also very different from those in other Arab countries. The Iraqi Islamic Party, the largest Sunni Arab Islamist party, takes its inspiration from the Muslim Brotherhood but is not subordinate to the group's Egyptian-led global leadership. In the years following the 2003 U.S.-led invasion, the Iraqi Islamic Party took advantage of every opportunity to participate in the political process, ignoring the militantly pro-insurgent and anti-American stance of the global Muslim Brotherhood movement. The Iraqi party's general secretary, Mohsen Abdel Hamid, explained its perspective in a September 2003 interview with Al Jazeera, saying he had found the U.S. officials then running Iraq open to dialogue and disagreement, in contrast to Saddam Hussein's regime, which acknowledged only two categories of interlocutors: propagandists or opponents.⁹

None of this is to say Iraq is safe from the threat posed by Islamist radicalism. Genuinely dangerous Islamist groups are operating in the country, seeking to undermine its democratic freedoms and tolerant social fabric. To provide but one example, the Islamic Fadhila Party, a Shiite group, has used its control of the Ministry of Justice to give Shiite custodians control of formerly Sunni mosques,¹⁰ and has alarmed Christian and other minority communities by advancing a family-status law that orders minor children registered as Muslims if either of their parents converts to Islam.¹¹ But it is important to remember that Islamism in Iraq is very different from the phenomenon in other Arab countries, and that not every party or organization with a religious name is a radical, antidemocratic, or anti-Western group seeking to dominate state and society.

Islamist groups are the most powerful actors in Iraqi politics, but they are not alone on the scene. Former prime minister Allawi, as noted, leads the al-Wataniya bloc, a loose coalition of mostly Sunni politicians and

a few Shiite opponents of the ruling coalition. In 2010, Allawi's coalition, running then under the name Iraqiyah, won the largest number of seats in parliament (91 out of 325) but was ultimately outmaneuvered in coalition negotiations, enabling Maliki to win a second term in office. Since then, Allawi's influence has declined greatly, and he is no longer a serious contender for prime minister. Since 2010, his coalition has shed many of its key members, such as Salih al-Mutlaq, whose Iraqi Front for National Dialogue shares Allawi's secular nationalist ideology but now functions as a separate parliamentary bloc. Due to fragmentation in the country's Sunni politics, Allawi's parliamentary faction was reduced by April 2015 to just 21 seats out of 328, and Mutlaq's to just 11 seats.¹²

Another key secular faction in parliament is the Mutahidun Coalition, led by brothers Usama and Atheel al-Nujaifi. Originally from Mosul, the Nujafis began their political careers as secular Iraqi nationalists allied with Allawi but now advocate for the creation of autonomous, self-governing regions for the Sunni-majority areas of Iraq, modeled loosely on the Kurdistan Regional Government. The Nujafis remain secular in their outlook, but their rhetoric of Sunni victimhood and autonomy is perhaps more sectarian and divisive than that of the Iraqi Islamic Party. The Nujafis are eager to build strong ties with the United States—they maintain paid lobbyists in Washington—but their political vision is now limited to achieving Sunni autonomy rather than broader reforms of the Iraqi system. Their Sunni autonomy plan is unlikely to succeed, although more modest plans to increase the powers of provincial governments in Sunni areas might fare better. The Mutahidun holds ten seats in parliament¹³ but enjoys an outside influence due to the Nujaifi brothers' strong political relationships inside and outside Iraq.

Reform Advocates and Protest Organizers

In recent years, many Iraqis who seek an alternative to the religious parties have switched their hopes from older politicians like Allawi to a fresh generation of liberal activists, seemingly younger and disproportionately

Shiite, who seek a new, cross-sectarian politics. These activists tend to describe their approach as civil (*mada-ni*) rather than secular (*ilmani*) to emphasize that they are not hostile to religion but seek a political culture focused on individual rights, not on religious identity or sectarian power sharing. In parliament, this trend is represented by the Civil Democratic Alliance, which despite its tiny size (five seats)¹⁴ has an outside presence in parliamentary debates and the media, thanks in part to its outspoken MPs, including Shuruq al-Abayachi, Mithal al-Alusi, and Faiq Sheikh Ali.

Outside parliament, reform-minded civic activists have been organizing demonstrations for years, but these campaigns have only recently begun to produce results. Waves of popular demonstrations against corruption in 2011 and 2013 drew repeated promises of reforms but little else. The corruption, economic stagnation, and inadequate public utilities that first aroused these protests have yet to be adequately addressed, resulting over time in escalating dissatisfaction and cynicism among the protestors. The new round of demonstrations in July 2015 featured bolder demands than before, including a complete end to partisan and sectarian hiring quotas. The slogan "They robbed us in the name of religion" used by some demonstrators seemed to target the role of Shiite Islamist parties in general, rather than the specifics of their policies, suggesting a new turn in Iraqi politics. But as the weather cooled and electricity supply improved, the demonstrations also lost steam, and the lack of a strong national leadership prevented their consolidation into an effective political movement.

Despite resemblances between Iraq's summer 2015 protests, with their youth-filled crowds demanding change, and the demonstrations in other Arab countries since 2011, the Iraqi protest movement had different origins and has taken a very different course. To begin with, its leaders and spokesmen tend not to be youths or full-time political activists but rather academics and journalists, like Kadhim al-Sahlani, who teaches Japanese history at the University of Basra, or Ahmad Abdul Hussein, a journalist and poet.¹⁵ And protest slogans have focused on demands for reform, such as the end to partisan quotas in government and tougher

anticorruption measures. Recognizing that Iraq's democratic system distinguishes it from the regimes overthrown in the Arab Spring, the Iraqi protests generally lacked calls to oust the existing political order. Sahlani, for example, spoke in a television interview of the need to keep pressure on politicians for reform—a very different kind of goal from that expressed by protesters in authoritarian countries like Assad's Syria or Ben Ali's Tunisia.¹⁶

Authorities allowed the peaceful protests to go forward under heavy protection from security forces. But a number of prominent activists have been kidnapped or murdered, with the crimes still unsolved—as, it should be noted, is the case with most such crimes in Iraq. The most prominent activist to suffer this fate, although certainly not the only one, is Jalal Shahmani, who was kidnapped from a restaurant in Baghdad's Waziriya neighborhood in September 2015 by gunmen in a three-vehicle convoy.¹⁷

Reports have also emerged of attacks on protestors by plainclothes thugs, generally assumed to be affiliated with some of the establishment Shiite Islamist parties,¹⁸ but these do not seem to have been very common and did not end the protest movement. Rather, alongside the cooler weather, the protests lost momentum as politicians began to co-opt popular demands: Abadi, by adopting the call for reform as his own, and al-Sadr, who sent his followers to join the protestors in the fall.¹⁹ The original "civic activists" who first organized the protests were left divided among those willing to give Abadi time, advocates of continued demonstrations in alliance with al-Sadr, and proponents of creating a new political party based on the protests—the last option being especially unpromising given the institutional strength of the existing parties on the one hand, and the public's distaste for party politics on the other.²⁰

In the absence of a strong NGO sector or other independent civil society institutions in Iraq—most institutions describing themselves as such are actually party affiliated—and with a media landscape largely dominated by party-linked outlets, anticorruption demonstrations serve as the primary testing ground for new political ideas. Protest organizers are unlikely to coalesce into an electoral force, but many of their de-

mands, from the idea of a nonpartisan cabinet to demands that provincial governments receive a share of oil revenues, have found their way into national political discourse. To be sure, these activists are unlikely to sweep away the existing order. But they can be valuable in helping develop and reform Iraq's political system—as long as they can maintain both a steady flow of constructive proposals and the popular momentum behind their demonstrations among a public increasingly cynical about the political process.

The Militia Threat

For Iraq's friends, helping the country preserve its democratic system of government means supporting it against two threats. The first is the imminent threat posed by lawless militias and warlordism over the next five years. The second, longer-term threat is that Iraq's political system could remain so dysfunctional as to invite a return to dictatorship, erasing all the gains made by the Iraqi people since 2003.

The militia threat is the more severe. Creative and determined action will be needed to defeat it. This threat was largely brought into being by Prime Minister Maliki's decision, in the final months of his second term, to authorize militia groups to join the army and police in the fight against the Islamic State. These groups, now organized as the Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs), receive salaries and weapons from the Iraqi state but are organized by nonstate actors: mostly political parties but, in some cases, tribal or religious leaders. Contrary to perceptions in some Western circles, not all PMU factions are aligned with Iran.²¹ But several of the largest and most powerful factions are Iran-backed groups with a history of militant violence against U.S. and coalition forces, Sunni and Kurdish civilians, and even Shiite political opponents.

The PMUs are popular among Iraqi Shiites, many of whom see its fighters as patriotic volunteers who helped block IS's advance as army units were collapsing in June 2014. But several of the PMUs' more powerful faction leaders have an open disdain for the democratic state structures and claim for themselves an extralegal power to

fight real or perceived enemies of Iraq or of Shiite interests abroad. For example, Ali al-Yasiri, spokesman for Saraya Talia al-Khurasani, describes his group as an “ideological army” formed in response to the call by Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to fight in Syria, which it continues to do under Iranian direction—the group’s military leader, Hamid al-Jazayeri, describes Khamenei as the “commander” of all Muslims.²² Abu Ala al-Hashemi, the leader of the powerful Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada faction, also says his group was originally formed to fight in Syria on Khamenei’s orders and that “the world is divided into two camps, with no middle ground: the camp of Yezid [a seventh century Sunni caliph reviled by Shiites], represented today by the West, Israel, al-Qaeda, the Baathists, and ISIS. The other camp is Imam Hussein’s.”²³

Several PMU faction leaders take Iran as their model for Iraq’s political development: a weak and corrupt state, shepherded by religious leaders and networks of vigilante zealots who amass power and wealth in a never-ending campaign to protect Shiite society from imagined threats of Western economic domination or cultural subversion. The most radical leaders, who fought or claim to have fought the United States as insurgents, still see Iraq’s elected government as somehow foreign controlled. Qais al-Khazali of Asaib Ahl al-Haqq is the most prominent such PMU leader. He has made open threats to attack U.S., Turkish, and Saudi targets in Iraq, accused Iraq’s defense minister of “conspiring” against the country, and implicitly threatened to bring down the Iraqi government by force if it stands in his way.²⁴

A whole crop of younger PMU figures, some of whom lack Khazali’s pedigree as an insurgent, have adopted his rhetoric instrumentally, invoking the government’s supposed illegitimacy at every turn to justify their lawless behavior. After several members of Saraya al-Khurasani were killed in an April 2015 gunfight with local police in Balad, in southern Salah al-Din province, the group’s spokesman, Yasiri, gave a rambling press conference, complaining of “ISIS inside the government,” and spoke ominously of the need to “wipe out ISIS from inside the Iraqi population.”²⁵

Facing the Militia Threat

Reining in the PMUs’ radical factions is an urgent challenge for Iraqi democracy, but it is not an easy one. Some politicians within Prime Minister Abadi’s governing coalition support the radicals’ program, while others are allied with them temporarily out of tactical considerations. The PMUs’ formidable political and military power means they are unlikely to be disarmed or fully subordinated to state authority this year or next, and any such proposal would likely produce a violent backlash. But Iraqi state authorities, and even the leaders of several of the more moderate PMU factions, are well aware that Iraq must ultimately rein in the radical militants: Muqtada al-Sadr has been very explicit on this point, while the Badr Organization’s Hadi al-Ameri and his subordinate, Interior Minister Mohammed Salem al-Ghabban, also recognize the problem, even if they discuss it in comparatively guarded terms.²⁶

The United States can best support the Iraqi government in dealing with the PMUs by providing assistance and support at a pace dictated by Iraqi authorities themselves. Public condemnations of the PMUs or other direct measures will only inflame the situation and play into the radicals’ anti-American rhetoric. The wiser path is to provide aid and support to Iraq’s internal security forces and its law enforcement apparatus, to create a more stable security environment in which lawless militias find it more difficult to operate.

To reduce the militias’ role, the United States should be looking for ways to strengthen the ability of formal state security forces to maintain order. Iraq is already trying to go in this direction, as seen in initiatives introduced over the past two years, including the National Identification Card, which replaces earlier, easily forged identification documents such as the *jinsiya*, and the Baghdad Hawk program, which has enlisted outside contractors to create an electronic database of vehicles registered in Baghdad for the security forces’ use. Iraqi leaders know they must modernize their approach to internal security and are open to receiving assistance from other countries to implement this vision.

Upgrading Iraq’s security architecture is not as simple

as funding new technology. Basic security tools and techniques such as security cameras, intelligence databases, and proper tracking of badges and credentials have yet to see effective widespread implementation in Iraq, due to the inertia of old, pre-electronic systems as well as to logistical challenges like electric blackouts. Even if these obstacles are overcome, militia groups may try to block any measure that makes it harder for them to move and carry out armed activities undetected, especially if they perceive such measures as being U.S.-directed. Careful coordination with Iraqi authorities will be needed, guided by a keen sense of local political dynamics. In most cases, the less publicity this kind of U.S. security assistance to Iraq receives, the better. U.S. policymakers should also keep in mind that some assistance may be most effectively provided by other members of the anti-Islamic State coalition.

The goal of U.S. security aid should not be to target or undermine the PMUs as an institution. The Iraqi government will have to make its own decisions in time about how it wants the PMUs to be structured and eventually integrated into the state. U.S. policy should aim at helping position Iraq's elected government to make this decision for itself, without fear of militia violence. Framed in this manner, aid from the United States and its allies will likely be welcomed by mainstream Iraqi leaders from all major ethnosectarian groups. Even those who are suspicious of U.S. motives and see a broad future role for the PMUs recognize that the security forces must be empowered to meet the challenge of nonstate armed actors, or else Iraq will face dissolution into anarchy reminiscent of failed states like Somalia or Yemen.

The militia threat may seem less urgent than dealing with IS, but it poses the greater potential menace to Iraq's survival as a democracy. If the United States sees Iraqi democracy as worth supporting, then the militia threat must be addressed. Compared to military aid for the anti-IS fight, the struggle against militia violence requires a more cautious and flexible approach, at both the political and technical levels. Therefore, the effort to help Iraq rein in militias deserves careful attention from the U.S. government, alongside the more public efforts to defeat IS.

Broader Engagement to Support Democracy in Iraq

The longer-term challenges facing Iraqi democracy will require a similarly nuanced approach. U.S. policymakers should adopt a sober and realistic attitude to political engagement with Iraq, recognizing that the United States cannot and should not dictate solutions to Iraq's domestic political problems. The U.S. government is still an important partner for Iraq, but it can no longer play the midwifing role to the country's democratic institutions that it did in the 2003–2011 period. Many Iraqis remain suspicious of U.S. motives, partly because of past experiences and partly because of newer suspicions fed by anti-American propaganda, such as absurd allegations that the United States secretly supports the Islamic State. Outside the Kurdistan Region, a reputation for close relations with Washington can be more of a burden than an asset for Iraqi politicians.

The U.S. political engagement strategy for Iraq should channel resources into nonpartisan channels, providing support to the democratic process itself rather than for specific political actors. Many of Iraq's biggest political problems, such as the issue of sectarian quotas in government or the question of Sunni autonomy, are not amenable to solutions offered by the U.S. government. But Washington can be constructive in helping Iraq deal with some of its other challenges: the struggle against corruption, the need for better education of both politicians and the public about democratic processes, and greater professionalization of institutions in a democratic society, from the courts to the media.

The U.S. government is already actively working on these issues, most prominently through USAID's extensive training and professional development programs which have reached civil servants in 15 provinces of Iraq. These kinds of efforts can be expanded, especially to provide more opportunities for Iraqi participants to travel to the United States and see the American democratic process first hand.

Given the limits of U.S. government capabilities, and the existing political sensitivities between the United States and Iraq, it may prove more fruitful for America to help Iraq build ties with other U.S. allies and with the

nongovernmental sector. European and Arab states interested in participating in the fight against IS, but unwilling to commit ground troops, could still help Iraq overcome its challenges by hosting training courses and conferences for Iraqis or, better yet, by promoting people-to-people diplomacy with Iraqi cultural, educational, and media institutions. These kinds of ties will certainly not be decisive in saving Iraq, but they can give hope to Iraqi advocates of democracy and plant the seeds for future reform efforts.

It is important that these opportunities be offered to Iraqis from as wide a range of ethnic, sectarian, and political backgrounds as possible to avoid giving the false impression that the United States or its allies are vying to put some particular group into power. Secularists and non-Shiites are especially vulnerable to such accusations, and the participation of individuals affiliated with some of the Shiite Islamist parties in these programs can help dispel such claims.

Lessons for the Region

Iraq was the first Arab country in the twenty-first century to experience the overthrow of an authoritarian regime—albeit by an outside invasion rather than through revolution. Iraq’s experience was uniquely shaped by the Baath Party’s legacy, by the U.S. invasion’s empowerment of the exiled opposition parties, by the country’s ethnosectarian diversity, and by the experience of war and insurgency. Other Arab countries will, of course, follow different paths, but they can still draw lessons from both Iraq’s successes and its failures in its democratic experiment.

One key lesson from Iraq is that a strong multiparty system, in which actors accept each other as legitimate representatives of their respective constituents, can help preserve democratic politics even when rule of law is weak. A second lesson is that devolving power to elected provincial or local governments can help spread the culture of democratic politics, as well as providing an avenue for power sharing among competing political groups.

In examining the many setbacks Iraqi democracy has encountered, a common thread through most of them is

this: economic underdevelopment and political underdevelopment go hand in hand. Iraq’s cutthroat system of competing patronage networks and militia violence is in part the product of an underdeveloped financial sector, and a cash economy that is extremely vulnerable to corruption and organized crime. Politicians, for example, protected their patronage networks by delaying even straightforward measures such as the digitization of payroll rosters, which could have rescued government institutions from the massive corruption that left military units vulnerable to collapse against the Islamic State. For Iraq and other regional countries, the struggle to implement democracy necessitates a simultaneous effort to win support from political stakeholders for the economic reforms needed to bring stability and prosperity.

Conclusion

Iraq’s political system is unique in the Arab world. The sharp competition among powerful religious parties—especially within the Shiite community—means that Islamists, at least in the term’s broad sense, hold power without implementing authoritarian rule and without shutting non-Islamist actors out of the political arena. But the power sharing among Iraq’s Islamists operates through dysfunctional arrangements that fail to meet the Iraqi people’s basic aspirations for security, development, and economic growth. Many of Iraq’s Islamist politicians have come to recognize that reforming this system in a more liberal direction is an urgent task and that, if they fail, the alternatives of authoritarianism or anarchy would prompt a substantial decline in their own power, not to mention the damage to Iraq’s future.

At present, a return to dictatorship in Iraq seems unthinkable, given the state’s weakness and the Islamists’ internal divisions. At the same time, the state’s all-dominating economic power, via oil revenues, militates against an imminent collapse into anarchy. Thus, while neither dictatorship nor state collapse can be ruled out, for now the post-2003 political order endures, and has good odds of continuing to do so even if substantial reforms are implemented.

The most dangerous alternative to democracy in Iraq

is an Iranian style of government consisting of competing, nominally Islamist cliques—the rule of thieves and bullies in the guise of theocracy. The Iraqi version of this system, run by militiamen rather than clerics and without an overarching Supreme Leader, would be even more lawless and violent than the Iranian original and would leave Iraq poorer and more internationally isolated than at any time since 2003.

The advocates of militia rule in Iraq are well armed and determined, and they of course benefit from Iran's political and economic support. But the militias' own competition and infighting undermine their efforts. And they face a formidable opposition in the many Iraqis, both Islamists and liberals, who understand that only democratic politics and the rule of law can secure Iraq's long-term security and prosperity.

Notes

1. Iraq is not an entirely Arab country, but the politics of its autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government are so independent of those of the rest of the country as to necessitate a separate analysis, which is beyond the scope of this report.
2. Harith al-Qarawee, "Iraqi Election Commission in Spotlight," *Al-Monitor*, February 12, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/02/iraq-elections-commission-challenge-transparency.html>.
3. Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, "Corruption in Iraq: 'Your Son Is Being Tortured. He Will Die if You Don't Pay,'" *Guardian*, January 15, 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jan/16/corruption-iraq-son-tortured-pay>. Over the course of 2012–2013, arrest-for-extortion became an increasingly open secret in Iraqi security circles, to the point that parliament member Izzat al-Shabandar, himself a longtime member of Maliki's party and a fellow Shiite, explained the situation thus: "Whenever there are more bombings...the next day, they make arrests, they say, sir, we've arrested 200 terrorists. I swear, of those 200, there will be maybe ten [terrorists], and the other 190, what becomes of them? They become enemies, because to prove their innocence takes months, and they won't be released unless they pay five or ten thousand dollars each. We should tell the truth. I used to hear these kinds of things, but now I've seen it for myself, how widespread this corruption is." See "Interview with Izzat al-Shabandar," *Hadith Al Watan*, Alsumaria TV, December 12, 2013, <http://www.alsumaria.tv/videos-on-Demand?title=hadis-al-watan-mr-izzat-shah-bandar-episode-11&ID=4954>.
4. For a detailed account of the Sunni protest movement, Maliki's response, and the descent into violence, see Kirk H. Sowell, "Iraq's Second Sunni Insurgency," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* (Hudson Institute, August 9, 2014), <http://www.hudson.org/research/10505-iraq-s-second-sunni-insurgency>.
5. See, for example, Abadi's June 27, 2015, speech at a celebration marking 146 years of Iraqi journalism, covered by Al Jazeera, among others: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jZhr1mkowYo>.
6. Iraqi Prime Minister's Office, "Text of the First Reform Package Submitted by the Prime Minister, Dr. Hayder al-Abadi, in the Extraordinary Cabinet Session Held August 9, 2015," August 9, 2015, <http://pmo.iq/press2015/9-8-201503.htm>.
7. See, for example, video from protests in Baghdad, September 18, 2015, YouTube video, 0:33, September 21, 2015, posted by "Nashir al-Thawra," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Whddu1lJkg>.
8. Interview with Muqtada al-Sadr in *al-Mada*, published in two parts, March 25 and April 1, 2013: <http://www.almadapaper.net/ar/newsdetails.aspx?newsid=260978> and <http://washin.st/1qyEqUj>.
9. *Liqa al-Youm* [Today's meeting], Al Jazeera, September 12, 2003, transcript, <http://washin.st/1U4LkZ5>.
10. "Cold War between Sunni and Shiite Waqfs over 'Usurpation' of Real Estate," *Kirkuk Now*, April 30, 2012, <http://kirkuknow.com/arabic/?p=12117>.
11. "Christians and Yazidis Boycott Parliamentary Conference on Coexistence: No Benefit in Slogans without Action," *al-Mada*, February 9, 2016, <http://washin.st/255E8E1>.
12. *The Guide to Iraqi Politics*, 2nd ed. (Utica Risk Services, April 25, 2015), p. 30.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
15. During the summer 2015 protests, Ahmad Abdul Hussein used his Facebook account, with some 15,000 followers, to help organize demonstrations in Baghdad, as in this post from July 26, 2015: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1182781948415478&set=a.203881282972221.60714.100000510515631&type=1>.

16. For Kadhim al-Sahlanī's explanation of the summer 2015 protests' goals and methods, see his Al Jazeera interview on *Ma Wara al-Khabar* [Behind the news], YouTube video, 26:28, posted by "Kadhim Hailan," August 30, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=81pRCvVzIJA>.
17. "Amaliyat Baghdad: al-Baḥth Jarin An al-Nashit Jalal al-Shahmani" [Baghdad operations command: search continues for activist Jalal al-Shahmani], *al-Bayan*, September 28, 2015, <http://www.albayan.ae/one-world/arabs/2015-09-28-1.2468454>.
18. Aktham Sayf al-Din, "Al-Milishiyat Tafidhdh Tadhahurat Baghdad, wa-l-Abadi Yuhadhdhir Min Tasyisiha" [Militias disperse Baghdad protests as Abadi warns against their politicization], *al-Arabi al-Jadid*, August 14, 2015, <http://washin.st/1Tor4SC>.
19. Sara al-Qahir, "Nushata Baghdad: Nataij Liqa al-Sadr Tadhhar al-Jumah Fi Sahat al-Tahrir" [Baghdad activists: results of meeting with al-Sadr will become clear next Friday in Tahrir Square], *al-Alem*, October 26, 2015, <http://www.alaalem.com/index.php?aa=news&id22=33178>.
20. Perhaps the most prominent advocate of creating a new party to advance the protest movement's aims is Najaf's Ali al-Dhabhawi, who announced the inception of his "Opposition Youth Current" at a tiny gathering, videotaped and posted to Dhabhawi's Facebook page on January 2, 2016: <https://www.facebook.com/571955909576977/videos/756561097783123/>.
21. For a discussion of PMU integration with the Iraqi military, with a focus on the al-Abbas Combat Division, which is sponsored by the administrators of Iraq's Shiite shrines, see Michael Knights, *The Future of Iraq's Armed Forces* (Baghdad: Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, 2016), pp. 29–33.
22. Interviews with Ali al-Yasiri and Hamid al-Jazayeri on *Banadiq al-Dhil* [Shadow rifles], Dijlah TV, February 22, 2015: YouTube video, 31:08, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2rUV6cODvfM>.
23. Interview with Abu Ala al-Hashemi on *Banadiq al-Dhil* [Shadow rifles], Dijlah TV, April 25, 2015: YouTube video, 27:57, posted by "mohannad mph," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OfibLPkXj4>.
24. Interview with Qays Al Khizaali on *Ghayr Mutawaqqa* [Unexpected], Alsumaria TV, January 7, 2016, <http://www.alsumaria.tv/program/485/alsumaria-programs/9578/Episodes/ghayr-moutawaqaa-sheikh-qays-al-khizaali-episode-3>. On this program, Khazali explicitly discussed his group's preparations to attack Turkish targets inside Iraq, accused Iraq's defense minister, Khaled al-Obeidi, of "plotting" with Turkey, and, at around minute 14:00, cracked up laughing while explaining the operational challenges involved in blowing up Saudi Arabia's embassy in Baghdad. See also: Interview with Qais al-Khazali, al-Sharqiya TV, December 4, 2015: YouTube video, 52:14, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-dKeDmf0dCc>. Khazali implicitly threatened to take action against the Iraqi government if it allowed U.S. ground forces into the country, saying this would make Iraq's government "illegitimate."
25. Saraya Talia al-Khurasani press conference, April 5, 2015: YouTube video, 29:12, April 5, 2015, posted by the group's media department, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_CnBkWp_MGo.
26. Muqtada al-Sadr addressed this issue in a written response to a question from a follower, posted on the website of the "Personal Office of His Excellency Hojjat al-Islam the Sayyed Muqtada al-Sadr," September 12, 2015: <http://jawabna.com/index.php/permalink/8449.html>. Badr's Hadi al-Ameri threatened to prosecute "troublemakers" behind recent PMU-Peshmerga clashes in Tuz Khormato, as reported by Badr's al-Ghadeer TV on April 26, 2016: <http://www.alghadeer.tv/news/detail/39383/>. Mohammad Salem al-Ghabban addressed the issue in an interview with Iraqiya TV's program *VIP*, uploaded to the Internet January 7, 2016: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jZHr1mkowYo>. Ghabban has also pursued the issue through less public channels, although so far without much success; see Hamza Hendawi and Qassim Abdul-Zahra, "Fears in Iraqi Government, Army over Shiite Militias' Power," Associated Press, March 21, 2016, <http://bigstory.ap.org/urn:publicid:ap.org:9696d8589a774c33a2e29aaf9699330c>.



YEMEN'S RELAPSE INTO TRIBALISM

■ NADIA AL-SAKKAF

IN 2011, Yemen astounded the world with its surprisingly democratic response to the Arab Spring. Because it is the least developed country in the region, with a staggeringly high illiteracy rate and an average of three weapons per person, many had believed that any political instability or uprising in Yemen would result in civil war. Yet, to the contrary, political factions came together in a power-sharing agreement known as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) initiative, signing an implementation mechanism on November 23, 2011.¹ This political agreement, orchestrated by the UN and sanctioned by Saudi Arabia, obliged then-president Ali Abdullah Saleh to hand power over to his deputy, Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi. It also required Saleh's party, the General People's Congress (GPC), to divide government positions equally with the opposition coalition. Although eleven months of deaths and disturbance had elapsed between the start of the uprisings in January 2011 and the signing of the deal, Yemenis and outside observers alike believed the country had saved itself from imminent crisis.

Post-initiative, Yemen took significant strides toward reforming its democracy and creating a civic state: a ten-month National Dialogue Conference (NDC) began

in March 2013 and concluded in January 2014 with a very modern and ambitious draft constitution.² The most important feature of this new draft was that it transformed Yemen into a federal state of decentralized autonomous regions, thought to be the best way to address the grievances of various political factions, bolster the economy, and keep the country in one piece. However, it appears the NDC came too late.

Continuing unrest, coupled with internal and external political scheming, rendered these goals much more complicated than had been envisioned. The NDC was not taken seriously by many of the political factions, particularly the GPC, and a coup d'état took place a mere nine months later in September 2014, dragging the country into a vicious civil war. This turn of events took Yemenis as well as observers by surprise, and the

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situation today is even more disheartening. Despite several efforts to establish a truce, the nation is still embroiled in armed conflict initiated by the Houthis and later joined by a Saudi-led coalition of more than fifteen nations, including the United States. In effect, the country has regressed fifty years, destroying any vestiges of a civic state, and the resultant misery and death has rent the social fabric and fragmented the Yemeni community as never before.

To put the situation in perspective, a Red Cross press release stated that the damage inflicted in Yemen in the five months after coalition airstrikes began in March 2015 was equivalent to that which took place in Syria during five years of war.³ According to the April 4, 2016, UN Humanitarian Bulletin, one in ten Yemenis has been displaced by the conflict, and the documented death toll has exceeded 6,400, with approximately six times that number in injuries.⁴

Pseudo-Democracy Amid Political Instability

Prior to the Arab Spring, Yemen had a weak democratic system with regular elections, a parliament, an upper house—the Shura Council—and relatively strong political pluralism. A robust political opposition was led primarily by the conservative Islah Party, regarded as the Yemeni version of the Muslim Brotherhood. This opposition bloc, called the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP),⁵ was created in 2002 in response to the unwavering, and many times illegal, domination by the ruling GPC over the country's politics and assets. The JMP included the Yemeni Socialist Party, the Nasserite Party, and two smaller parties.

Beyond party politics, Yemen had also witnessed growth in organized political activities; in fact, it was one of the first countries in which protestors took to the street to demand change—much earlier than in Tunisia or Egypt.⁶ Beginning in 2007, almost every Tuesday saw a gathering in Freedom Square (the area between the parliament and cabinet buildings) to protest issues ranging from early marriage to corruption in the military. These demonstrations were often steered by Tawakkol Karman, who four years later would lead Yemen's version of the Arab Spring and win

the Nobel Peace Prize for her role in peaceful protest and peace building. Since 2000, the growth of Yemeni civil society had achieved significant momentum in quantity and quality, partly credited to donor-led programs such as UN agencies, World Bank, and foreign ministries of Western countries that included training and funding for development and political projects. By June 2014, the number of registered civil society organizations reached 8,300.⁷ In short, despite its tribal structure and low ranking in the UN Human Development Index, Yemen was attempting to establish itself as a forward-thinking society on civil rights and related issues. Saleh had marketed himself to the Western world, particularly Washington, as a modern leader who believed in civil liberties and whose main concern was fighting terrorism. Yemen was usually one of the first countries to sign treaties and conventions toward this end—whether on human rights, free trade, women's and children's rights, or the like. Moreover, Saleh signed agreements allowing U.S. drones to target alleged terrorist operatives and groups on Yemeni soil in return for \$1.4 billion in U.S. economic and military assistance between 2009 and 2015.⁸

Ironically, Saleh was also instrumental in harboring al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) on Yemeni territory and providing the major terrorist affiliate with training grounds, going so far as to support its existence in order to keep the threat alive and extract more funding from the West.⁹ Not only did he support the real AQAP, he reportedly created fake terrorist groups and directed their operations through his nephews in order to keep waving the terrorism card every now and then.¹⁰

Meanwhile, the Saleh government was carefully monitoring the growth of Yemen's civil society movements by keeping tabs on potential public leaders who might threaten the status quo. This was done by creating pro-regime civil society organizations and defusing opposition figures by buying their loyalty or making their lives very challenging (assuming they were not killed outright). As Yemen specialist Sarah Philips phrased it in 2008:

Generally, the state has sought to avoid outright oppression where possible. Instead, it prefers to allow political and civil organizations to exist and run

out of steam through their own lack of capacity, stymie them through a series of legal or bureaucratic obstacles, co-opt their leaders, flood their body with GPC members, or suppress them from within if necessary.¹¹

Even so, incidents of harassment against independent journalists, political opposition figures, and activists were rife. Human Rights Watch emphasized this point in its “World Report 2011”:

Yemen’s human rights situation continued to deteriorate in 2010. Amid political unrest in the south, hundreds of arbitrary arrests and the use of lethal force against peaceful demonstrators undermined advances in the rule of law.¹²

In contrast to the relatively recent advancement of civil society and civil liberties—which reached its apex between 2003 and 2009, especially during the 2006 elections¹³—political instability has dominated the country’s history for much longer. Beyond terrorism and other security challenges, Yemen’s political problems over the past couple decades have stemmed from the secessionist Southern Movement, also known as Hirak, which first came to prominence during the 1994 civil war between the north and south. Southern leaders had come to believe that the May 1990 unity agreement between the two sides was not in their best interests, since the north had taken control in an unbalanced manner. Grievances continued to brew, strengthened by the deterioration of living conditions and discrimination against southerners in state-run institutions such as the various ministries and their local offices.

Political instability became more extreme when war broke out years later against the Houthis, a minority faction that practices the Twelver Zaidi branch of Shiite Islam. The conflict began in 2004 with a small insurgency in Saada, an impoverished northern town with a strong community of Twelver Shiites.¹⁴ Although the majority of Yemenis are Sunni, Twelver Zaidi Shiites, with a population of approximately 8 million, constitute approximately 30 percent of the population. More important, they have long wielded significant power and wealth in the north and in the country as a whole. Thus it is important to

note that the Houthi insurgency did not start as a sectarian war, but rather as a minority’s struggle for power.

Since then, however, the government’s disproportionately violent response has resulted in six wars that have left hundreds of thousands displaced and tens of thousands dead.¹⁵ Moreover, Saleh appointed Gen. Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, a strict Sunni and a prominent figure in the conservative Islah Party, to lead his forces in these wars because he knew they would eventually lead to a sectarian conflict—the essence of his divide-and-rule strategy.

Turning Points

The first turning point in Yemen’s recent political history was the Arab Spring. The revolutionary spirit behind this regional movement created an opportunity for the Yemeni opposition and other aggrieved parties to unite against the government and push their causes forward. Avowed enemies such as Houthis and Islah Party supporters, conservatives and secularists, all came together; women even found a voice in the male-dominated public sphere.¹⁶ The excitement over change and the vision of a new Yemen, one that addressed the people’s grievances and attended to economic deterioration, was the dominating spirit in 2012 and the first half of 2013.

Yemen’s second turning point was the formation of the various political committees that paved the way for the 2013 NDC. The inclusion of all political parties, as well as a membership composed of 30 percent women and 20 percent youths, was unprecedented at the national level. Discussions across nine working groups ranged from trade rights and civil liberties to longstanding political grievances in the south. The NDC’s general mandate was to create a new federal state, with the number of regions to be decided later per a technically sound and agreed-on method. Nevertheless, the eventual decision on regions turned out to be far from technical or harmonious; indeed, it was likely the spark that ignited the most recent war. From the final quarter of 2013 onward, it was clear that a political solution was not forthcoming, since the GPC, Hirak, and the Houthis kept putting obstacles in the NDC’s path.

In retrospect, the 2011–2014 period was a huge disappointment to Yemenis, particularly the independent youths who had led the uprising in the early weeks of 2011. In the end, members of the former regime still held power, and the former opposition had been coopted by the new power-sharing agreement. With the parliament functioning as a mere advocacy tool for the parties in power, and a void where the opposition used to reside, the free media and independent civil society organizations were the only ones left to represent the public's best interests. The interim coalition cabinet (or consensus government) that resulted from the 2011 GCC initiative was completely dysfunctional, led by a weak prime minister and officials who were more concerned with securing power and undermining rivals than with serving the people.

Extreme polarization of public and political spaces was the result, presenting Saleh with an opportunity he could not pass up. As scholar Tobias Thiel described it at the time:

The fragile achievements in the north are matched by chaos in the south. Aden is witnessing an unprecedented security vacuum, as the absence of the state allows [AQAP affiliate] Ansar al-Sharia, the Southern Movement, former regime loyalists, armed gangs and Salafists to wreak havoc. The [2013] upsurge in Islamist violence by Al-Qaeda and Ansar al-Sharia in Abyan, Shabwah, Al-Baydha and Lahj has developed into a full-blown insurgency, which suggests at least some links with Saleh's associates.¹⁷

Indeed, Saleh was among those wreaking security havoc in the south—despite having stepped down from the presidency, he still controlled the military and was even reaching out to the Houthis, his sworn enemies. His ultimate aim was to carry out a coup, specifically against his former deputy, President Hadi, but more generally against the Islah Party, which had spearheaded the effort to oust him from power.

Yet Hadi had been at Saleh's side for nearly two decades and was well aware of his methods. Sensing that a coup was imminent and that the public was deeply disappointed with how the political situation had turned

out, Hadi's first thought was to change the government.¹⁸ To do so, however, he needed approval from the same parties that had put him in power—a difficult prospect because the GCC initiative's implementation mechanism stipulated that his consensus government was to last only three years, after which Yemenis would elect a new president to create the next government. Moreover, his efforts to implement the GCC initiative were limited by the fact that he was not truly in charge of Yemen's power structures. Saleh still ran these structures from behind the scenes, in collusion with a greedy former opposition that was making the most of the power-sharing arrangement.

Eventually, the Houthis partnered with the Republican Guard—an elite army branch managed indirectly by Saleh's son, Ahmed Ali—to take over northern governorates and seize cities one by one. On September 17, 2014, they invaded the capital, Sana, seizing control four days later. By this point the Houthis had merged even more fully with the Republican Guard, wearing the branch's uniforms to give the impression they were a military institution rather than a militia.¹⁹

Immediately after Sana fell, UN mediators brokered the Peace and National Partnership Agreement between Hadi and the Houthis, which led to the appointment on October 13 of a new prime minister, Khaled Bahah. Bahah worked out an agreement with President Hadi and the political parties—and indirectly with the Houthis—to appoint a technocratic cabinet made up of professionals who were distinguished in their disciplines and respected by the public. Established on November 7, this "Cabinet of Professionals" generated very positive public reactions, especially since many of the ministers were taking government posts for the first time, thus starting with a clean slate.

Yet even these changes did not sufficiently appease the Houthis, who escalated their action against Hadi's government. On January 20, 2015, they attacked the presidential palace and put Hadi himself under house arrest. Hadi declared his resignation two days later, only hours after Prime Minister Bahah did the same. On February 6, the Houthi/Saleh camp announced a constitutional declaration dissolving the parliament and taking charge of the government, thereby formalizing the coup and forcing Yemen into its third sharp turn in the same decade.

At first, the Houthis publicized their takeover as a revolution against corruption, winning over many disgruntled Yemenis who were disillusioned by the Arab Spring and the resultant political system.²⁰ Most of the northern governorates surrendered to Houthi control without a fight, except for Marib, Taizz, and al-Bayda, which are predominantly Sunni and have a strong Islah presence. Gradually, however, Houthi/Saleh groups began behaving aggressively against citizens: extorting money from businesses, looting homes, and punishing protestors, journalists, and others who stood against them via stabbings,²¹ illegal arrests, and torture.²² They also looted the offices of Yemeni intelligence agencies, resulting in the March 2015 seizure of secret files containing details of American counterterrorism operations.²³

A fourth turning point occurred on February 21, 2015, when Hadi, under house arrest in Sana, fled to the Republican Palace in his hometown of Aden, then withdrew his resignation and declared himself the legitimate president. The Houthis responded on March 19 by sending ground units and the air force, which was under their control, to bombard the Aden palace. Six days later, the Saudi-led coalition launched airstrikes against Houthi/Saleh military targets, changing the political scenario completely.

The Bigger Picture

Although the Zaidi Shiite Houthis and Saleh wound up leading the insurgency that posed the greatest threat to Yemen's stability, outside actors were more concerned about a potential Sunni Islamist political takeover prior to the war. Seeing how the Muslim Brotherhood had risen to power in Egypt during the Arab Spring, many Gulf and Western countries feared that the Brotherhood-affiliated Islah Party could topple Saleh's regime and establish an Islamic regime.

For the West, Yemen's conservative nature, strong tribal culture, and potent terrorist groups were a troubling combination, especially since the country is strategically located at the intersection of two seas (international maritime traffic in the area was already suffering because of Somali piracy). For Saudi Arabia,

however, terrorism was not the main concern—rather, Riyadh was worried about the Brotherhood's growing challenge to its own Sunni Wahhabi ideology. In the eyes of Saudi royals, the Arab Spring was seemingly leading to a Mecca-like capital next door in Cairo, one that was connected to a supportive Turkish government to the north and an ascendant Islah faction in Yemen to the south. The Saudi ruler at the time, King Abdullah, had particularly strong sentiments against the Brotherhood, preferring to support the Saleh regime and the Zaidi Shiite Houthis rather than shake hands with the Islah.

The king's calculus probably made more sense at the time; when the Houthis first began their rebellion, the notion that they were receiving support from Riyadh's main enemy, Iran, was controversial at best, despite Saleh's apparent complaints to Western diplomats during the periods when he was at war with the Houthis.²⁴ To be sure, the Houthis shared similar religious slogans with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and Houthi figures reportedly traveled to Iran seeking financial and educational support.²⁵ Yet little tangible proof of Iranian support for the Houthi rebellion emerged until later. For example, on January 25, 2015, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's representative to the IRGC stated, "Hezbollah was formed in Lebanon as a popular force like [Iran's Basij militia]. Similarly popular forces were also formed in Syria and Iraq, and today we are watching the formation of Ansar Allah [the Houthi movement's formal name] in Yemen."²⁶ Such statements were confirmed by actions on the ground, including the discovery of an IRGC training team in Yemen,²⁷ Iranian weapons transfers to Houthi forces,²⁸ images of Khomeini and Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah decorating the streets in Sana, and the frequent medical and political visits that Houthi leaders made to Tehran and Lebanon, where they met with IRGC and Hezbollah officials, respectively.²⁹

Despite these discoveries, most of the military and financial support for the Houthi rebellion came from Saleh and other sources within Yemen rather than from Iran. Even so, the prospect of an extremist Shiite entity emerging on Saudi Arabia's southern border greatly troubled King Salman, who succeeded Abdullah in Jan-

uary 2015. Unlike his predecessor, he had no problem dealing with the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates, and the growing Houthi problem seemed to spur him into becoming the main driver behind intervention in Yemen. On several occasions before the coalition air campaign,³⁰ President Hadi commented that he had sought Saudi help against Saleh and the Houthis at the beginning of their 2013 offensives, but it was only when Salman took over that his requests were met.

As a result, by the time Riyadh and its allies decided to intervene in March 2015, the Houthis had taken over most of the country. Instead of helping the Yemeni government deal with a small rebellion, the Saudis were compelled to launch Operation Decisive Storm, a major air campaign involving nine Arab countries and other foreign actors. For Saudi defense minister Muhammad bin Salman, the tipping point came when Houthis began using the air force against Hadi in Aden. Riyadh argued that the Houthis and Saleh could just as well use their air assets and long-distance missiles against the kingdom—a prediction that was soon fulfilled.³¹

As part of the intervention, the Saudis established a full blockade of Yemen, partially lifting it later on to allow commercial and humanitarian ships to reach the country. As for the air campaign, coalition forces initially focused on bombarding Houthi/Saleh military targets, yet later struck more indiscriminately in Houthi-held areas, causing thousands of civilian casualties and great damage to the already feeble infrastructure.³² At the same time, Houthis and Saleh loyalists kept advancing south, and the more resistance they met, the more aggressive they became against civilians, sometimes shooting children, women, and relief volunteers in cold blood.³³ In the end, Yemenis found themselves engulfed in full-scale war less than a year after celebrating a new constitution that had brought hope of a peaceful, federalized country.

Community Resilience Initiatives

Today, the entire concept of state and state institutions has disappeared in Yemen, along with the state itself. The northern part of the country is being mis-

managed by disorganized and unskilled Houthi leaders who frequently resort to severe measures against anyone who challenges their command, including torture and murder.³⁴ In the south, no single entity has taken charge despite the president residing there and sizable contingents of Saudi and Emirati troops present to handle security. The Southern Movement has taken the Houthi coup as an opportunity to renew its demands for independence, raising its flag on almost every street and above every official building. Additionally, the south has a rampant terrorism and internal security problem—assassinations of officials and activists occur almost daily, AQAP has taken advantage of the war to seize areas in and around Hadramawt, and Saleh's undercover agents continue to wreak havoc and undermine Hadi's leadership. And in May, security authorities in Aden arrested around 800 people, many of them northerners, and forced them to leave the city, further fueling the fire of ethnic hatred.³⁵

Worst of all, Taizz governorate—Yemen's most-populated region, with more than three million inhabitants—remains an open wound where suffering continues unabated. The governorate has been a heavily contested battleground since April 2015, and access to food, medical supplies, and electricity is very limited.

The silver lining is that amid the lack of state control and the proliferation of fragmented militias attempting to run the country, civil society activists have risen to the occasion with effective local initiatives. Arguably, they were forced to step in, if only to provide urgent support to those in need.

Currently, three main types of civil society engagement are at work in Yemen. The first is direct participation in formal associations such as political parties, unions, and NGOs. This type of activism has taken a blow since the conflict began, largely because warzones do not exactly encourage organized events and entities capable of challenging the status quo.

The second type of engagement is material and financial contributions to charities and individuals. This has been ongoing throughout the conflict, and while the general economic crisis has left fewer people able to donate money, it has not stopped them from volunteering their time for various causes.

The third type of engagement—which is thriving at the moment—is intellectual production, including media and other publications, artwork, music, performances, conferences, and similar endeavors. Some of these are ongoing campaigns, though the lack of resources coupled with instability means that one-off initiatives tend to dominate.

Examples of all three types of civil society activity abound, formal and informal. In terms of relief and humanitarian assistance, many local initiatives have been launched, some more effective than others and often posing great risk to those involved. In some cases local charities have collected food and other items and distributed them in conflict zones where international humanitarian organizations will not go. Food baskets and other items have also been distributed in camps for internally displaced persons. For instance, in June 2015, a coalition of seventy-three civil society organizations called OMAM began carrying out humanitarian activities in Sana, including food distribution, hospital visits, and donation of medicines.³⁶ Yet the group has suffered in 2016 from a lack of resources and organizational capacity. Similar initiatives have appeared in other regions, including the “survive together” movement in Ibb, founded by female staff of the local university.

Meanwhile, microenterprises and other small-scale business initiatives have stepped in to support the local economy. After factories and companies closed due to instability, thousands of Yemenis found themselves unemployed and confronted with increasing prices. Out of necessity, ingenious solutions were born, such as the use of solar panels to provide electric power, alternative efforts to address community hygiene, new forms of shared transport and accommodation, and an assortment of vocational trade initiatives.³⁷ New jobs were created to attend to each community's changing needs, with many locals forced to improvise just to stay alive.³⁸

In other sectors, the online-based initiative Support Yemen³⁹ has been producing and widely disseminating videos and documentation of the conflict in Arabic and English. Recent short documentaries on the war bear titles such as *Yemen Deserves Love Not War*, *They Have Not Returned*, *The Melody of Our Alienation*, and *The*

Happy Yemen Video. Similarly, a new wave of online activists—mainly bilingual expatriate Yemenis who managed to flee the war—have used social media and other networks to advocate peace and keep their country's plight on the global radar. These activists often represent Yemen at international conferences, write news articles and policy papers, or simply spread the word online. Yet they must often counter the social media narratives spread by activists on the other side of the conflict such as the Facebook page “Afash. Yemen” and the YouTube account “True Story SAS.”

Moreover, many youth initiatives emerged as community-based organizations began to sponsor peace-building activities that emphasized tolerance and community resilience.⁴⁰ Most prominently, the Youth Leadership Development Foundation is one of Yemen's leading civil society organizations and has continued working despite the instability and hardships. With support from donors, it has carried out several crisis-management and conflict-resolution training activities aimed at empowering Yemeni youths to take positive action even amid armed conflict. These efforts are in addition to the foundation's other humanitarian and development projects. Local actors have also organized sports activities and competitions, primarily soccer matches, to defuse tension and bring some positive energy to conflict zones, particularly among youths. Another example is the only community radio operating in the south, Radio Lana,⁴¹ which is based in Aden and has been producing programs supporting tolerance and peace building.

On an individual level, some Yemeni youths have created new jobs such as selling ice and renting out phone-charging devices, which became more and more necessary as electricity grew scarce. The Cash for Work initiative established by the UN Development Programme in 2015 has furthered such efforts.⁴² For example, it has helped unemployed youths identify jobs they can perform for cash, such as cleaning up roads, removing garbage that accumulated when municipal collection services were halted, and delivering water to homes for domestic tasks.

Youth volunteers have also organized neighborhood security committees to stand watch against potential

thefts or violence. These local security groups are visible in all of Yemen's conflict zones: in Aden, for example, the "We are All Aden Security" initiative tasks volunteers with patrolling various districts and reporting suspicious incidents. Interestingly, this initiative was created by ten female activists who held a protest on October 20, 2015, against the city's lawlessness. Soon enough, other individuals and organizations joined them, and today the movement comprises more than thirty youth initiatives and groups that not only provide security but also promote tolerance. They have painted murals on walls in prominent locations to advocate peace, distributed flyers at traffic lights, and spoken frequently with the media.

Despite these efforts, the promise of the Arab Spring has become a distant memory for most Yemenis.⁴³ The disillusionment spawned by the disparity between that promise and the situation today has caused many to lower their expectations of whichever ruling authority they happen to live under. The reality is that many Yemenis are satisfied simply if they can meet their basic needs such as food, electricity, security, and some kind of job, however minor.

Yemen's Future and the U.S. Role

Over the past several months, the UN Department of Political Affairs has overseen intermittent peace talks, currently led by the secretary-general's envoy to Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed. These talks may provide the Saudi-led coalition with a way out of this exhausting war if they can reach a compromise that protects their southern border. As described previously, this southern security problem (whether portrayed as a Sunni Islamist threat or an Iranian-linked Shiite threat), rather than protection of Yemenis, was the driver behind Riyadh's intervention.

Accordingly, the responsibility for creating an operational governing body has been left to President Hadi, whose latest move, in April 2016, was to remove his deputy vice-president/prime minister and replace him with two old-guard figures from the former regime: Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar as vice president and Ahmed bin

Daghr as prime minister. Ahmar, who belongs to the same tribe as Saleh and has strong tribal connections in general, has been tasked with convincing the northern groups to compromise. Bin Daghr, who is from Hadramawt and has some influence over the GPC, has been tasked with reforming the party and working out a solution with the Southern Movement.

Although these two men are experienced and, at least on paper, the best-qualified candidates to fulfill their newly assigned roles, they exemplify why Yemen is where it is today. They represent the tribal element and manipulative political elite who considered themselves above the law, using whatever resources under their sway to serve their own interests. Moreover, the public still remembers how deeply these factions were involved in human rights violations and corruption. In fact, most former regime officials—and, sadly, most members of the new government as well—have, in one way or another, degraded the country's economic prospects and civil liberties. In terms of development, Yemen has seemingly regressed at least five decades, especially with respect to its economy and infrastructure. It has also reverted to complete chaos and tribal rule: in most areas, the strongest clan or militia leaders can take control without accountability, while various state and independent institutions (e.g., the parliament, judicial system, police, anticorruption authority, and electoral commission) have been rendered void.

For its part, the United States has been busy coming to terms with Iran and dealing with its own domestic political affairs, apparently content to allow the Gulf countries to play the leading role in addressing Yemen's crisis. The failing UN resolutions on Syria and the continuous instability in Iraq have created public pressure on Washington and other Western governments not to spend any more tax money on distant failing states. Even the counterterrorism focus has been shifting to other arenas, with Islamic State operatives and sympathizers attacking Western cities directly in recent months.

In short, Yemen's peace talks may well succeed in establishing an actual, extended truce if Saudi Arabia is willing to pay the right price and Iran withdraws its most visible support to the Houthis. Yet the country's deeper problem will remain: how to reintegrate a society that has been torn to shreds economically, socially, and liter-

ally through divided geographical control. Yemen needs help in learning how to rebuild its economy, recreate the state, and regain the citizenry's trust and respect. Most important, it needs advice on establishing rule of law

and fighting the various terrorist and armed groups that have flourished in the past two years. These are huge challenges, and the current authorities in Yemen are unlikely to deal with them effectively, if at all.

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EGYPT'S OCCASIONAL NON-ISLAMIST REFORMISTS

■ ERIC TRAGER

ON FEBRUARY 6, 2011, Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak was on the ropes. During the previous two weeks, an unprecedented mass uprising had shaken his government to its core: the Egyptian police had collapsed, protestors now occupied central squares across the country, and the military had assumed control of the streets. Meanwhile, the government's supporters were in disarray: the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) failed to mobilize a significant response during the first week of the uprising, and Mubarakists' February 2 assault on protestors in Cairo's Tahrir Square ended in defeat. So with much of the country now demanding Mubarak's ouster, Vice President Omar Suleiman and Prime Minister Ahmed Shafik invited opposition groups to negotiate a political transition.

While the youth activists who organized the uprising's initial protests rejected the meeting as a betrayal of the revolution, Egypt's most prominent legal opposition parties—the nationalist Wafd, socialist Tagammu, and pan-Arab nationalist Arab Democratic Nasserist Party—accepted the invitation, as did the Muslim Brotherhood. Unlike the activists, these opposition groups

had pursued reform, rather than revolution, throughout Mubarak's three-decade reign. Despite their (sometimes severe) ideological differences with the Mubarak government, they worked within the existing political system, using whatever limited space the government afforded them to achieve whatever minor influence they could.

Once the January 2011 uprising began, however, the leaders of these groups relented to pressure from their younger members and joined the demonstrations. But they never ceased contact with the authorities. In this sense, they occupied the rare middle ground between the government and the revolutionaries.¹ Their February 6 meeting with top Mubarak government officials, therefore, produced a predictably middle-of-the-road compromise: a committee would be formed to amend the existing constitution; the prosecutor-general would investigate crimes committed against the demonstrators since the uprising began; and Mubarak would remain in office until new presidential elections were held in September.²

The proposed transition process, in other words, favored reform over revolution: the constitution would be amended rather than overturned, and power would be transferred gradually rather than immediately. With

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the benefit of hindsight, some have argued that this approach might have enabled a more orderly political transition, rather than the political uncertainty, polarization, and autocratic resurgence that followed. But at the time, this proposed transition program was dead on arrival. The revolutionaries absolutely refused to end their uprising until Mubarak was toppled, and a critical mass of Egyptians appeared to share this sentiment.³ The following day, the Muslim Brotherhood backed away from the reformist transition plan, threw its total support behind the revolution, and started charting its post-Mubarak political strategy.⁴ Four days after that, on February 11, 2011, Egypt's military toppled Mubarak and assumed control.

The reformists' irrelevance at the height of the 2011 uprising wasn't surprising. To some extent, of course, it reflected the excitement of the moment, and a broad desire within Egypt for Mubarak to leave as quickly as possible. But the reformists' weakness also reflected the Mubarak government's success in constraining their growth during the previous three decades. While the Muslim Brotherhood emerged from the uprising as Egypt's preeminent political force and briefly served as the country's governing party, non-Islamist reformists still have not established themselves as a meaningful political force in post-Mubarak Egypt, and they are mostly indistinguishable from today's pro-government stalwarts. This paper seeks to account for the relative weakness of reformist actors within Egypt's non-Islamist camp, and traces the relevant groups' evolution from the Mubarak era through the tumultuous events of 2011–2013 and onward to the present day under the government of President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi.

Trapped Reformists

By the time of Mubarak's ouster, Egypt's non-Islamist reformist parties were widely seen as extensions of the leadership itself, and with good reason. They existed only with the government's permission; worked within the government's institutions, which overwhelmingly favored the ruling NDP; and in some cases were even created by the government.⁵ They criticized the government

mildly, if at all, and showed deference to Mubarak and his security services.

To be sure, the reformist parties contained many strident opponents of the government. The leftist Tagammu Party, which President Anwar Sadat established as the left "platform" of his own ruling party in 1976, incorporated many members from the secret communist organizations of the 1960s, and actively protested Sadat's economic policies and outreach to Israel during the late 1970s.⁶ The nationalist New Wafd Party, which members of the pre-1952 Wafd Party established in 1984, opposed the Mubarak government's autocratic abuses and demanded the cancellation of the peace treaty with Israel.⁷ And the Nasserist Party, which was established in 1992 after Nasserists broke from the Tagammu Party, similarly criticized Mubarak's pro-Western foreign policy. Moreover, these parties were not always hapless: the Tagammu Party at one point boasted more than 150,000 members, while the Wafd Party maintains headquarters in nearly every governorate and prints a daily newspaper.

But throughout his three-decade rule, Mubarak brought these opposition parties to heel by offering them a deal they couldn't refuse: if they wanted to continue existing, they couldn't cross his government's redlines.

The redlines represented the upper bounds of oppositional activity that the government was willing to tolerate, and the punishments for crossing them could be substantial. Rogue oppositionists risked sanctions on their businesses, disclosures of their private lives in Egypt's sensationalist press, harassment by authorities, and imprisonment. And to induce the opposition parties' caution, the leadership kept these redlines somewhat ambiguous, such as by permitting intense criticism at certain times but punishing it harshly at other times.

Yet opposition party leaders understood that three topics were off-limits for criticism: President Mubarak, the Mubarak family, and the Egyptian military. They also understood that two specific activities represented clear violations of the redlines. First, parties could not participate in mass protest activities because the government viewed this as an act of insurrection. Second, particularly during the latter years of Mubarak's rule, parties could not align with the Brotherhood because the leadership

viewed the appeal of the Brotherhood's Islamism as uniquely threatening.⁸

In exchange for abiding by these redlines, the parties received certain privileges from the government. Legal opposition parties were permitted to maintain headquarters, where they could organize events with relatively little government interference.⁹ The parties were also permitted to print newspapers, which enabled them to send correspondents to various governmental ministries and institutions for collecting information.¹⁰ Finally, parties could run in parliamentary elections, and the leadership often awarded a few seats to quiescent parties. While parliament largely served as a rubber stamp for Mubarak's policies, participation in parliament carried key benefits, including a boost in a party's public profile. Parliamentarians also enjoyed parliamentary immunity, which enabled them and their partners to pursue lucrative business deals extralegally.¹¹

Given the autocratic context in which the legal opposition parties operated, this wasn't such a bad deal. So long as they kept their critiques of the government within certain boundaries, they were granted a platform. Opposition leaders thus graced the pages of the major newspapers and appeared frequently on television, sometimes as counterparts to ruling-party shills. They were, in other words, prominent figures from recognized organizations.

Yet the legal opposition parties' adherence to the government's redlines meant that they had little support in the streets. Confined to their headquarters, these parties rarely interacted with citizens and had only a skeletal presence in most governorates outside of Cairo. They also lacked coherent political principles or agendas. Beyond the handful of seats that the leadership permitted them to win in parliamentary elections, they became increasingly insignificant over time.

The Muslim Brotherhood similarly worked as a reformist group during the Mubarak era, and tried to gain influence by participating in elections. It also largely adhered to the government's redlines: the organization rarely criticized Mubarak or his family personally and often avoided mass protest activity, including at the start of the 2011 uprising. But these constraints did not stunt the Brotherhood's growth for two reasons. First, unlike the

political parties, the Brotherhood was not primarily interested in winning parliamentary seats under Mubarak. Its foremost goal was Islamizing society through its network of social services and preaching, and the government put fewer constraints on these activities.

Second, the Brotherhood's internal dynamics made it less susceptible to government pressure. Joining a legal political party under Mubarak was relatively easy: prospective members submitted written applications to internal party committees through an open process. The legal opposition parties' members were therefore politically interested Egyptians but hardly diehards—and thus unwilling to sacrifice greatly for their party's cause. By contrast, every Muslim Brother must pass through a five-to-eight-year indoctrination process. As part of that process, Muslim Brothers are repeatedly tested for their commitment to the Brotherhood's cause and willingness to suffer for it as they rise through various organizational ranks before becoming full-fledged members. The Brotherhood, therefore, comprised individuals selected for their willingness to withstand government pressure, which made the group much harder for the government to constrain.

So while the Brotherhood expanded significantly during Mubarak's three-decade reign and recruited young members at mosques and universities nationwide, the non-Islamist reformist parties grew old. By the final years of Mubarak's rule, the parties' headquarters felt more like social clubs than political nerve centers. Party leaders hung around talking politics (usually reminiscing about the past) but really didn't do much of anything, since there wasn't much that they could do even if they were so inclined, given the restrictions under which they operated.

In their quiescence, the reformists alienated the new generation of opposition activists that had cut its political teeth during the protest movements that surged at various points during Mubarak's final decade in power. These included the protests against Israel during the second Palestinian intifada, which began in September 2000; protests against the United States, particularly after the March 2003 invasion of Iraq; the "Kefaya!" (Enough) protests, which called for domestic political reform from 2003 through 2005; various university protests against the heavy security presence on campus; and the labor strikes that gave rise to the leftist April 6 Youth Move-

ment. With each new protest wave, the activists endured arrests and government abuse. And as the decade wore on, they increasingly called for revolution rather than reform, and viewed the reformist parties as sellouts for adhering to the government's redlines.

Reformists after Mubarak's Fall

Egypt's Arab Spring uprising validated the revolutionaries' critique of the reformists. After all, the uprising had achieved far greater political change in eighteen days than the parties could claim after many decades of work. As a result, Egypt's non-Islamist reformist parties suddenly confronted three sets of challenges.

First, they faced challenges from within. The parties' younger members lambasted their leaders for joining the uprising belatedly and then negotiating with Mubarak administration officials during the uprising's final days. In this vein, Tagammu Party youths occupied the party's headquarters, while youth members of all major reformist parties joined various activist coalitions to plan further protests. While party leaders ultimately found ways to manage their disgruntled youths, these rifts kept the parties off balance in the early months of the post-Mubarak transition.¹²

Second, in the more open environment that followed Mubarak's overthrow, many new non-Islamist parties burst onto Egypt's political scene. A group led by businessman Naguib Sawiris founded the Free Egyptians Party; a coalition of leftist activists and intellectuals formed the Egyptian Social Democratic Party; another group of leftist socialists founded the Socialist Popular Alliance party; still other activists formed the Awareness Party; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace fellow Amr Hamzawy founded the Egypt Freedom Party; revolutionary socialists founded the Democratic Workers Party; and former presidential candidate Ayman Nour and his supporters, who had been ousted from the al-Ghad Party, established the Ghad al-Thawra Party. Meanwhile, the Karama Party, which Nasserists founded in 1997, received its party license in mid-2011, while former parliamentarian Mohamed Anwar Esmat al-Sadat's Reform and Development Party (RDP), which

was founded in 2009, merged with businessman Rami Lakah's Our Egypt Party. At the same time, former NDP leaders established at least four different parties.¹³

Many of these parties' agendas overlapped with one another, at least in theory, since there were now multiple capitalist, socialist, Nasserist, and Mubarakist parties. But in reality, very few of these parties had substantive platforms. They were in most cases personality parties—small organizations built around one or two prominent political figures. They therefore had little name recognition, and almost no presence on the ground.

Third and most important, non-Islamist reformists suddenly had to contend with the Muslim Brotherhood, which emerged from the Arab Spring at a significant advantage. After all, whereas the legal non-Islamist parties had abided by Mubarak's redlines and kept their organizations small and nonconfrontational for much of the previous three decades, the Brotherhood had established a nationwide organization of hundreds of thousands of cadres. With the collapse and subsequent outlawing of Mubarak's NDP, the Brotherhood was the only organization that could mobilize cadres nationwide to win power.

Moreover, unlike the non-Islamists, the Muslim Brotherhood was built for unity, since every Muslim Brother had gone through the organization's multiyear indoctrination process and sworn an oath to "listen to and obey" the group's leadership. As a result, the Brotherhood leadership easily sidelined a faction of Brotherhood youths that sharply criticized it after Mubarak's ouster, rather than allowing this internal disagreement to destabilize the organization, as happened in many non-Islamist parties. And also unlike the non-Islamists, the Brotherhood established a single party—the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP)—rather than allowing its members to establish other parties that might compete with it.

The Brotherhood's emerging political strength was most apparent during the March 19, 2011, referendum on proposed constitutional amendments, which was the first time Egyptians headed to the ballot box after Mubarak's overthrow. While the non-Islamist parties joined the revolutionary activists in voting "no" on the referendum, the Brotherhood and other Islamist groups commanded their followers to mobilize for "yes," and "yes" carried the day with more than 77 percent of the vote.

Nearly ten months later, Egypt concluded its first post-Mubarak parliamentary elections, and the results were similar: Islamist parties controlled roughly three-quarters of the 2012 parliament, with the Brotherhood's FJP-dominated electoral coalition controlling a 47 percent plurality and a Salafist-led coalition coming in second with 24 percent of the seats. Meanwhile, the quarter of the parliament controlled by non-Islamists was deeply divided among sixteen different parties. Ultimately, one non-Islamist party, RDP—Our Egypt, joined the FJP-led parliamentary coalition, while the rest served in the opposition.

Non-Islamists During Egypt's Islamist Moment

In theory, non-Islamist parties could have served as reformists in the Brotherhood-controlled parliament, working within that parliament to advance their agenda, much as they had done during the Mubarak era. But in practice, non-Islamists never adopted this approach to politics during the brief period of Brotherhood dominance, for three reasons.

First, the Brotherhood quickly became drunk on its own electoral success. It interpreted its 2011–12 parliamentary election victory and Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi's victory in the 2012 presidential vote as mandates for fulfilling its longtime goals of "implementing the sharia" and Islamizing the Egyptian state. Moreover, it often partnered with Egypt's Salafist parties in pushing this theocratic agenda over non-Islamists' objections. Given that Islamists and non-Islamists hold mutually exclusive views about the role of Islam in politics, there was very little, if any, space for non-Islamists to participate meaningfully in an Islamist polity.

In this vein, when a joint parliamentary session was held to select the Constituent Assembly, which was tasked with writing Egypt's constitution, in March 2012, the Brotherhood and Salafists collaborated to ensure that roughly sixty-five of the assembly's hundred members were Islamists.¹⁴ While the Islamists noted that this was actually a lower percentage than they had won

during the parliamentary elections only a few months earlier, non-Islamists saw no benefit to participating in a process that would produce a theocratic constitution, and twenty-five members boycotted the first assembly session in protest. The Islamists attempted to press ahead without the non-Islamists, but the non-Islamist-led boycott gained steam, as representatives from the judiciary, Al-Azhar, and the Coptic Church all withdrew from the assembly. Ultimately, the Supreme Administrative Court intervened and disbanded the assembly.

Second, non-Islamists never embraced reformism, because working against the institutions that the Brotherhood controlled, rather than within them, proved to be more effective. In this sense, non-Islamist parties were more revolutionary than reformist during this period.

This was especially the case after President Morsi's November 2012 constitutional declaration, through which Morsi asserted unchecked executive authority and prevented the judiciary from dissolving the second Constituent Assembly formed five months earlier. When the Brotherhood and Salafist parties used the ensuing political crisis to hastily draft a theocratic constitution, non-Islamists boycotted the assembly and joined massive anti-Morsi protests outside the presidential palace and in Tahrir Square.¹⁵ Even after the Islamists' constitution passed with 64 percent of the vote via referendum, non-Islamist parties still rejected it, and demanded that it be amended as part of any reconciliation process. The Brotherhood, however, refused to compromise, and as the political crisis wore on, non-Islamist parties increasingly rallied alongside revolutionary activists for Morsi's overthrow.

Third, non-Islamist parties did very little to develop themselves during this period. Perhaps because they saw revolutionary activity against the Brotherhood-dominated institutions as preferable to working within those institutions, they did not use the relative freedom of the post-Mubarak era to expand their parties beyond the major cities, recruit many new members, or formulate substantive policy agendas that might have represented alternatives to the Brotherhood's Islamist project. Non-Islamist parties also remained numerous,

which contributed to their individual weakness. As a result, very few of these parties had meaningful name recognition on July 3, 2013, when Egypt's military responded to another round of mass protests by removing Morsi from office. A severe crackdown on the Brotherhood followed.

Non-Islamists During the Sisi Era

After Morsi's ouster, non-Islamist party leaders entered the new government at the highest levels. Prime Minister Hazem al-Beblawi and Deputy Prime Minister Ziad Bahaa Eldin, among others, hailed from the Egyptian Social Democratic Party. Vice President for International Affairs Mohamed ElBaradei and Minister of Social Solidarity Ahmed El-Borai were founding leaders of the Constitution Party. And Minister of Industry Mounir Fakhry Abdel Nour was a longtime Wafdist leader, while Minister of Manpower Kamal Abu Eita hailed from the Karama Party.¹⁶

Yet Egypt's post-Morsi political dynamics made political reform virtually impossible. After all, the new government was locked in an existential struggle with the Muslim Brotherhood, which sought to topple it and reinstate Morsi. So while Western countries tried to encourage "reconciliation" between the Brotherhood and the new government on the assumption that political inclusiveness would promote stability, the new government saw the Brotherhood's inclusion as suicidal.

The non-Islamist parties therefore aligned unconditionally with Egypt's military and security services, and deferred to these institutions as they cracked down brutally on the Brotherhood's pro-Morsi demonstrations. Indeed, when Egyptian security forces killed hundreds of Morsi supporters while clearing their Cairo and Giza protest sites on August 14, 2013, only Mohamed ElBaradei resigned in protest. The others effectively shrugged. As they saw it, the Brotherhood had pushed Egypt to the brink and declared war on an Egyptian public that had roundly rejected it. The security forces, in the non-Islamists' view, did what they had to do.¹⁷

Today, with tens of thousands of its members in prison

and perhaps thousands more living in exile, the Brotherhood is no longer a significant political threat to the Egyptian government. But its exclusion from Egyptian politics did not create a more hospitable environment for political reform. On the contrary: the successful crackdown on the Brotherhood, as well as the subsequent return to normalcy on Egypt's streets, bolstered the government's argument that stability required a strong—meaning repressive—state. And according to the government's narrative, those who advocated for greater political openness were in fact advocating for a weak state and possibly chaos.

Framed in this way, Egypt's non-Islamist political parties faced a stark choice: they were either with the state, meaning aligned with the security forces, or they supported political upheaval. So when former defense minister Abdul Fattah al-Sisi ran for president in a barely contested election in May 2014, many non-Islamist party leaders endorsed him. And when new parliamentary elections were held in late 2015, the most prominent non-Islamist parties joined the pro-Sisi "For the Love of Egypt" electoral list, which the security services helped to assemble.¹⁸ Indeed, for much of the past three years, the Egyptian leadership has viewed proponents of political reform as proponents of instability, which is why Egypt's non-Islamist parties have largely abandoned any pretense of being reformists.

To be sure, there are exceptions. Some reformists are working within parliament, focusing for the time being on providing social services to their constituents with the hope that they will gain sufficient credibility to then advocate for greater human rights. Others have lost faith in the government's institutions entirely, and instead hope to exert influence by fleshing out reformist ideas in their newspaper and think-tank articles. But these reformists are so politically weak right now, and so fearful of repression, that they refuse to be quoted on the record,¹⁹ or to explain their outlooks or strategies in greater detail for fear this might expose them.

In other words, despite the vicissitudes of Egyptian politics during the past six years, little has changed for Egypt's political reformists: they still exert practically no influence, and fear that openly declaring their reformist intentions will invite blowback or worse.

APPENDIX

**CATEGORIZING EGYPT'S
OPPOSITION PARTIES
AND MOVEMENTS**

Non-Islamist Revolutionaries

APRIL 6 YOUTH MOVEMENT This leftist organization was founded as an outgrowth of the April 2008 labor strikes in al-Mahalla al-Kubra, and it helped organize the initial protests of the January 2011 uprising. Following Mubarak's overthrow in February 2011, it declined to form a political party and focused on organizing demonstrations against the ruling military junta. It endorsed Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi during the second round of the 2012 presidential elections, but then protested Morsi's November 2012 constitutional declaration, in which he declared virtually unchecked executive authority. Following Morsi's overthrow, however, the movement continued protesting against the new military-backed government's autocratic abuses, and many of its leaders are currently imprisoned for violating the November 2013 demonstrations law.

JUSTICE AND FREEDOM MOVEMENT Established in July 2010, this socialist organization worked to organize laborers and farmers against the Mubarak government while campaigning for higher salaries and educational improvement.²⁰ It was a leading force in the initial protests of the January 2011 uprising, and its most prominent members continued to protest the various governments that followed Mubarak's February 2011 ouster.

REVOLUTIONARY SOCIALISTS Founded in 1995, this Marxist group organized labor protests against Mubarak's rule and participated in the January 2011 uprising.²¹

Non-Islamist Reformists

NEW WAFD PARTY Founded in 1918 to represent Egypt's interests at the Paris Peace Conference, the Wafd (which means "delegation") was the preeminent nationalist party of its era and led multiple governments prior to the 1952 Free Officers' coup, after which it was outlawed. In 1984, a group of former Wafdists and their descendants established the New Wafd Party, which participated in most

	REVOLUTIONARIES	REFORMISTS
NON-ISLAMISTS	▪ April 6 Youth Movement	▪ New Wafd Party
	▪ Justice and Freedom Movement	▪ Tagammu Party
	▪ Revolutionary Socialists	▪ Arab Democratic Nasserist Party
	▪ Numerous unaffiliated activists of various political leanings	▪ Reform and Development Party
ISLAMISTS		▪ Free Egyptians Party
		▪ Egyptian Social Democratic Party
		▪ Many other parties, most quite small and more defined by their leading figures than by any particular ideology
	▪ al-Gamaa al-Islamiyah (until 2011)	▪ Muslim Brotherhood (until 2013)
	▪ Muslim Brotherhood (since 2013)	▪ Nour Party
	▪ Wilayat Sinai (Egypt's Sinai affiliate)	▪ Wasat Party (until 2013)

Mubarak-era parliamentary elections. The Wafd belatedly endorsed the January 2011 uprising, but participated in negotiations with the Mubarak government at the height of the uprising. Following Mubarak's February 2011 overthrow, the Wafd initially aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood, but ultimately broke from the Brotherhood prior to the 2011–12 parliamentary elections. Following Morsi's November 2012 constitutional declaration, it joined the anti-Morsi National Salvation Front, which initially called on Morsi to retract his declaration but over time called for his overthrow. It participated in the June 30, 2013, anti-Morsi protests, and has taken part in Egypt's political process since Morsi's July 2013 ouster. The party currently holds thirty-six seats in Egypt's parliament.

TAGAMMU PARTY Established in 1976 when the Sadat government divided the ruling Arab Socialist Union into three "platforms," the National Progressive Union Party, which is its full name in English, absorbed many communist activists from the Nasser era. It has participated in most elections since 1976. It currently holds two seats in Egypt's parliament.

NASSERIST PARTY Founded in 1992 as an offshoot of the Tagammu Party, this party embraces former president Gamal Abdul Nasser's pan-Arab nationalism and socialism. It has participated in every parliamentary election since 1995, and currently holds one seat in Egypt's parliament.

REFORM AND DEVELOPMENT PARTY Although Mohamed Anwar Esmat al-Sadat, the nephew of Egypt's late president, founded the party in 2009, it did not receive its license until after the 2011 uprising. Its platform emphasizes rural development, equitable relations with the West, and political reform.²² During the 2011–12 parliamentary elections, it merged with the Our Egypt Party and won nine seats, and Sadat was later appointed chairman of the parliament's human rights committee. The RDP later split from Our Egypt, and it currently holds three parliamentary seats. Sadat initially served again as chairman of the human rights committee in the current

parliament, but resigned from his post in September 2016, expressing his frustration with the leadership's lack of cooperation with his efforts.

FREE EGYPTIANS PARTY Founded after the 2011 uprising by Egyptian billionaire Naguib Sawiris, its platform emphasizes religious equality and free market economic principles.²³ During the 2011–12 elections, it partnered with the Tagammu Party and the Egyptian Social Democratic Party as part of the non-Islamist Egyptian Bloc, and won fifteen of the Bloc's thirty-five seats. It later supported the ouster of President Morsi, and participated in the post-Morsi transition. The party currently holds a sixty-five-seat plurality in Egypt's parliament.

EGYPTIAN SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY Founded by a coalition of left-wing thinkers and activists following the 2011 uprising, it advocates a civil state and "leading role" for the private sector in the national economy, but also advocates state regulation to some extent.²⁴ During the 2011–12 elections, it partnered with the Tagammu and Free Egyptians Parties as part of the non-Islamist Egyptian Bloc, and won sixteen of the Bloc's thirty-five seats. It later supported Morsi's ouster as president, and two of its founding leaders served in high positions in the first post-Morsi government. It currently holds four seats in parliament.

Islamist Revolutionaries

AL-GAMAA AL-ISLAMIYAH This U.S.-designated terrorist organization emerged during the 1970s, and fought an insurgency against the Egyptian state from 1992 through 1998. It renounced violence in 2003, and formed the Building and Development Party following the 2011 uprising. Al-Gamaa opposed President Morsi's July 2013 ouster. Some of its leaders are currently imprisoned, while others have joined the Brotherhood in opposing the current government from exile.

MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD POST-2013 Since Morsi's ouster in July 2013, the Brotherhood has refused to participate in the political process and instead called

for the toppling of Egypt's current government. In a January 2015 statement, the Brotherhood called for a "long, uncompromising jihad."²⁵

WILAYAT SINAI The Sinai-based terrorist organization previously known as Ansar Beit al-Maqdis pledged its allegiance to the Islamic State in November 2014, and declared itself IS's Sinai Province (Wilayat Sinai in Arabic). It seeks to overthrow the existing Egyptian government and replace it with a radical theocracy, and has killed hundreds of Egyptian security personnel since 2013. It is also believed to be responsible for the October 2015 Metrojet attack, in which 224 people were killed.

Islamist Reformists

MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD PRE-2013 Founded by schoolteacher Hassan al-Banna in 1928, the Brotherhood is a rigidly hierarchical organization that seeks to establish an Islamic state in Egypt and, in the longer term, a "global Islamic state." For much of its history, it tried to achieve this goal by winning influence or power within the existing political structures. It therefore participated in most of the Mubarak-era parliamentary elections, won a 47 percent plurality in the 2011–12 parliamentary elections, and its candidate Mohamed Morsi later won the June 2012 presidential elections. Following Morsi's toppling in July 2013, however, the Muslim Brotherhood has sought

to overthrow the new government and restore Morsi, rendering it revolutionary rather than reformist.

NOUR PARTY Founded by the Alexandria-based Salafist Call after the 2011 uprising, it favors implementing a rigid interpretation of sharia. It formed an electoral alliance with three smaller Salafist parties in the 2011–12 parliamentary elections, and held 107 of the alliance's 123 seats. Although the party initially collaborated with the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party in appointing parliamentary committee chair heads and in drafting the theocratic December 2012 constitution, it later supported Morsi's July 2013 ouster as president. It was the only Islamist party to participate in the 2015 parliamentary elections, winning eleven seats.

WASAT PARTY Founded by former Muslim Brothers in 1996, it did not receive its party license until after the 2011 uprising. The party describes itself as a "civil" entity that favors an "Islamic frame of reference."²⁶ It won ten seats in the 2011–12 parliamentary elections, and ultimately became one of the Muslim Brotherhood's chief allies during Mohamed Morsi's yearlong presidency. Wasat opposed Morsi's ouster in July 2013, and its top leaders were arrested following the August 14, 2013, massacre at the pro-Morsi protest sites in Cairo and Giza. It has not participated in Egyptian politics since then, but its chairman, Abu Elela Madi, is widely seen as a possible facilitator of "reconciliation" between the Muslim Brotherhood and those political forces that rejected it.

Notes

1. This paper focuses on reformists and distinguishes them from revolutionaries. Reformists are those who work within political systems to advance change and, in Egypt, include legal opposition parties such as the Wafd, Tagammu, and Nasserist Parties. Revolutionaries work to promote change by overturning existing political institutions and, in Egypt, include organizations such as the April 6 Youth Movement.
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SAUDI ARABIA

The Virtual Quest for Citizenship and Identity

■ HALA ALDOSARI

INSIDE THE SAUDI KINGDOM, political uncertainty has often triggered a surge in public demands. For instance, the 1990 protest movement regarding the ban on women driving occurred during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Likewise, the 2003 petitions for political reform came on the heels of 9/11.¹ And more recently, in the wake of the Arab uprisings of 2011, Saudi Arabia again witnessed a sudden revival of political dissent. Petitions for transition to a constitutional monarchy were submitted, political and human rights organizations announced, small-scale protests organized, and calls for revolution posted online.²

Yet Saudi Arabia's online activism presented a misleading picture: in reality, few groups were active. This was evident in the late King Abdullah's first public address to the Saudi people after the Arab Spring:

I am so proud of you. Words are not enough to commend you [for not taking to the streets]; after God, you represent the safety valve of this nation, and you struck at that which is wrong with the truth and at treachery with loyalty.

His speech specifically praised Saudi religious scholars "for prioritizing the word of God over the callers for sedition," intellectuals and writers "for acting as arrows against enemies of religion, country, and the nation," and the Ministry of Interior's security forces "for shielding the nation by striking against whoever threatens the security of the state."³

Nevertheless, the state seemed unsure of how to guard against the possible development or growth of activism. In the end, a series of fatwas (religious edicts) and royal decrees provided the religious and legal foundation for the prohibition of all forms of dissent. At first, the

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country's supreme scholar, Grand Mufti Abdul Aziz ibn Abdullah al-Sheikh, warned the country's youth against following the path of Egypt's January 25 revolution, describing it as a "Western conspiracy aimed at weakening the region and destroying religion by instilling doubts and sedition between the rulers and the public."⁴

Later, in January 2014, a more formal response included the passage of laws drafted years before and the issuance of royal decrees against any existing or potential dissent.⁵ The antiterrorism and anticrimes laws were used to systematically target activists on charges that ranged from defaming the reputation of the state, insulting Islam, and disobeying the ruler to using the Internet to harm the unity and stability of the state.⁶ The state shut down numerous independent media outlets while sponsoring massive public relations and lobbying campaigns.⁷

In general, Saudi law is uncodified in the tradition of early Islamic jurisprudence, whereby the judge is the instrument of the law. However, the antiterrorism and anticrimes laws were exceptions that created the basis for legal persecution of activists and dissenters.^{8,9} The king and interior minister ordered travel bans, legal harassment, imprisonment, and executions as needed¹⁰ to ensure a tight grip on society in all domains, particularly that of online social communication.

To help secure loyalty, the king offered a generous 514 billion Saudi riyals (about \$137 billion) in benefits to key groups, including those expected to rebel due to unemployment or limited income.¹¹ At the same time, sixty thousand new jobs were developed for the Interior Ministry alone to counter any perceived revolutionary threats. An anticorruption institution, Nazaha, was established in an apparent response to the demands of the Islamic awakening stalwarts' call for *islah*, or reform.¹² Religious institutions—the traditional supporters of the monarchy—received massive funds to expand their existing resources. For instance, the king awarded 500 million Saudi riyals (about \$133 million) to restore mosques around Saudi Arabia, 200 million riyals (about \$53 million) to support Quran memorization societies, 300 million riyals (about \$80 million) to support centers of Islamic preaching and guidance, 200 million riyals for the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice to finish building centers across the kingdom,

and 200 million riyals to fund three hundred new jobs and build new branches for the *ifta*, or "religious edicts," department.¹³ In the end, no meaningful civil or political reforms were pursued.

Contesting the Saudi State

Historically, Saudi rulers have secured their monopoly on the state by three means: regional and local partnerships, collection of ample oil rent, and support from powerful Western patrons.¹⁴ Inside and outside the kingdom, members of the royal family have blood, business, and patronage relationships with key religious and other leading figures. For example, King Abdullah did not stop at supporting the Bahraini king with battalions during the island nation's popular February 14 revolution; he also arranged the marriage of his daughter to the sheikh's son.¹⁵ The patronage system, empowering certain groups at the expense of others, has created varying degrees of loyalty to the ruling family among different groups of citizens.

Facilitating this Saudi patronage culture is a political system that falls somewhere between a tribal structure and a modern state. Whereas the kingdom has ministries, municipalities, bylaws, and regulations, the king and his circle retain absolute authority to override otherwise binding laws, international treaty commitments, or other apparently official decisions. Although, as noted, laws have been intentionally kept uncodified, those that are codified are phrased loosely to allow for flexibility of interpretation and, therefore, political control over the legal system.

The story of Saudi Arabia, as portrayed by state textbooks and media, is one of warring tribes and a vast land unified by the wise King Abdul Aziz al-Saud in a quest to implement Salafism, a puritanical form of Islam. In this view, the Saudi people are the obedient subjects, or *rayah*, following their shepherd or guardian, *wali al-umr*—the singular term for *uli al-umr*, a group of rulers. The plural form is cited from the Quran, in God's command for Muslims to follow the orders of Allah, his prophet Muhammad, and the ruling group (Quran, al-Nisaa 4:59). The Quran always mentions a group of rulers, never a single ruler. Religious reform-

ers have argued that these rulers should represent the will of the people. The king, however, through religious institutions that report to him, manages to delegate absolute power to himself as the people's ultimate *wali al-umr*.

This power structure is reinforced and replicated at different levels of society, including in national institutions and the family. For example, the religious Council of Senior Scholars dominates religious decisionmaking, and men dominate women in families as their guardians. Submission to the king and his appointed guardians is therefore expected from the ideal Saudi citizen. In return, the privileges and entitlements of citizenship are awarded based on religious affiliation, loyalty to the king, and gender.¹⁶ Those serving the king in a military or civic capacity, members of religious institutions, and men in general have been granted higher citizenship privileges than others, namely religious minorities and women.

In Saudi Arabia, most dissent movements arise from a desire to challenge this enforced identity rooted in fealty to the crown and its precepts. Such movements often appear cloaked in religious garb. In turn, when the royal family perceives a threat to its political security, it often acts to accommodate the very forces underlying that threat, sometimes without realizing the collateral damage entailed. Of all such instances, the state has acted most affirmatively, and perhaps damagingly, when it comes to Islamic extremism.

In 1979, the Saudi leadership embraced radical Islam in response to several events: Iran's Islamic Revolution, the siege of Mecca by a radical Saudi Salafist, Shiite riots in the kingdom's Eastern Province, and the need to recruit jihadists in Afghanistan to counter communism. As a result, large segments of Saudi society were radicalized. Ideologies associated with the radical Islamic *Sahwa* (awakening) movement—characterized by a rejection of U.S. troops on Muslim lands, a literal, rigid interpretation of Islamic teachings, and an expanded role for clergy in the state's social, economic, and political domains—became prevalent in Saudi education, media, and religious institutions. In the 1990s, Sunni objections to the U.S. presence in Saudi Arabia and Iraq resurged, driving key *Sahwa* religious figures to become political activists.¹⁷

For its part, the state undertook a series of cosmetic reforms to counter its reputation for accommodating Islamic radicalization, such as allowing partial municipal elections, creating a Center for National Dialogue and an international interfaith dialogue center, and appointing women in limited numbers to official positions. These measures were carefully planned to permit only loyalists to hold positions of authority and to maintain the monarchy's political control.

Recently, the state announced its Vision 2030 program, which highlights its political identity as a leading Arab and Sunni Islamic state, as well as its unique potential to become a "powerhouse" for business investments.¹⁸ Through this initiative, Saudi deputy crown prince Muhammad bin Salman is implicitly acknowledging that, to attract new revenue through business and tourism, power must shift from religious conservatives to moderates. To establish broad leverage for such a venture, royal patronage circles have been expanded to include new business leaders, social entrepreneurs, online "social influencers," religious leaders, and women. Consequently, competition for royal privileges among social groups has intensified. Here, the king is seen by society at large as the ultimate arbiter in empowering any of these groups or potentially saving one from the others. National belonging, therefore, remains problematic when the monarchy enforces unequal distribution of citizenship rights.

Today, several distinct categories of activists are pressing the authorities for expanded civil and political rights. This essay addresses two of them. One is the network of human rights activists—the most diverse and inclusive group—encompassing many Shiites, liberals, and women; the Shiite rights movement and women's rights movement are addressed separately in this piece. The second category comprises social entrepreneurs, who advocate a cultural transformation to resist politically forced norms. Although outside the scope of this project, two other categories of activists warrant mention: the national Arabism movement, composed of youth intellectuals, which advocates an Arab-centered identity, and Islamic reformists, who emerged gradually in the early 2000s and call for a constitutional monarchy.

Indeed, the categories addressed here are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive. Saudi women's rights

activists, for instance, are often also active in the Arab nationalism or social entrepreneurs' circles. Along these lines, given that restricted freedoms have severely hampered the development of Saudi civil society, activists often stretch their support into interconnected causes across various advocacy groups, thus enhancing interconnection, tolerance, and transfer of skills and knowledge.

Shiite Approach to Equal Citizenship Rights

Located in the predominantly Shiite Eastern Province, the city of Qatif is commonly referred to as Saudi Arabia's human rights capital. This is not surprising, considering that the state regards Shiites as a proxy for Iran and therefore a security threat. Given this context, human rights advocacy has represented a safe approach for Shiite activists to discuss equal citizenship rights and an opportunity to network with non-Shiites for support. Online connections via social media and smartphone apps have helped people share information and mobilize despite the forced social isolation of certain groups, such as Shiites, as well as restrictive association and communication laws. Joining Shiites in virtual and smartphone groups pursuing equal citizenship rights are women, liberals seeking religious reforms, and human rights defenders from various national regions.

Historically, Saudi Shiite demands for reform have centered on the community's grievances, such as the arrest of protestors and exclusion of Shiites as a group from governmental or leadership positions. In the early 2000s, however, a change in tactics came about with the return of some leading Shiite opposition figures from exile in the United States and Britain. They struck a reconciliation deal with the late King Fahd that included freeing political prisoners and easing restrictions on Shiite religious practices. At the time, three leading Shiite opposition figures, Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar, Jafar al-Shayeb, and Tawfiq al-Saif, began to advocate for equal citizenship rights via sermons, media, and direct community outreach. Shayeb cofounded the first semi-governmental organization toward this end, the National Society for Human Rights. He also established in

2000 a cultural forum with the aim of networking with influential figures and countering prevalent misconceptions about Shiites. Saif, still active as a political analyst and writer, has continuously advocated for equal citizenship rights. In 2003, he drafted the intellectuals' petition "A Vision for the Present and the Future" calling for a constitutional monarchy, a national dialogue, and economic reforms. The petition was presented to then crown prince Abdullah.

Around 2010, Shiite activists began to use the United Nations' human rights mechanisms to advocate safely for political reform. For example, they sought licensure at the Dammam city general court for a new independent organization, the Adala Center for Human Rights, which they had developed to support their work. The religious court ruled against it, citing the noncompliance of Adala's bylaws, based on international human rights law, with sharia.¹⁹ By 2015, several human rights activists from the Shiite region were being targeted for supporting imprisoned protestors; researching violations by law enforcement officials in arresting, detaining, or sentencing prisoners; or communicating with the media or international human rights organizations. In 2016, two notable founders of Adala escaped the country after being targeted legally for their advocacy. This targeting of activists may have reflected an attempt to silence dissent after the recent execution of a leading religious cleric.²⁰ Two years earlier, another Shiite activist, Ali al-Dubaisi, had also fled the country after his arbitrary arrest and established the European-Saudi Organization for Human Rights, which mainly advocates for the Saudi Shiite community. This instance widened the circle of activists in exile (discussed below) and their concerted efforts internationally.²¹

Despite the state focus on the Shiite activists, Saudi legal persecution has affected human rights activists of all backgrounds. In 2012, Waleed Abu al-Khair, a Sunni lawyer, registered his organization, Monitor of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia, in Canada to avoid a licensure ban in Saudi Arabia.²² He also hosted a regular public meeting at his home in Jeddah called *Sumud*, or steadfastness, to promote public discourse on politics and human rights issues. In 2014, he was sentenced to fifteen years in prison by the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC)

on terrorism charges that included defaming the state's reputation and disparaging the judiciary.²³ Abu al-Khair refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the SCC or his trial. His organization continued to operate from Canada in documenting the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia. Another activist, Yahya Assiri, who previously worked with Abu al-Khair, also left the country for fear of persecution in 2013, and established another human rights organization, al-Qist (meaning "justice"), in London in 2014.²⁴ The active proliferation of Saudi-based human rights organizations abroad since 2011 reveals the sense of determination by activists to find platforms for their advocacy to compensate for the narrowing political space inside Saudi Arabia.

Women's Social and Political Rights

In the kingdom, women, controlled by their male guardians, have borne the brunt of repressive tribal and religious expectations. Historically, Saudi women's rights advocacy has been sporadic and easily quashed by the authorities, including the women's driving protest of 1990.²⁵ Moreover, women's access to public discourse has often been limited to newspapers, blogs, and private or exclusive group memberships, such as chambers of commerce, literary clubs, or academic circles. Since 2011, however, a shift has occurred whereby Saudi women have become the most visible social group pressing for rights. In 2012 and 2013, several small women's protests erupted aimed at securing jobs and better campus conditions. A few unemployed women tried to organize a protest through a Twitter hashtag before being detained by police, and women protestors' clashes on campus with security forces were uploaded online, stirring public resentment over the unnecessary violence used against them.²⁶

In the past, Saudi women's rights discourse has often been framed within strict societal norms, both tribal and religious. For instance, the demand for expanded women's rights has been justified based on the desire to develop more capable wives, revered mothers, or supportive daughters. However, the driving campaign launched October 26, 2013, altered the public discourse on gen-

der discrimination by focusing it on political, as well as social, restrictions.²⁷ The campaign promoted photos and videos of women driving on social media, including Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp, to advocate lifting the women's driving ban. Men were showcased as campaign supporters, whether from religious, literary, or traditional backgrounds. Further, the campaign has built on the cumulative efforts and lessons of previous advocacy work to lift the driving ban. For example, women avoided protests and instead used their cars to run errands, while questioning the legal and economic impact of the ban rather than the religious justification for it, as they had done in the previous campaigns.

Media images of women driving, and their frequent encounters with the Saudi police, grabbed international attention, with the ban spotlighted as an unprecedented measure of control over women. Such portrayals, in turn, triggered international interest in delving deeper into the issue of women's rights in Saudi Arabia. It also granted women campaigners some level of protection. For example, when the Ministry of Interior decided to silence the campaigners, a man claiming to be the interior minister's representative made courtesy phone calls to suspected women campaigners to warn them against continuing their advocacy. However, a campaigner and the author managed to meet with the interior minister, who assured them that the issue was under discussion and to expect a positive outcome.²⁸ The ministry was not as lenient, though, with the only man remotely involved in the actual mobilization effort, as opposed to those showing rhetorical support for the campaign. Tariq al-Mubarak was kept in solitary confinement for several days for purchasing a SIM card that was used by campaigners to collect the public videos and photos of women driving, as well as messages of support.²⁹

The campaign continued using online advocacy tools, until two women were arrested and imprisoned for driving across the UAE-Saudi border in 2014. They were referred to the SCC for defying the driving ban, communicating with foreign agencies, and defaming the reputation of the state.³⁰ Although the two women were freed after approximately three months in jail, other campaigners continue to be interrogated over clips posted online of women driving in Saudi Arabia.

This response echoed other examples in which women protesting or demanding more rights were detained, beaten, or imprisoned by the state security apparatus. The excessive use of force by the state highlighted the greater risk associated with any advocacy outside the virtual world. It also heightened the media and the international community's interest in a wide range of women's issues in Saudi Arabia, such as the municipal elections of 2015, in which women were allowed to participate for the first time.

Similar to the driving campaign, the Baladi ("my country") electoral initiative began online, with a Facebook page in 2009. It was coordinated by two women, Fawzia al-Hani and Hatoon al-Fassi, who traveled across the kingdom to encourage women to participate as both candidates and voters in the municipal elections of 2011. Soon, a national network of women coordinators and members of Baladi developed in major areas. In remote areas, where women were more invisible in the public sphere, Baladi rallied men to reach out to women.

Baladi activists utilized the Saudi Chambers of Commerce and Industry, where businesswomen have been eligible for membership since 2005, literary clubs and writers' groups, academic circles, and activists' networks to recruit women. They also engaged in online coordination through smartphone apps and social networks and administered workshops between 2013 and 2014, in partnership with prestigious foundations across the Arab world and the Alwaleed Philanthropies in Saudi Arabia. Baladi coordinator Fawzia al-Hani explained that she had decided to advocate for women's political participation in response to the low perception of women by Saudi men. This perception, she said, could only be challenged when women occupy positions of influence and authority, such as the municipal seats.³¹

For a while, Baladi was generally tolerated by the authorities, contrary to other civil society organizations. After all, women's participation in municipal elections was now legitimate and building awareness free of cost was surely a state objective. However, the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs ordered Baladi's closure in 2014 without explanation, possibly to allow licensed, for-profit campaign-management companies to function during the election.³² Nevertheless, Baladi campaign activists participated as candidates and voters,³³ even as three

activists, Loujain al-Hathloul, Nasima al-Sada, and Tamador al-Yami, were disqualified with no public justification—and their advocacy itself the likely underlying cause. Hathloul and Sada filed objections since they had fulfilled all the conditions for candidacy, but the authorities did not respond.³⁴

Notably, by 2015, the previously sporadic, disconnected advocacy work for women's rights had gained depth and interconnectedness. Women activists were engaged in national and regional networks, utilizing UN mechanisms, enlisting media support locally and internationally, and determined to work around root-cause restrictions to gain visibility and push for their demands. In 2016, an online campaign to remove male-guardianship restrictions on women citizens took on a life of its own, with minimal involvement from well-known women activists. The campaign's hashtag has been trending daily and has prompted several announcements of support from key Saudi religious and community leaders.³⁵

Social Entrepreneurs and the Reconstruction of Social Norms

Against the forced, limited, and exclusive political identity propagated in the Saudi kingdom, activists are always striving to expand the boundaries. On this count, social networks have made the promotion of ideas fairly simple, and a number of individuals and groups have gained prominence on the virtual scene.

In 2011, a group of young Saudis established the YouTube channel Telfaz 11 (Television 11), guided by a vision of changing perceptions about local creativity and entertainment. Talented stand-up comedians started developing shows utilizing YouTube and social networks for promotion. One of the shows, *La Yekthar*, has 1,036,619 subscribers to its YouTube channel. The group created a song, "No Woman, No Drive," as a parody of Bob Marley's "No Woman, No Cry," to support the women's driving movement. The trending tune reached three million viewers.³⁶ A Saudi video blogger with similarly high subscriber numbers was less lucky. He was detained with two members of his group after airing

an episode on poverty in the kingdom. Activists suspected that the detention was based on charges of “inciting” other youth to control the new media.³⁷

The state’s efforts to control media, in all its forms, have emerged in repeated arrests and detentions of individuals utilizing various online means of expression. The Saudi Liberals Network, aimed at encouraging open discussion of religion, is a well-known example. Its founder, Raif Badawi, was sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment, a thousand lashes, and a fine of \$266,600 in 2014, after four years in detention and trials.³⁸

Aimed at widening access to education, Rowaq (“hallway”) is a free online platform offering university-level courses designed by certified professors. The courses, presented in Arabic, fit the broad themes of technology, self-development, advanced religious studies, communication, and social science.³⁹ The founder, Fouad al-Farhan, has been an active blogger since 2007, with the stated mission of recovering freedom, dignity, justice, equality, public participation, and other “lost” Islamic values. In 2008, Farhan was arrested and detained for months for supporting political prisoners.⁴⁰ He has remained active on social networks since his release but now keeps a lower profile. In 2011, he participated in the municipal elections amid a public call for boycotting, but his name was dropped from the final list of candidates without any justification.⁴¹

Contemporary art can be a softer, less direct medium of expression that can provoke discourse on identity and political restrictions. Edge of Arabia has emerged as an art partnership established by a British artist and two Saudi artists, Ahmed Mater and Abdunasser Gharem, from the remote Saudi southwestern region of Asir. The two Saudis, a retired military officer and a young medical doctor, strive to carve a tolerated space for themselves and for other Saudi artists. The three founders have formed a nonprofit social enterprise and promoted their work internationally with great success, resulting in 300,000 visitors to their exhibitions, 50,000 books distributed, and an audience of more than 10 million in their communication campaign.⁴²

Edge of Arabia works feature contemporary reflections on religion, feminism, commercialization of spiritual places, urbanization, globalization, environmental

deterioration, and the impact of a civilization that revolves around oil. The group has managed to support aspiring young artists by providing local studios and showing their completed artwork in international exhibitions. Inside the kingdom, the artists exercise extreme caution and rarely discuss their work. Although highly promoted and celebrated internationally, their interviews reveal the limitations imposed by formal authorities in Saudi Arabia on their association and expression. For example, Ahmed Mater is a close friend of the Palestinian-origin Saudi poet Ashraf Fayadh, who was arrested for what was considered apostasy in his novel.⁴³ Yet, earlier this month, Saudi deputy crown prince Muhammad Bin Salman selected a work by Mater, *Silk Road*, as a gift to China during his formal visit.⁴⁴ Indeed, the independent artists’ new affiliations with the state may be aimed at fostering greater support for their own vision of cultural transformation.

For their part, unions are illegal in Saudi Arabia, but a group of young female lawyers organized the Young Lawyers Union in 2012. At the time, women lawyers were banned from practicing law professionally despite being able to study law in universities since 2005. The young female lawyers organized small group meetings and eventually an annual conference. After learning of the conference, the Jeddah governorate demanded that it be canceled, along with all the union’s other meetings and activities. Since this closure, the group has nevertheless kept a Facebook page to connect lawyers and share expertise, and organizers still use their connections to support women in finding jobs, research, and advocacy. Such work gained a new layer of utility in October 2013, when Saudi Arabia allowed female lawyers to obtain licenses.⁴⁵

Looking Ahead

In identifying the structural forces of disorder obstructing any meaningful reforms in Middle East states, the foreign policy expert Richard Haass has cited top-down, corrupt, and illegitimate governments, minimal civil society, abundant energy resources, poor educational systems, and various religious problems.⁴⁶ Saudi civil society has been actively addressing each single source listed in

Haass's analysis, whether in demanding accountability, facilitating public participation, establishing independent media outlets, providing better education, or reforming religious narratives and collective identity.

The state's attempts, in the last few years in particular, to intimidate activists have largely succeeded in slowing the pace of reforms and narrowing their boundaries. However, the intensified Saudi state conflicts with regional and international allies, coupled with reduced oil reve-

nues and increased public expenditures, create a unique opportunity for reformers. This opportunity can be exploited through the same tactics employed by the state: creating alliances with national constituencies, and harnessing regional and international media and human rights organizations as alternative, influential power centers. If activists pursue these opportunities, they may well come close to achieving the sociopolitical reforms needed for sustainable stability in the kingdom.

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NARRATIVES OF REFORM IN THE UAE

■ LORI PLOTKIN BOGHARDT

IN A REGION marked during recent years by mass protests, revolution, civil war, interstate conflict, and rising extremism, the United Arab Emirates is a success story on many levels. The country's vast oil resources make it one of the wealthiest states per capita in the world. Emirati leaders have pursued economic and social development projects of epic proportions, and citizen support for the country's national leadership is generally understood as high. The World Happiness Report, sponsored by the United Nations, has ranked the UAE as one of the happiest countries across the globe—and the Arab world's happiest.¹

The UAE, however, is one of the most restrictive states in the Middle East when it comes to political rights and civil liberties. This has been the case for some time; for example, political organization has always been illegal in the UAE. However, since the Arab Spring swept across the region in 2011, public space for discussion of political reform has contracted even more in the country. Critical discourse on this issue is strongly discouraged by both the state and society.

In this environment, prominent Emirati intellectuals, activists, and others known to support a generally plu-

ralistic and inclusive approach to governance based on their writings, lectures, and activities have taken different paths. Some have assumed important positions in government. Others are working in respected policy institutes supported by Abu Dhabi. A small number continue to press gently for more-inclusive governance and society as independent citizens—sometimes with and sometimes without the general support of the state. Still others are choosing to steer clear of all politics for the time being.

That various pluralistically oriented Emirati figures are choosing paths inside, outside, on the periphery of, and either supported or disavowed by the government, as well as the path of silence, points to the multiple narratives of reform in the UAE. One narrative is that the government itself is the most important driver of reform in the country. A second narrative is that there are some opportunities for influence and gentle activism on re-

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form issues, albeit with significant caveats. A third narrative focuses on the restrictive climate for discussion of reform enforced by the state. Finally, a fourth narrative highlights popular support for the UAE leadership's current course, regardless of its approach to political inclusiveness.

These four narratives are diverse and complex, and in some areas they conflict with one another. Still, each is a valid component of the UAE's reform story. This essay examines these four narratives and then addresses U.S. policy on reform issues in the current environment.

Government as a Driver of Reform

In the UAE context, political reform generally refers to the leadership's efforts to streamline bureaucracy and increase efficiency—which it has done laudably in recent years—as opposed to charting a genuine path toward more inclusive governance. But when it comes to social reform, in certain areas the leadership is an important driver. That the UAE has an interest in a social reform agenda is not an unusual phenomenon for Arab Gulf states—although policies linked to this phenomenon play out differently in various Gulf countries. Indeed, one frequently hears among non-Islamist Gulf elites the belief that some Gulf governments, or elements of them, are more forward leaning than their own populations in terms of their interest in social reform. Often, this is a gentle reference to the local popularity of ultraconservative Islamists whose platforms do not embrace principles of social inclusiveness.

One genuine systemic-reform project driven by the UAE leadership is what has been termed broadly “tolerance.” Promoting cultural and in some ways religious tolerance represents a strategy by the UAE to contribute to economic progress, address population diversity, and fight the spread of explicitly intolerant Islamist extremism. To be sure, tolerance is not consistently afforded across the board to all elements of UAE society, and the state also supports certain religious elements that promote unequivocally intolerant views.

With regard to diversity, the UAE vies with Qatar as

home to the world's largest proportion of foreign nationals among its population. Approximately 89 percent of the UAE's 9.6 million people are non-Emirati.² More than half of the Emirates' population is South Asian, with Indians outnumbering Emiratis by more than two to one.³ The presence in the UAE of several dozen churches of various denominations, two Hindu temples, and two Sikh temples is appropriately often cited as an example of the UAE's support for religious tolerance and diversity.

In recent years, the government has widened the institutionalization of its tolerance agenda in response to growing security threats. In February 2016, the UAE went so far as to appoint a minister of state for tolerance, Sheikha Lubna al-Qasimi, and a national program for tolerance was approved by the cabinet in June.⁴ These latest developments complement official efforts in place since the early 2000s. They also benefit from the work of approved nonprofit organizations like the Watani social development program, established in 2005. Watani emphasizes the concept of shared values over shared national origins, and embraces cultural pluralism as a part of both Emirati identity and the UAE experience for nonnationals.⁵

Another area in which the UAE has spearheaded reform involves promoting professional opportunities for women, including by placing women in visible leadership positions. For example, eight of the country's twenty-nine cabinet appointees are women, and women make up 20 percent of the Emirati diplomatic corps, according to government statistics.⁶ Emiratis often trace the success of women in professional arenas, including business, media, healthcare, and elsewhere, to the strong influence of the still-living Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak al-Ketbi, the influential third wife of the first UAE president, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan.

With regard to the country's parliamentary-style advisory body, the Federal National Council (FNC), 20 percent of its forty members are currently female. The UAE also holds the distinction of having the region's first female head of parliament, Amal al-Qubaisi, who was unanimously elected FNC speaker and president in November 2015. Some say that the government's appointment, rather than popular election, of all but one

of the female FNC members indicates the government is ahead of its population with regard to supporting women in leadership positions.

More broadly speaking, the FNC itself is a story of limited reform. To be sure, the UAE leadership has taken important steps to expand its representative character. Originally a fully appointed body established in 1972, the FNC is now partly indirectly elected. Electoral colleges chosen by the rulers of the UAE's seven emirates have elected half of the FNC's membership during the past three elections. In 2006, 6,595 Emiratis were given the opportunity to vote for FNC representatives; in 2011, the college was expanded to include 129,274 Emiratis; and in 2015, 224,281 citizens were permitted to vote. The last figure probably represents about one-third of Emiratis of national voting age (25 years).⁷

Outlining his vision for the new voting practices in 2005, UAE president Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan stated that the institution of partial, indirect elections was meant to "promote a culture of political participation among citizens and create a mood of democracy."⁸ The expanded electoral college, however, has not been accompanied by broader FNC authorities. Nurturing the development of partners in decisionmaking has not appeared to be the leadership's driving interest in FNC reform. Instead, the electoral changes may be understood as part of a national consolidation effort, wherein popular representatives of the seven disparate emirates are brought together under a single federal umbrella.⁹ All FNC candidates run on individual platforms because political organization is prohibited. During sessions in 2015–16, the FNC discussed family law, healthcare and public safety, company layoffs, and government pensions, among other issues.

In January 2016, the northern emirate of Sharjah became the first of the seven to hold elections for some members of its Executive Council.¹⁰ Half of its forty-two seats were offered up for direct election, and voter participation was high, including 67 percent of registered voters, 42 percent of whom were women.¹¹ Like the FNC, the role of Sharjah's Executive Council remains advisory.

Independent Voices

Today, a small number of Emiratis address basic reform issues publicly in ways that are sometimes tolerated by the UAE government. One is Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, a retired political science professor from United Arab Emirates University. Yet Abdulla is far from retired; now a nonresident fellow at London and Washington research institutes, he participates in multiple international conferences each year, where he discusses Gulf political trends. At home, Abdulla has supported fully enfranchising Emirati citizens and granting legislative powers to the FNC. He also has advocated for a stronger civil society, including a freer press and expanded civil rights.

Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, who is well known for his social media commentary on Arab affairs and has a Twitter following of approximately 465,000 as of October 2016, is another leading figure in this realm. Al Qassemi, a member of Sharjah's ruling family, has advocated for a more pluralistic vision of Emirati society as well as broader civic engagement. He stirred heated debate among Emiratis in September 2013 when he wrote that the UAE should consider developing a clear path toward citizenship for long-term foreign residents contributing to society.¹² In July 2016, Al Qassemi published a complimentary article that featured the stories of Arab immigrants who had been naturalized by the UAE.¹³

Voices like those of Al Qassemi and Abdulla are rare in the UAE. Since the region's first Arab Spring protests and the rise in influence of antiestablishment Islamist groups, the already-limited number of independent voices in the country has retreated.¹⁴ Today is a period of quiet for activists and reformers.¹⁵ The reasons are understandable: intellectuals and others wishing to engage publicly on issues of reform and rights encounter a climate of severe intolerance. This climate is shaped not only by government policies but also by a society that is generally antagonistic toward the idea of reform that is understood to put national stability at risk.

In fact, the sense of threat to the UAE—from some Islamists at home, and from destructive regional forces—has created a formidable "rally around the flag" effect and "fortress mentality" in the UAE.¹⁶ There is widespread rejection on Emirati social media sites, for ex-

ample, of calls for reform. Such calls are not infrequently labeled as treason. As reported by numerous activists, an environment of civil harassment prevails.

Abdulla has described how even the label “liberal” is rejected when it comes to identifying one’s personal political positions and activities. He argues that, in 2016, “no one in his right mind would describe himself as a liberal. Society thinks liberals are dangerous, revolutionary. Discussion of participation, democracy, and reform has all but disappeared.”¹⁷ His observations echo the sentiments of other Emiratis.

Al Qassemi, for his part, maintains that it would indeed be worthwhile for the UAE to “cultivate liberal voices and accentuate existing ones, so that discourse is not dominated by ‘house’ Islamists [Islamists sponsored by the government] and ultranationalists who are not fit for the twenty-first century.”¹⁸ Indeed, there may come a time when state and society will view these two strengthened constituencies that currently dominate the discourse as not serving the country’s interests.

More broadly, some also point to the UAE’s “quietist” tradition to help explain the limited nature of independent political activity. Unlike Kuwait, Bahrain, and some areas of Saudi Arabia, the UAE does not have a history of robust formal political life. Traditionally, the *majlis*, a special area for hosting guests inside or near the home, has represented the focal point for engagement by the public with the leaders of the country as well as each other.

This practice continues today, sometimes in more modern and grandiose forms. Sheikh Muhammad bin Zayed bin Nahyan, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi and de facto president of the UAE, hosts at his *majlis* Emiratis as well as international leaders, innovators, and intellectuals to inform his leadership.¹⁹ Sheikh Muhammad bin Rashid al-Makhtoum, the UAE’s vice president, prime minister, and the ruler of Dubai, has a “smart *majlis*,” whereby citizens and others can submit proposals online for building the future of Dubai.²⁰ Other rulers and senior family members hold a more traditional open *majlis*, where various issues are discussed and debated. The principle of consultation is a driving force behind political leadership in the UAE.

Today, Emirati civil society remains dominated by

government-approved and supervised charities and environmental groups. But, over time, Emiratis have shown more extensive interest in public civic and political activity. Early signs of collective political consciousness came in the form of petitions to the rulers focused on urban dilemmas, such as transportation and housing, as well as demands for more equitable resource distribution across the seven emirates.²¹ The announcement of partial elections for the FNC in 2005, as well as a petition asking for additional FNC reform in 2011, generated excitement among activists, academics, former officials, writers, and the local media. More recently, Emiratis have used social media as a political vehicle, including to influence government plans to reduce subsidies to widows and divorcees. According to activist Ahmed Mansoor,

History shows that Emiratis, like most people, do want change, and have asked for it in many different forms and at many different intervals throughout the history of the UAE, and the time will come again when people will gain their free will and ask for real political reform and political participation.²²

Redlines

The most important factor contributing to limited reform activism may be concern about where exactly the state’s redlines are, and personal and family security. The government has acted severely against those perceived to have crossed a line with critical commentary or politically oriented activity. While punitive action has especially targeted Islamists, including associates and supporters of the Emirati organization affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Islah, it has not been limited to them.

Although such tactics had been used prior to 2011, the years immediately following the first Arab Spring protests saw a more aggressive policy evolve toward what was deemed unacceptable behavior. To be sure, the UAE—along with Qatar—was home to the “mildest” Arab Spring experience in the Gulf. In March 2011, 133 prominent individuals sent a gently worded petition to UAE president Sheikh Khalifa and the Federal Su-

preme Council, the country's top decisionmaking body, consisting of the rulers of each of the seven emirates. The petition asked that FNC voting rights be extended to all adult citizens and that the FNC be granted legislative and oversight powers.²³

The petition drive originally was led by some among the liberal current, but Islamist signatures dominated due to Islamists' numerical and organizational strength. Because of an anticipated negative government reaction to a document signed by many Islamists, some of the petition drive's liberal leaders had gone so far as to ask their Islamist friends not to sign.²⁴

What followed was a series of punitive measures targeting activists and others. This coincided with a period of wider uncertainty across the region as opposition protests toppled governments in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. With political Islamists gaining power and influence across the Arab world, UAE security measures especially focused on al-Islah, then the most organized group in the country. In early 2011, the UAE disbanded al-Islah's board and the Islah-dominated jurist and teacher associations. Seven al-Islah associates were stripped of their citizenship later that year. Ultimately, over the subsequent years, the UAE pursued arrests and prosecutions of around one hundred al-Islah associates and their supporters, especially after the group was blamed for receiving support from external Brotherhood elements to undermine the government. In fact, these measures represented an escalation from previous campaigns that had sought to weed out al-Islah influence in Emirati schools and other government institutions.

At the same time, Abu Dhabi worked to silence several non-Islamists, including an influential member of the liberal current who had signed the petition. Ahmed Mansoor had been running an online discussion forum on democracy and rights issues, and had commented critically about the leadership in ways that ultimately crossed a redline. Along with four others, Mansoor was imprisoned for several months in 2011. He also was terminated from his job, deprived of his passport, thus prohibiting him from travel, and dealt other severe consequences. Mansoor continues to engage in rights awareness work primarily on social media under the

shadow of state penalties. There are strong indications that the state is monitoring his activities closely.²⁵

In the end, from the government's perspective, the petition may have represented potential seeds of collective opposition that included both the Islamists as well as members of less organized political trends.²⁶ However, the fact that Mansoor is no longer imprisoned, as contrasted with so many al-Islah associates, contributes to the argument often touted by Emiratis that the government's policy toward liberals and independents differs from that toward political Islamists, despite overlaps.

Today, political commentary or activity from almost any quarter that veers from state policy may not be tolerated and can lead to punitive action. This includes not only independent, Islamist, and other commentators at home but also foreign individuals and institutions linked to reform-oriented discourse about the UAE. A number of such foreign organizations with offices in the UAE were shuttered in 2012, including two democracy-promoting institutions, Germany's Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and the U.S.-funded National Democratic Institute, in March of that year; the Abu Dhabi hub of the U.S. polling and research firm Gallup, also in March; and in December, the RAND Corporation's Abu Dhabi office. Foreign individuals have been requested to leave the country, or denied entry, for apparently similar reasons.²⁷ In 2016, Britain went so far as to advise its citizens traveling to the UAE not to post material online "appearing to abuse/ridicule the country or its authorities" because such activity is considered a crime punishable under UAE law and there are "cases of individuals being detained, prosecuted and/or convicted for posting this type of material."²⁸

Local Perceptions

Against this backdrop of severe restrictions is what is fundamentally understood as general public support for the government, which can be confusing for non-UAE audiences. In the UAE, government advocates and non-Islamist critics agree that Emirati citizens broadly support the direction in which their national leadership is taking

the country. This includes support for state security actions against al-Islah. Many Emiratis speak disdainfully about an Islamist project, and believe that political Islamists represent a security threat to their country and the Arab world more widely.

Support for the government is especially prevalent among liberally minded citizens. The wealthiest emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai have built substantial backing among this constituency by aggressively enacting liberal economic and some social reforms, according to the Emirati analyst Muath al-Wari.²⁹ Furthermore, while there is a growing pluralistically inclined middle class of businesspeople, media professionals, intellectuals, and others who in some countries might push for more-liberal political and social reform, many among these groups perceive that they benefit from the current situation. This includes views of the leadership as a bulwark against political Islamists, who the liberal-oriented constituencies believe would bring about regressive economic and social policies.

In this regard, some Emiratis look at the experience of Kuwait, with its more robust parliamentary system, as an utterly unappealing example of political inclusiveness. Here, the perception is that openness has transformed a country that once was a bastion of liberal thinking into one of increasing Islamist political domination, economic stagnation, and social conservatism. There are other reasons for the growing strength of Kuwait's Islamists, but this is a prevalent view in the UAE.

There are also powerful elite interests built into the existing system in the UAE. The most influential segments of the citizen population have vested interests in the current way of doing business. This includes leading businesspeople and tribes that benefit from special relationships with government officials.³⁰

Finally, there is the issue of political apathy. This is prevalent especially in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, which together are home to approximately two-thirds of Emirati nationals. A common narrative one hears from both officials and citizens is how far the country has come in such a short time. Over about a half-century, the geographic area that is now the UAE has grown from poor fishing villages, small desert oases, and pastures roamed by Bedouin to one of the wealthiest states in the world, with

renowned modern metropolises. Healthcare, education, and infrastructure all have experienced rapid and transformative growth. An important aspect of this narrative is that while oil money has fueled this growth, UAE leaders have driven it.

It should be noted that such sentiments are also echoed by middle- and upper-class foreign residents in the country. Frequently, such residents express a genuine sense of gratitude for the opportunity to live and work in the Emirates. Some Palestinians, for example, compare their lives favorably to those Palestinians and their children who have been naturalized in Jordan. The UAE has provided temporary residence visas to more Syrians as a percentage of its own citizen population than any other Gulf state, according to official counts—even though the impermanent nature of their legal stay in the UAE contributes to a desire to move elsewhere.³¹ And in September 2016, the UAE became the first Gulf country to declare its intention to accept Syrian refugees (15,000 over the next five years).

U.S. Policy

The UAE has grown to become one of the strongest U.S. partners in the Middle East on a host of regional security, counterterrorism, and other issues. The complex and sometimes conflicting narratives of reform in the UAE add a layer of complication to the enduring American desire to balance such strategic interests with political and other values. Furthermore, any encouragement by the United States regarding sensitive domestic policies in the Gulf is especially difficult when, as is often the case, America's Gulf partners understand them to run counter to their own security interests. As former deputy assistant secretary for the Arabian Peninsula Stephen Seche observed during this summer's U.S. presidential election campaign season, "How we achieve the proper balance between our values and our interests... is a question as complex as it is unwelcome, for this president and whoever succeeds him."³²

The UAE's social reform projects certainly should be welcomed by the United States as part of a genuine recognition of the UAE's strengths. Of course, this should

not be done with eyes closed to the illiberal policies also pursued by Washington's strategic partner. On rights and other issues, a close working relationship at the leadership level is one dynamic understood to enhance U.S. influence in the Gulf. A driving force behind the UAE's institution of elections for some FNC members in the mid-2000s was President George W. Bush's "Freedom Agenda," which encouraged foreign governments to give a greater voice to their people. U.S. influence was strengthened by the close relationship shared by the president and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice with Emirati and other Gulf leaders.

A particular tool that Emirati and other Gulf citizens

cite as effective in influencing their governments on rights issues is official, high-level public and private expression of concern about particular cases. There are strong indications that such an approach occasionally encourages Gulf governments to change course regarding certain measures against critics and others. This kind of action should be pursued on a case-by-case basis.

When it comes to implementing more profound systemic changes, the United States will need to wait for its Gulf partners to believe it is in their interest to make adjustments. Some Emiratis maintain that more open political discourse might be tolerated when the region's Islamist extremist threat has subsided.

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STRUGGLING TO ADVANCE IN POST-SPRING LIBYA

■ MOHAMED ELJARH

LIBYA'S ONGOING CIVIL STRIFE has made it easy to forget that for a brief period after the 2011 fall of longtime dictator Muammar Qadhafi, signs pointed to a successful transition away from authoritarianism for this oil-rich country on the Mediterranean. 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 fueled cautious optimism about Libya's future. However, by 2012 serious obstacles to democratization had emerged. Arguably the two most formidable such impediments have been the lack of a political and civic culture, following forty-two years of dictatorship, and the proliferation of weapons and militias undermining the state's monopoly on the use of force. As a result of these conditions, militarized groups have assumed key responsibilities for governance and service provision, and tribes have emerged as the leading civil society actors. This paper explores these developments and considers their implications for Libya's democratic prospects in the post-Arab Spring environment.

Voting for Change

The uprising against the Qadhafi regime in 2011 started with calls for reform, justice, and accountability by families of the victims of the infamous Abu Salim massacre of June 29, 1996, in which more than 1,100 inmates were killed by security services. When the Qadhafi regime responded brutally to the peaceful protestors, the situation escalated into calls for the regime's downfall. Led by the bar association, intellectuals, and students, the protestors outside Benghazi's courthouse in 2011 demanded freedom, justice, accountability, and democracy.

The first phase of the political transition concluded in August 2012, almost a year after Qadhafi's death, with the peaceful transfer of power from the National Transitional Council (NTC), a body that had led the armed uprising against Qadhafi, to the General National Congress (GNC), the country's first democratically elected

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legislative body in more than four decades. The election of the GNC was widely seen as rushed, but Libya's transitional leaders, no less than the countries that had intervened militarily to help topple the Qadhafi regime, were eager to register a success and frame the intervention in Libya as a successful model.

The results of the 2012 GNC elections, which saw 62 percent voter turnout, offer insight into Libyans' choice for their country's political future. The election results showed the nationalists, represented by the National Forces Alliance (NFA) of former wartime prime minister Mahmoud Jibril, dominating party-list races, securing around 50 percent of the popular vote and winning thirty-nine out of the eighty seats designated for party lists. However, in the race for the individual seats, the NFA only won 21 percent, with these individual seats comprising 40 percent of the NFA's total seats.

The Justice and Construction Party (JCP), the Muslim Brotherhood's political arm in Libya, won the second highest number of party seats with 21 percent of the popular vote. However, the JCP doubled its representation in the GNC through the individual candidate races, winning seventeen seats, or 14 percent of the total. Salafi parties performed poorly in the party-seat races, winning only four seats. But through the individual candidate races, the Salafists outperformed the JCP and did nearly as well as the NFA. Thus, they were able to boost their GNC representation, winning twenty-three seats, or around 20 percent of the total. The Salafists' individual candidates accounted for roughly 85 percent of the Salafist GNC seats and went on to form what was known as the Martyrs Bloc within the GNC. This discrepancy in the vote between party lists and individual candidates likely owed to the voters' lack of familiarity with the individual candidates' political affiliations and backgrounds. When given a choice between political parties, by contrast, it was relatively easier for voters to distinguish between those parties and cast a more well-informed vote.

The electoral majority for the NFA within the GNC and its dominant share of the national vote demonstrated that Libyans wanted to move beyond the "Islamists or autocrats" choice. They had picked a relatively progressive coalition in the first democratic elections in more than four decades. The NFA was made up of figures

of nationalist persuasion and former regime technocrats with strong support among tribes.

Indeed, many Libyans describe 2012 as the best year of the transition because thousands of people engaged with civil society organizations or participated in political activities, joining political parties, taking part in training courses and voter-awareness campaigns about electoral processes, running for election, and casting their vote. It was a truly positive, fulfilling experience for a large number of Libyans.

Meanwhile, encouraged by Islamist gains in neighboring Egypt and Tunisia, Libya's Islamists insisted on a system of proportional representation based on alternating lists between male and female candidates, in which parties would win seats based on their share of the vote. (Alternating lists guarantee an equal number of male and female candidates for party lists.) By contrast, some nationalists and liberal-leaning members in the former NTC insisted on a majoritarian electoral system, in which seats would be won by individual candidates who earned the highest number of votes. In addition to this political feud, the unfolding power struggle had a regional element. Federalists in eastern Libya, backed by key tribal figures, protested what they deemed unfair representation for the eastern Libyan region of Cyrenaica (known as *Barqa* in Arabic). The 200 seats of the GNC were divided among the western region of Tripolitania with 106 seats, the eastern region of Cyrenaica with 60 seats, and the southern region of Fezzan with 34 seats. Armed federalists in the eastern city of Benghazi attempted to violently disrupt the elections but did not succeed.¹

The struggle between Islamist and non-Islamist groups within parliament debilitated the performance of Libya's highest political authority, and Libyans soon grew disillusioned with political parties. Toward the end of the GNC's term, nationwide protests erupted, with protestors demanding the elimination of political party lists in favor of individual lists. Indeed, the February 17 committee that was tasked by the parliament to draft the new electoral law heeded the protestors' demand and scrapped the party lists for the ensuing legislative election. But in an unintended way, the move represented a setback for democracy in post-Qadhafi Libya. Political parties are one of the pillars of a functioning democra-

cy, and eliminating them gave rise to personality-driven politics that many feared would eventually pave the way for a new autocratic regime in Libya.

Emerging Threats to Democratization

The euphoria of 2011 and 2012 notwithstanding, signs of impending failure soon emerged. An initial indication of looming trouble came with the September 2012 attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi that killed Ambassador Christopher Stevens, just over a month after the GNC took office. In the ensuing months, Libya's political leaders and groups chose to strengthen armed militias that aligned with their interests and political agenda, using them as a political weapon to influence and dominate politics in post-Qadhafi Libya, with catastrophic consequences in the immediate term and huge implications for long-term stability and democracy. When, for example, following the murder of Ambassador Stevens, civil society activists mobilized thousands of people to protest against militias in Benghazi and called for a regular army and police, the GNC president Muhammad Yousuf al-Magariaf and then prime minister-designate Mustafa Abushagur appeared in a press conference in Benghazi beside the leaders of the same militias against which thousands had been protesting. Civil society activists and Libyans more generally deemed this display of a burgeoning alliance to be a legitimization of militias and a betrayal of nonviolent activists' call to disband militias.

Ultimately, Libya's transitional leaders underestimated or ignored the threat posed by scattered weapons and armed militias. Instead of coming up with a unified vision and strategy for disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration, political blocs within the GNC embarked on a bitter struggle to defend and legitimize militias loyal to them and integrate them into the state security and military structures. It did not take long before militias and their leaders gained the real power, overwhelming politicians and political groups. Libya's leaders, along with the foreign governments that had helped overthrow Qadhafi, ignored the warning signs and failed to an-

ticipate or stop Libya's downward spiral into chaos and lawlessness, creating fertile ground for jihadist groups. By 2014, the Islamic State had set up a province in Libya's eastern city of Darnah.

Another setback for democracy has been the militarization of eastern Libya, a trend that could expand to the western and southern regions.² The militarization started on June 19, 2016, when the head of the Libyan parliament in Tobruk, Aguila Saleh, declared a state of emergency and appointed the Libyan National Army's chief of staff, Gen. Abdul Razzaq al-Nadori, as a military governor for the eastern region. Nadori's appointment happened without a clear legislative mandate encompassing the work of a military governor or specifying his powers and competencies in a state of emergency. Soon after his appointment, Nadori began replacing democratically elected local municipal councils with military governors. By the time of this writing, seven democratically elected municipal councils had been replaced with military governors.

The appointments seem to have the support of local communities in most of the eastern Libyan municipalities targeted with the militarization exercise, reflecting the inability of democratically elected local authorities to deliver the most basic services to their voters. Indeed, no public opposition to these moves has arisen from civil society or even the democratically elected authorities, and neither the international community nor the United Nations-backed Presidential Council has condemned the moves. Furthermore, some democratically elected mayors have requested that a military governor replace them, citing their inability to tackle crimes and reduce lawlessness in their municipalities. This gives the impression that democracy and democratic practices have lost their legitimacy in today's Libya. Given the choice between security and stability on one hand and democracy on the other, the majority of Libyans—at least, in the eastern region of Cyrenaica—have evidently made their selection.

Tribes and the Limitations of Civil Society

Throughout its modern history, Libya lacked a political culture in the form of political parties, an organized civil

society, or labor unions. During and after the 2011 uprising, civil society flourished, with thousands of new local and nationally registered civil society organizations (CSOs) cropping up alongside an increase in print media and private radio and television stations. Prominent examples of CSOs that emerged during this period included the “Benghazi Rescue Friday” movement, born out of protests against the killing of Ambassador Stevens. The movement, which grew into an antimilitia and antiextremism campaign, went on for many weeks and attracted thousands of supporters.

However, on June 8, 2013, around 40 people were killed and more than 150 injured when an Islamist armed group known as the Libya Shield opened fire on protestors outside its barracks. Following the deadly attack, fewer people attended the protests, believing that their demonstrations would be futile against the power of militias and guns. Additionally, key activists who had organized the protests were either assassinated or intimidated into silence. Less than a year later, activists and civilians in Benghazi found themselves supporting a military campaign led by Gen. Khalifa Haftar against the same Islamist militias in what has been dubbed Operation Dignity, or *Karama* in Arabic. Civil society and pro-democracy activists were forced by the reality on the ground to choose between two extremes, supporting either a military campaign that would later turn into a full militarization exercise or chaos in which extremist Islamist militias dominated.

Another example of a nationwide civil society initiative was the so-called November 9 movement, also known as the “no extension movement,” formed in response to an announcement by the Islamist-dominated GNC that it would extend its mandate one year beyond the February 7, 2014, deadline set by the temporary constitutional declaration, the country’s political transition roadmap. After several weeks of protests, the GNC yielded to pressure and agreed to hold new parliamentary elections in June 2014.

Such examples notwithstanding, many civil society organizations that emerged post-2011 were silenced by militias’ guns, assassinations, kidnapping, intimidation, or self-imposed exile.

If civil society organizations lacked a historical foundation in Qadhafi’s Libya, nonorganized civil society, including broader societal movements and nonstate actors

such as tribes, had always played an important role in Libya’s political scene and governing structures. Tribes, in particular, had well-established, if informal, structures and traditions that positioned them to emerge as a leading civil society actor in the post-Qadhafi period. During Qadhafi’s reign, tribes were exploited as tools to secure his rule, with the dictator granting tribes the space to exercise, implement their traditions and rules, and incorporate themselves into his model of “direct democracy” as explained in his *Green Book*. Tribal associations, or *fayliat shabiyah*, played an important role in maintaining social peace, resolving disputes, and advising on governance issues in their respective municipalities.

The conventional wisdom on tribes and tribal structures in Libya has been that they wield less influence in big urban centers such as Tripoli and Benghazi, where most of Libya’s population resides. But in Libya’s violent uprising and the instability that followed, people sought security and protection in their most basic enclaves of tribes, ethnic groups, and clans. Most notably, after 2011, when it became dangerous for judges to function, following a series of assassinations and assassination attempts, the tribes stepped in to provide security, protection, and social justice to those who subscribed to the tribal structures or sought their help. The tribes’ well-established societal structures are grounded in their own traditions and even have penal codes to settle disputes and resolve criminal cases outside the court system.

Increasingly, tribes are becoming the dominant non-state actors, collectively constituting a nonviolent player in Libya’s political scene, especially in the eastern and southern regions of Cyrenaica and Fezzan, respectively. Political parties and successive governments have sought tribal support or assistance in resolving localized conflicts involving various groups, cities, or tribes. Additionally, tribal help was sought in the resolution of national disputes such as the oil terminal crisis in 2013, in which tribes did not sufficiently trust the central authority to help reopen the oil terminals that had been shut down by the Petroleum Facilities Guards, an armed group led by Ibrahim Jadhran. Or consider September 2016, when the head of the Magharba tribe—which resides in the oil-producing areas where Libya’s four main oil terminals are located—facilitated and supported the capture

of the oil terminals by forces loyal to the government in eastern Libya led by General Haftar. Tribal support proved crucial in delivering a quick and relatively peaceful victory for Haftar's Libyan National Army, as tribal leaders managed to convince many of Jadhran's men to lay down their weapons and join the LNA instead.³

Additionally, tribes have played a key role in local reconciliation and peace-building efforts, particularly in the western and southern regions. However, when tribes were invited to take part in the UN-led political dialogue process, their ensuing engagement was not successful. The UN Support Mission in Libya invited tribal leaders to participate in a tribal-dialogue track of the broader political-dialogue process but mismanaged the process, thus failing to bring tribes together to meet under the UN banner. Furthermore, some leading tribal figures have always expressed skepticism about the UN role in Libya.

Prospects for Democracy

Today, more than five years since the overthrow of the Qadhafi regime, Libya is a deeply polarized and divided country, with three different governments claiming legitimacy and engaged in a zero-sum struggle to control the country's resources and key institutions. This political and institutional fragmentation has disrupted the country's oil production for more than two years and led to the erosion of the country's finances, with the World Bank warning in its latest economic outlook report that Libya's economy is near collapse.⁴

The lack of a political and civic culture after forty-two years of dictatorship has weighed heavily on Libya's prospects for democratic consolidation. After an initial burst

of promising political activity and civil society activism, CSOs and the media became deeply politicized through their links to political groups and figures. Thus, CSOs became parties to the conflict rather than tools of democracy, peace, and nation building. Since 2012, democracy activists, politicians, and human rights groups that espoused principles of justice, human rights, rule of law, and democracy have been silenced by assassinations and kidnappings or sidelined by the ongoing conflict. Beyond the threat of violence, these groups have been silenced by their own communities, many of which increasingly see those with guns—and not the democratically elected officials—as providers of security and stability. Many within Libyan society, especially in the eastern region of Cyrenaica, believe that only those who lead the war can achieve security, stability, and peace.

It will take years and possibly decades for Libya's civic political culture to take root and produce an environment conducive to democracy, in which citizens face a viable choice between autocrats and Islamists. However, worrying about democracy alone in Libya today seems like a luxury for many who are struggling to provide for their own families. Yet human dignity and security, justice and universal human rights cannot wait decades. Against this backdrop, a national civic push similar to the November 9 movement could have a huge and positive impact by underlining these fundamental principles as a path toward sustainable peace and stability. For that to happen, Libya's intellectuals, political and human rights activists, and social groups, including tribes, will need to make their case for such a governance framework and work at the grassroots level to raise awareness. Undoubtedly, substantial progress will require a level of stability and security hard to imagine in Libya today.

Notes

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GOVERNANCE AS A PATH TO PALESTINIAN POLITICAL REJUVENATION

■ GHAITH AL-OMARI

SINCE THE CREATION of the Palestinian Authority in the mid-1990s, Palestinian politics has been dominated by Fatah and Hamas. Fatah, a secular national liberation movement established in the late 1950s, has held sway over Palestinian politics and institutions since 1968. Hamas, the Palestinian offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, was established in 1987 and rose to prominence in the 1990s. The competition between the two movements turned sharply in 2007, when Hamas, after winning legislative elections in 2006, violently took control of the Gaza Strip. Since then, the contest has widened into a rift, both politically and geographically. Amid this dynamic, alternatives to the autocratic secular Fatah and the equally autocratic Islamist Hamas have struggled—and largely failed—to emerge. Meanwhile, other political parties have been unable to articulate an alternative popular vision for creating a Palestinian state. Palestinian civil society is yet to find the balance between its traditional role as a part of the Palestinian liberation movement and a new role under the PA. Governance reform efforts, while initially successful, have been undermined before they could take deep hold.

A Political Third Way?

Ostensibly, conditions are ripe for a new Palestinian political movement to rise as an alternative to Fatah and Hamas. Both organizations are confronting internal political challenges. In late 2016, Fatah concluded its seventh General Congress, which strengthened PA president Mahmoud Abbas's grip on the movement but marginalized and alienated significant constituencies within it, especially among its younger members. For its part, Hamas has endured a protracted internal struggle involving its various political and armed components, and the group's fortunes rise or fall with the regional political jockeying of its various benefactors. Additionally, both have failed to govern areas under their respective control in effective, transparent ways and have closed the political space, further turning off the general public.

Results from a poll conducted in late September 2016 by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR) illustrated public dissatisfaction with the two major

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blocs. When respondents from the West Bank and Gaza were asked which party they would choose in a prospective parliamentary vote, 32.1 percent indicated Hamas, 36.9 percent indicated Fatah, and, tellingly, 24.1 percent marked “none of the above.”

Yet, as evidenced in the 2006 elections for the PA’s parliament, the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), no political actor has succeeded in uniting this large undecided segment of the Palestinian electorate. The various Marxist “Fronts for the Liberation of Palestine” that populated the Palestinian political scene in the 1970s have withered away with the demise of the Soviet Union, and these secured just five of the PLC’s 132 seats. The two independent lists that ran won just two seats apiece. As the PSR survey suggests, the decade that followed the 2006 elections did not witness a transformation of the political map. The nine parties identified in the survey as alternatives to Hamas and Fatah garnered a total of 6.9 percent among them.

The failure of a new Palestinian political movement to emerge can be explained by a number of factors, some of them generic. Indeed, the Fatah-Hamas dynamic resembles the struggle in many Arab societies between the established authoritarian order and political Islam. On the Palestinian scene, these two forces are well established, possess strong political machinery, and enjoy name recognition. Any newcomer would be at a disadvantage.

The tools used by Hamas and Fatah to maintain their grip on politics likewise resemble those used by other authoritarian regimes. In broad terms, both parties’ control over the institutions of government in their respective areas of rule enables them to use patronage to attract supporters and suppress dissent. Reports by international and Palestinian human rights organizations show that both parties use violence, unlawful arrest, torture, and a weak court system to systematically restrict basic political rights such as freedom of assembly, expression, and the press. While these repressive tools are mainly used by each party against the other, they are also used against independent critics or potential new competitors.

Such problems are daunting in their own right, but politics in Palestine offer an additional challenge to new forces seeking to enter the scene. Unlike sovereign states,

where legitimacy is a function of domestic economic, governance, and inclusion of various societal sectors, legitimacy in Palestinian politics has traditionally been closely linked to the ability to articulate a credible path for ending the Israeli occupation and achieving independence. The establishment of the PA and subsequently the Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip have forced the two movements to confront issues of governance, corruption, service provision, and economic challenges. Their failure to meet these challenges has weakened their standing, but the issue of liberation continues to be central in Palestinian politics.

Given Hamas and Fatah’s dismal record on the governance front, the space exists for a new political movement to articulate a more compelling governance or economic program. But when it comes to articulating a vision for liberation, the two movements have already claimed the obvious options—namely, diplomacy in the case of Fatah and armed resistance for Hamas—and none of their competitors has put forth an alternative narrative that sufficiently captures the public imagination.

The combination of challenges, whether generic ones facing any newcomer to a well-established political map, ones relating to Hamas and Fatah’s use of traditional means of oppression, or ones specific to the anomaly of governing and engaging in politics in the absence of sovereignty and independence, have lowered prospects for the emergence of effective non-Islamist, nonauthoritarian political forces.

Palestinian Civil Society in Context

Given the challenges facing new political forces, civil society is sometimes looked at as a potential incubator for new voices and trends that challenge the Palestinian status quo. Yet Palestinian civil society faces its own limitations.

Palestinians proudly claim a well-established civil society. Some of its components, like the General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS), trace their origin to the 1920s. In the 1960s, after the establishment of the Palestine Liberation Organization, a number of additional

civil society organizations, such as the General Union of Palestinian Women, were created under the PLO umbrella. Also active were numerous trade and labor unions, students associations, and charitable organizations. Many of these, however, were an extension of the political party map and functioned along the patronage and quota systems that characterized much of the bureaucratic history of the PLO. Some, such as GUPS, fostered the development of future political leaders or—absent other forms of elections—arenas where different factions competed to prove their political weight.

In the 1970s and 1980s, though, a new form of civil society organization sprouted in the occupied territories. After the 1967 Six Day War, Israeli authorities had assumed direct governance functions and service provision in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Even as Palestinian inhabitants of these areas engaged Israeli authorities, most did so out of necessity, especially in crucial sectors such as health, education, and municipal affairs, while rejecting the legitimacy of Israeli rule. Given this denial of the Israeli occupation's legitimacy, and the limited nature of the services provided by Israeli authorities, civil society organizations started cropping up to fill this vacuum. While providing services to the populace in myriad sectors, including healthcare, agriculture, culture, and human rights, these organizations saw themselves and were seen by the public as central agents in confronting the occupation through the preservation of Palestinian identity and the promotion of *sumud*, or steadfastness.

When the first intifada began in 1987, the role of these organizations became pivotal; along with political movements, they helped mobilize, organize, and provide leaders for the popular uprising. While some of these organizations were loosely affiliated with or dominated by members of political movements, they were largely seen as independent and tightly connected to the grassroots, with all its political diversity. During that period, civil society's standing rose to an extent that some of its leaders started being seen as potential national leaders, a trend that alarmed not only Israeli authorities but also the PLO leadership in the diaspora.

The Oslo peace process, however, begun in the early 1990s, presented a challenge from which Palestinian

civil society has yet to recover. Although the resulting Oslo Accords did not end the occupation or bring about an independent, sovereign Palestinian state, they did create protostate institutions. Thus, the establishment of the PA marked the first time Palestinians were governed by their own leaders, albeit via limited self-rule. Whereas, formerly, opposition to Israeli governing structures had offered clarity of purpose, now this clarity dissipated, replaced by complex sets of questions regarding how to relate to the newly established PA and the ever-present, if reduced, footprint of the Israeli occupation: What was the role of civil society in confronting the occupation now that the Israeli authorities were no longer directly managing a wide array of civil and security issues touching Palestinians' lives? Was it preferable to support the PA's strategy of negotiations and diplomacy or to continue the forms of nonviolent resistance developed during the first intifada? How should Palestinians relate to the PA, which was seen as a national achievement and a first step toward establishing Palestinian independence but was also marred by corruption and poor governance? How should civil society balance its mission of pursuing good governance and grassroots empowerment with the desire not to undermine the fledgling PA? In the absence of sovereignty, how could a civil society centered on resistance make the transition to being a normal civil society?

These enduring tensions are most vividly illustrated in the Palestinian human rights community. Before the establishment of the PA, Palestinian human rights organizations focused on Israeli human rights violations, thereby serving two purposes: helping Palestinian individuals and communities pursue their rights, and politically mobilizing international pressure on Israel. With the creation of the PA, human rights organizations had to address two fronts: one, continued Israeli human rights violations, though their numbers diminished as Israel handed over certain authorities to the PA; and two, high disregard for human rights demonstrated by the PA itself, in both the West Bank and Gaza, an attribute imported from Arab governments. If Palestinian human rights organizations only focused on Israeli violations, they would be ignoring a sizable portion of their mandate to protect universal human rights and would become irrelevant for

the growing number of victims of PA violations. If they focused on violations by the PA, however, they would be seen as undermining or even delegitimizing Palestinian leadership. The PA, of course, exacerbated this dilemma by painting human rights activists calling attention to PA violations as collaborators who wittingly or unwittingly supported anti-Palestinian sentiments. Faced with this conundrum, Palestinian civil society began losing direction and relevance.

This diminishing relevance was reinforced by two trends, the first being PA policies that did not favor civil society. Upon its establishment, the PA largely marginalized Palestinians from the occupied territories in favor of those longstanding exiled PLO members whose return to the West Bank and Gaza Strip was permitted by the Oslo talks. Partly out of concern over the rising popularity of local leaders, and partly reflecting a natural gravitation by PA leaders toward a familiar group whose loyalty was tried and tested, the PA allotted the greater share of jobs and resources—and therefore power—to the “returnees.” As it consolidated power, the PA began enacting restrictive policies reminiscent of those adopted by other Arab countries aimed at limiting NGOs’ access to foreign funding and their freedom of operation.

Second, the NGOs themselves contributed to their own marginalization, especially in the area of foreign aid. In order to receive this aid, which proliferated after Oslo, Palestinian NGOs became at least as sensitive to donor requirements as they were to the needs of their constituencies. Considerable international funds and donor requirements for reporting and evaluation fostered bureaucratization and a move away from the grassroots qualities that characterized Palestinian civil society in the 1980s. This shift favored larger NGOs, often resulting in the crowding out of smaller initiatives. It also resulted in transparency-related problems, whether accusations of outright corruption or the more subtle concern over funds being diverted from NGO work to political purposes.

While Palestinian NGOs continue today to provide important services to Palestinians, civil society has lost vibrancy for the reasons just outlined. Once a model of pluralism that cultivated leaders with grassroots le-

gitimacy, Palestinian civil society more than two decades after Oslo has become bureaucratized, less able to mobilize the public, and increasingly directionless. To illustrate this point, the Independent Palestine list, headed by veteran civil society leader Mustafa Barghouti, garnered only two seats in the 2006 PLC elections. In the intervening time, and despite recent attempts by emerging civil society actors to address these issues, the picture has not fundamentally changed and civil society has not regained its pre-Oslo standing.

Prospects for Good Governance

The problem of poor governance in the PA was identified shortly after its establishment. Most notably, in 1997 the PLC issued a report detailing instances of corruption within the PA. Yet the overall international and Palestinian focus on peace negotiations in the 1990s kept issues of governance at the margins of international attention. With the collapse of the negotiations in 2000 and the outbreak of the second intifada, the governance issue started receiving more international attention. This attention culminated in 2003 with the publication of the Roadmap for Peace in the Middle East, which called, *inter alia*, for the creation of the post of prime minister and for a slew of reforms, including restructuring of the Palestinian security sector. While some of the reforms suggested in the Roadmap were implemented at that time, the process was hobbled by constant opposition from President Yasser Arafat, who regarded the reforms as measures intended to sideline him.

After Arafat’s death and the election of Mahmoud Abbas to the PA presidency, the governance question finally entered the limelight, brought about in particular by Hamas’s victorious campaign in the 2006 PLC elections, with its rhetorical emphasis on good governance and anticorruption. In the security sector, the perils of poor governance became evident in 2007, when Hamas forcibly took over the Gaza Strip, defeating the larger but ill-coordinated and poorly governed Palestinian security forces.

A combination of the Hamas electoral and security victories along with an international focus on reform,

particularly by U.S. president George W. Bush and his administration, created irresistible pressure on the PA. Salam Fayyad, a political independent with a proven reformist track record during his earlier tenure as finance minister, was appointed prime minister in 2007 and embarked on a program of building PA institutions. Under Fayyad's leadership, reforms, particularly in the security, public finance, and public administration sectors, were striking enough to suggest to international organizations and observers that Palestine was ready for statehood.

Despite these practical successes, Palestinian reform faced significant political resistance. Hamas was concerned with the prospect of a reconstituted Palestinian security sector that would effectively curtail its activities in the West Bank. And Fatah worried that financial and bureaucratic reforms would threaten its control of the PA, with all its attendant financial and patronage benefits. The two organizations thus worked effectively to undermine the reform process and negatively brand its proponents.

The main vulnerability of those promoting reform was their inability to convince the Palestinian public that it offered a path to ending the occupation. In general, while Palestinians consider issues relating to quality of life and governance important, opinion polls consistently show these to be secondary to matters of liberation. Despite attempts to cast reforms as a step toward independence—Fayyad's reform program was titled *Palestine: Ending the Occupation, Establishing the State*—he was unable, in a way that resonated with the public, to counter the accusation leveled by both Hamas and Fatah that his program amounted to "beautifying the occupation." According to critics, reforms were simply creating a PA that was more effective in managing Palestinians' daily affairs and the security situation in the West Bank. For its part, Israel did not provide concrete deliverables that would allow reformists to argue reform was producing deoccupation such as curbed Israeli military operation in PA-controlled areas or extended PA authority to additional areas in the West Bank.

Reform, however, was treated as a priority by the international community, particularly the United States

at the highest level under President Bush. This robust support was crucial in protecting reform and providing a margin of effectiveness for its proponents, given that the Fatah leadership was not willing to confront an American president heavily invested in reform's success. But this support was not without problems. Reform was closely identified with Fayyad, and was often referred to as "Fayyadism," exposing the inherent tension between the objective of building institutions *qua* institutions and the need to support individual reformers, even if the latter approach risked personalizing reform as an issue. Indeed, opponents of reform highlighted American support in order to paint Fayyad as a U.S. implant into Palestinian politics.

When the Obama administration took office in 2009, the focus shifted toward resuming negotiations with the Israelis and away from internal Palestinian reform. Sensing waning international attention to reform, President Abbas replaced Prime Minister Fayyad in 2013.

Although relatively short-lived, Palestinian reform did have a political impact. At a baseline, the prioritization of reform by the international community enabled Palestinian reformists to emerge, with Fayyad the most visible example. Fayyad was also one of a small handful of Palestinian leaders to rise to national prominence without the backing of an established political party. More generally, given Palestinian political stagnation, Fayyad is one of the few new Palestinian leaders to emerge, period, in the last decade, and he remains active on the political scene. In addition, while governance did not displace liberation as the primary focus for the Palestinian public, the reforms themselves improved Palestinians' sense of personal security and their economic prospects. While the long-held negative public perception of the PA was slow to change, opinion polls showed Palestinians gradually improving their perceptions of PA transparency. All these factors helped promote stability in the West Bank and injected new, albeit limited, energy into Palestinian politics.

Against the transformative potential of governance reform, Fayyad's experience also showed its limitations. While opinion surveys indicated public support for reform, this did not translate into political capital or an electoral constituency. In the 2006 PLC elections, the list

headed by Fayyad only managed to secure two seats, and polls have shown little change since. Given the threat reform represents to established political actors who benefit from the status quo, emerging Palestinian reformists are especially vulnerable, and their agendas require sustained international support until they can take hold. Unless coupled with a convincing promise that it will provide a path to Palestinian statehood, reform remains insufficient on its own as a platform for a new type of Palestinian politics.

Lessons for U.S. Policy

Political stagnation, a weakened civil society, and poor governance are creating a combustible situation among Palestinians, a scenario worsened by the crisis of legitimacy facing national political and governing structures. Indeed, institutional weakness could threaten the very viability of the PA. The legitimacy crisis also contributes to a volatile security situation, as witnessed by the wave of individualized terrorist attacks against Israelis since late 2015. Eventually, such volatility could erupt in ways that affect U.S. interests and policy objectives. Yet Washington can only influence the state of affairs among Palestinians on certain fronts.

When it comes to rejuvenating political parties, there is little the United States can do directly. Hamas is a terrorist organization that Washington cannot and should not engage. Stagnation within Fatah, meanwhile, owes not only to a lack of skill or professionalism within its ranks—issues that can be addressed through U.S. technical assistance—but also to a lack of political will to rejuvenate. Indeed, President Abbas has been consistently tightening his grip on the movement and regards doing so as an existential matter. For Abbas and other Fatah leaders, the political calculus behind various actions is highly local and, as such, not amenable to U.S. influence.

Short of direct intervention in the minutiae of Palestinian politics, however, the United States can pay more attention to undemocratic policies and actions by the PA. Calling out PA violations of human rights and political freedoms, and attaching a cost to such violations,

will help create an environment in which new political voices can emerge. Additionally, the United States should continue to engage with neighboring regional allies that have greater influence on and understanding of Palestinian domestic politics, particularly Jordan and Egypt, to gain deeper insight into these countries' concerns and potentially support measures they may be willing to undertake to encourage Palestinian leaders to reinvent their political structures.

Similarly, with civil society, the fundamental questions on overcoming impediments to change can only be answered by the Palestinians themselves. Recognizing this limitation, Washington can take certain steps to maintain the viability of this sector. In addition to direct support to NGOs providing valuable services to the public, the United States can push back against PA policies intended to constrain civil society before such policies take deep hold. As demonstrated by successful recent European pushback against attempts by the PA to penalize and coerce NGOs, external pressure can effectively convince the PA to reverse such measures. But just as efforts must be in place to protect civil society, measures are needed to ensure that support for NGOs is transparent and used as intended.

The area in which the United States can be most effective is governance reform. Under the Bush administration, U.S. policy demonstrated compellingly that a sustained U.S. commitment to reform, in addition to improving the effectiveness, legitimacy, and stability of PA institutions, can empower reformers and facilitate their rise into national politics. But for such a policy to succeed, it needs to have support from senior quarters in the U.S. administration, be sustained in order to protect reforms and reformers when the process is most vulnerable, and be accompanied by deliverables that enable reformers to argue convincingly that their efforts are contributing to Palestinian independence.

Traditionally, U.S. policy toward Palestinians focused on negotiations—and rightly so, since Palestinian-Israeli peace can only be achieved through U.S.-led diplomacy. Yet the stagnation of Palestinian politics and the growing lack of legitimacy of Palestinian political structures and governance institutions deeply impede the Palestinians' ability to conclude a conflict-ending

peace deal, and present risks of their own. Whether in the context of active negotiations or—as seems likely in the foreseeable future—in the absence thereof, addressing Palestinian politics, particularly in the area of

governance, where Washington can be most effective, can help advance U.S. values, create conditions for reformers to emerge, bring about stability, and improve the prospects for peace.



THE NARROWING FIELD OF SYRIA'S OPPOSITION

■ JAMES BOWKER & ANDREW J. TABLER

IN MARCH 2011, Syrians took to the streets to demand the fall of their country's dictator, Bashar al-Assad. With calls for dignity, freedom, and democracy, secular protestors organized Local Coordination Committees to plan demonstrations, especially on Fridays, pressing for a more representative and pluralistic Syria. The Assad regime responded with live gunfire and an escalation of arrests. As soldiers from the Syrian army defected to neighboring countries and members of an initially peaceful opposition picked up weapons to fight back, the emerging opposition formed Revolutionary Councils to coordinate between civil bodies in various "liberated" areas of Syria and armed groups fighting the Assad regime.

These early Assad opponents were geographically based and primarily secular in their orientation and goals. But as UN-backed diplomacy in spring 2012 failed to yield a political solution to the crisis and U.S. president Barack Obama rejected a plan to arm the nascent Syrian militia seeking to take down Assad, the task was left to America's Arab Gulf allies. Quickly, Free Syrian Army (FSA) brigades became marginalized, while Is-

lamist groups—particularly Salafi-jihadists whose ideology was closer to Gulf-based Salafism than to any native Syrian belief system—became the most effective fighting forces. They were able to deploy fighters across multiple provinces where local armed groups had remained tied primarily to their communities.

Six years later, despite the country's devastation, groups still exist that espouse the opposition's original goal of bringing about a more democratic and pluralistic Syria in keeping with its diverse demographic makeup. However, these groups are few and increasingly far between, with years of war having driven both the regime and the opposition to extremes, and increasingly to Shiite-Sunni sectarianism. Indeed, a symbiosis between Shiite and Sunni groups has emerged: the Assad regime has come to rely more and more on Hezbollah and Shiite militias to maintain its hold on power, while the Sunni ultraextremist Islamic State has overrun half of Syrian territory.

The remaining opposition groups that emphasize pluralism, religious tolerance, and individual free-

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doms—rejecting exclusivist, intolerant, and sharia-based agendas—consist primarily of exiled organizations or figures, armed FSA formations who defend their communities but still rely on Salafists or jihadists to take offensive actions, and marginalized opposition groups tolerated by the Assad regime. Further complicating the landscape has been the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and its armed People's Protection Units (YPG), a Kurdish group spawned by the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which the United States considers a terrorist organization. Despite this designation, U.S. officials now rely on the PYD as the political arm of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a Kurdish-majority multiethnic fighting group that Washington hopes can root out the Islamic State in Raqqa and elsewhere in Syria. Another emerging opposition player, the Turkish-supported Euphrates Shield, is likewise muddying the field.

While not addressing grassroots activists, this paper sketches the remaining non-Islamist, pluralistically inclined groups involved in the Syrian conflict, with an eye toward which groups the United States could potentially work with when the war finally ends.

External Opposition

The Syrian opposition-in-exile, represented broadly by the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), has made a point of using language committed to secularism, democracy, and pluralism. Nevertheless, it has become increasingly irrelevant over time owing to infighting, corruption, and the stagnating negotiations. The SNC, formed in November 2012, originally included well-known opposition figures, representatives from various Syrian civic associations, political parties, and Kurdish and Turkmen groups. Nestled next to its two principles of “overthrowing the Syrian regime” and refusing to negotiate, the body lists among its goals “a democratic, pluralistic Syria based on the rule of law and [a] civil State,” while also announcing it does not tolerate “acts of revenge and retribution against any group in Syria.”¹ While this language would make the coalition an ideal partner for the United States ideologically, the SNC has been significantly un-

dermined by the increasing alienation its inefficiency and corruption have engendered in Syria.

The basis of the current SNC is the Syrian National Council, formed in October 2011 in Istanbul by a group of Syrian oppositionists, many of whom were already in exile because of the Assad regime's refusal to respond to months of protests with anything but violence. At that point, the Syrian National Council stated explicitly that “to overthrow the regime and [facilitate] the establishment of a pluralistic democratic system” was among its tasks.² However, more secular-oriented members of the council balked at the presence of a bloc from the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, prompting the Brotherhood to release a document committing the group to a democratic, pluralistic future Syria.³

The council began to coordinate governance and military efforts later inherited by the SNC, which was formed in response to U.S. urging for a more inclusive opposition umbrella group. In the new arrangement, the council remained the SNC's main bloc. The SNC gained recognition from many foreign countries as a legitimate representative—if not the only representative—of the Syrian people. In March 2013, it established the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), which has made efforts to provide municipal services to opposition-controlled areas through local councils.

However, these efforts were plagued from the outset by corruption and squabbling. By early 2014, the SIG found itself unable to pay employees and therefore largely reliant on Qatari funding, putting it in competition with Saudi-backed SNC blocs. Former SIG employees have complained that Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood exerted undue influence in the SNC as well as the SIG.⁴ While some humanitarian efforts continued to be channeled through the SIG and associated civic councils still in Syria, the SNC was increasingly marginalized because of its ineffectiveness.

That ineffectiveness was evident at the various international peace talks held since 2014. The SNC participated in the largely unproductive 2014 Geneva II negotiations, although the decision to attend the talks sparked internal divisions that led to a threat to leave by the Syrian National Council bloc. At an opposition conference in Riyadh in December 2015, nine members of the SNC were chosen

to join the thirty-three-member High Negotiation Committee to represent the Syrian opposition in the February 2016 Geneva III talks. To date the broadest-based opposition body, the High Negotiation Committee includes armed groups such as the influential Islamist factions Ahrar al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam. However, as demonstrated by the exclusion of opposition members from the talks in Astana between the armed groups, Turkey, Iran, and pro-regime forces, the external opposition has no productive role in negotiations.

While SNC member Riad Hijab was originally selected as the head of the High Negotiation Committee—although not as its chief negotiator—the fact that the committee was formed at all reflects the SNC’s lack of clout. Furthermore, the local councils of three of the provinces with the strongest opposition presence—Aleppo, Hama, and Idlib—announced their withdrawal from the SNC in June 2016, citing the coalition’s inability “to meet the ambitions of the people of the Syrian revolution.”⁵

Moreover, the local councils’ move reflected a widespread frustration, if not antagonism, toward the SNC on the ground in Syria. While secular politicians living outside Syria have continued to rearrange themselves into different blocs and coalitions, towns and cities remain besieged, aid goes undelivered, and barrel bombs continue to fall, fundamentally marginalizing these outside players. At the same time, their involvement in negotiations in European cities has not yielded results. As a common rhyming refrain in Syria goes, these secularists are the rebels “in the hotels, not the trenches.”

Armed “Moderates”

Reliably identifying moderate rebels in Syria—those fighting for a future rule of law based on pluralism and democratic mechanisms—is a nearly impossible task. As the war has turned more sectarian, the lip service paid to secular, pluralist values—which was tainted as the empty discourse of the secular regime—increased in parallel with the growing presence of Islamist groups. As fighting groups have disbanded, reformed, and joined broader coalitions, the ability to ascertain whether fighters in a given brigade envision a future Syrian government re-

sembling anything like Jeffersonian democracy has grown more difficult. Some may find themselves fighting with radical brigades simply because these brigades are most effective. Finally, image-conscious armed groups have tailored their presentation to reflect the ideology of their backers, whether it has meant shaving or growing out their beards. The resulting conformity in appearance has further complicated the task of pinpointing ideologies.

As it stands, the FSA exists as a series of local brigades with notop-down command structure organizing their activity—or ensuring ideological uniformity throughout the country. The traditional signifier for such groups, the three-star Syrian republic flag—adopted as a symbol of the revolution in 2011 and then by the FSA—places a group outside the realm of Salafi-jihadism, but it does not indicate much about that group’s political agenda. Indeed, some groups are too small to have even developed such an agenda.

Many of the groups vetted for U.S. support, most notably in the form of TOW missiles, incorporate Islamic themes into their names or logos, indicating that the U.S. process considers what rebel groups *don’t* say—incitement through sectarian language or promotion of an exclusivist Islamist program—as much as what they do. Indeed, a few rebel groups are on record as using language supporting democratic and inclusive values, including Division 13 in the north, the Southern Front coalition in the south, and the New Syrian Army (NSA), operating until recently from headquarters near the eastern border with Iraq.⁶

While the SNC nominally claims leadership over FSA forces, it clearly does not exercise such leadership in practice. Rebels operate based on local battlefield exigencies, and the SNC is too disorganized to handle aid delivery, let alone coordinate the hundreds of rebel formations throughout Syria. Further, these groups operate in battlefield environments where larger and better-organized Islamist groups throw their weight around, dominating regional coalitions and operations rooms that have been crucial to rebel gains.

In particular, the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra—and its later incarnations, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham—has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to wipe out the FSA brigades it dislikes because they either have Western backing or are competing for

influence. Moreover, while FSA-flavor groups have tended to join coalitions that exclude Jabhat al-Nusra and more extremist entities, they share an enemy. As such, they are forced not only to cooperate tacitly on the same frontlines as hard-core Islamist brigades, but also to rely on the intercession of these brigades to prevent Jabhat al-Nusra from chasing them out of their territory.⁷

The situation in southern Syria is less complicated, although not without questions. The February 2014 charter of the FSA's Southern Front, the umbrella coalition for brigades fighting primarily in Deraa province, provides unambiguous language on their ideological commitment:

We represent many classes but our goal is one: to topple the Assad regime and give Syria a chance at a better future. There is no room for sectarianism and extremism in our society, and they will find no room in Syria's future. The Syrian people deserve the freedom to express their opinions and to work toward a better future.

The Southern Front's constituent brigades also voice more support for inclusive values, albeit not by much. However, some Syria commentators have noted that the use of more-inclusive language simply represents a tactic to clear hurdles to access to Western backing and weapons.⁸

In the east, the FSA has not recovered from the Islamic State's rapid summer 2014 takeover of most of Syria's Deir al-Zour province. However, in November 2015, the NSA announced its formation along with its goal of expelling the Islamic State (IS) from the region. A U.S.- and Jordan-backed project, the group correspondingly prioritized fighting IS locally in Deir al-Zour over combating the Assad regime.⁹ But the group experienced little early success. Beyond capturing the al-Tanf border crossing that serves as its base, the group was beaten back by IS in its only major offensive, at Abu Kamal—citing the redirection of U.S. air support to IS targets in Iraq as the cause—and its activity has been otherwise limited to hit-and-run raids. The failure of the NSA to recruit and mount successful operations, despite being situated along a friendly border and unencumbered by the multiplicity of enemies in theaters like northern Syria, highlights the difficulties the United States faces in finding capable partners in even the best of circumstances. At

the same time, the controversy surrounding the redirected air support adds credence to widespread rebel complaints about fickle U.S. support. Further, it underscores the claim that even when the United States does find opposition forces willing to operate within U.S. ideological and operational parameters, such as those in Iraq, American support can be unreliable.

Democratic Union Party

The PYD, a Kurdish leftist political party with a parallel military structure known as the YPG, has received support from Western countries looking for a non-regime-affiliated partner in Syria that clearly articulates commitments to secularism and pluralism. The group, formed in Syria in 2003, grew out of the Turkey-based PKK when the Damascus government ended its unofficial sponsorship of the group, a policy pursued for leverage against Ankara.¹⁰

The PYD, like the PKK, adheres to the ideology and philosophies espoused by the Kurdish nationalist Abdullah Ocalan, who has been imprisoned in Turkey since 1999, after being forced to flee Syria. During his time in prison, Ocalan melded various strands of Western political philosophy into a proposed system for grassroots direct democracy for a wider Kurdish-majority region, a system he dubbed "Democratic Confederalism."

In his writing, Ocalan describes the system as "a type of political self-administration where all groups of the society and all cultural identities can express themselves in local meetings."¹¹ Although the 2014 social contract governing the three areas under de facto PYD control in northern Syria—Afrin, Kobane, and Jazira—does not make specific reference to Ocalan or his theory, the articles outlining the principles and mechanisms of democratic self-administration there closely mirror Ocalan's.¹² The charter also identifies itself as "a confederation of Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Arameans, Turkmens, Armenians, and Chechens" and lays out its goals as "freedom, justice, dignity, and democracy...led by principles of equality and environmental sustainability."¹³

Currently, the PYD/YPG, along with its Women's Protection Units (YPJ) and security branch, the Asayesh, con-

trols the swath of territory covered by the 2014 charter, an area referred to as Rojava, or alternatively Western Kurdistan. Although formally Rojava is governed by a coalition known as the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM), which consists of six parties including the PYD, many analysts claim the PYD is using TEV-DEM to place a democratic veneer on a PYD-dominated system.¹⁴

Indeed, evidence suggests PYD human rights abuses and practices at odds with the group's democratic principles. Part of the problem is that in the Rojava area, only 60 percent of a total population numbering some two million is Kurdish.¹⁵ In particular, a 2015 Amnesty International report documented the razing and forced displacement by the YPG and Asayesh of non-Kurdish villages in northeastern Syria.¹⁶ A year earlier, a Human Rights Watch report documented "arbitrary arrests, abuse in detention, due process violations, unsolved disappearances, and the use of children in PYD security forces."¹⁷

The Human Rights Watch report also pointed to the targeting of Kurdish political parties that oppose the PYD. These parties operate nominally under the banner of the Kurdistan National Council (KNC), which has consistently criticized the PYD, including the social charter in 2014 and later gestures. After the PYD and affiliated parties announced the formal incorporation of the Federation of Northern Syria–Rojava in March 2016, the KNC members vehemently denounced the move, calling it "unilateral" and "reckless."¹⁸

The PYD fed charges of heavy-handedness when it arrested the head of the KNC in Hasaka in August 2016.¹⁹ At the same time, the PYD may have dispelled long-standing questions over its allegedly warm relationship with the Syrian regime by expelling remaining regime militias from Hasaka city. Although the regime had never formally recognized Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria, it had tolerated the de facto situation there, withdrawing much of its military presence.

Some analysts speculate that the PYD's militant PKK roots prevent the group from abandoning a top-down system of rule and sincerely implementing a project more secular and democratic than any others evidently on display in Syria. As an International Crisis Group report commented, this heritage has "encumbered the party with a rigid culture and vague program that are out of sync with

popular expectations."²⁰ All the same, the United States, having little leverage on the Syrian battlefield, has few if any other alternatives for combating the Islamic State.

Syrian Democratic Forces

The SDF is the official umbrella military force of Rojava and, as such, has been primarily engaged in fighting the Islamic State. The core of the SDF consists of Kurdish YPG and YPJ fighters, with the remaining brigades a mix of Arab and minority armed groups. The proportion of YPG fighters in the SDF seems to support a prevailing hypothesis that the SDF was created to provide the YPG with a cover of inclusiveness by incorporating token FSA and non-Kurdish brigades.

An anti-IS force with proven effectiveness, the SDF has been a steady recipient of U.S. support, benefiting from assistance by U.S. Special Forces and anti-IS coalition air support. Notably, the PYD, as the YPG's military wing, employs the same language on and commitments to secular democracy, but it likewise faces accusations of unsavory tactics, including forced conscription and forced displacement.

While many of the non-YPG brigades in the SDF may be considered secular and democratic by dint of their association with the SDF, nonideological factors such as "bandwagoning" and receiving U.S. funding are other possible motivators. Many of the non-YPG and FSA groups in the SDF actively demonstrate a commitment to pluralism as mixed-ethnicity battalions. Should the SDF become increasingly involved in executing the PYD's heavy-handed orders, or should U.S.-SDF cooperation fragment, the United States could consider these groups for an alternative ground force.

Euphrates Shield

In August 2016, Turkish tanks and Special Forces entered Syria to support a coalition of FSA brigades in retaking the border city of Jarabulus from the Islamic State. The cross-border action marked the beginning of Operation Euphrates Shield, which was aimed at retaking IS-controlled territory and ultimately progress-

ing south to the city of al-Bab. Turkey's unannounced but immediately clear ulterior motive was to prevent the linkage of the PYD's Afrin and Kobane cantons. In short order, Euphrates Shield retook Dabiq—a symbolic victory given the town's important place in IS eschatology—and its brigades now control the city of al-Bab. Several of these FSA battalions have, in addition to fighting IS, clashed directly with SDF forces.

An estimated two to three thousand rebel fighters are associated with the Turkish operation, including many long-established FSA brigades operating on multiple fronts in northern Syria. Whereas Turkey has historically supported some such groups, others have received TOW missiles from the U.S.-led anti-IS coalition. As with other rebel coalitions in Syria, the brigades of Euphrates Shield do not warrant being painted with one ideological brush.

Some brigades, such as Division 13 and the al-Mutasim Brigade, are familiar FSA groups that have publicly mentioned democracy as part of their political vision.²¹ Yet, like nearly all FSA brigades, none of the Euphrates Shield member groups has a clear and comprehensive political program on record. The ambitions of some groups can be convoluted, given the web of alliances and players in Syria. For example, the leader of Liwa Ahfad Salah al-Din, a Kurdish-majority brigade in Euphrates Shield, was reluctant to identify his group as “secular” but emphasized its “civil and democratic nature,” while also criticizing the PYD's political program. The fact that this is one Euphrates Shield group also receiving coalition support is telling: public references to democracy are rare.

Nonsectarian FSA groups are also hard to find. For example, one of the groups supported by the SNC is named after an ancient Arab-Persian battle. Others work in alliance with Islamist brigades. Videos have surfaced of the Sultan Murad Division, one of the FSA Turkmen brigades in the coalition, in which the division's fighters torture other pro-YPG FSA fighters and YPG fighters.²² Even classic FSA “moderates”—those using the flag and the motto “Long live Syria, free and dignified”—require thorough vetting of individual leaders and members, since such individuals do not make statements that would clearly indicate their positions.

The United States is familiar with many of these groups, given their proximity to the Turkish border, where

the U.S. train-and-equip program, begun in fall 2014, was run. Accordingly, the United States has continued to support many of these groups in their fight against the Islamic State. However, the alliance is disjointed in terms of both coordination and ideology, with the unifying factor being opposition to the YPG and IS. To the extent possible, the United States, either unilaterally or by marshaling Turkish leverage, could push for vetted forces in Euphrates Shield to lead important campaigns should the SDF prove to be a troublesome partner.

Internal Opposition

Whereas the language of many groups acting on the ground in Syria is either vague on democracy or tinged with sectarianism (e.g., anti-Alawite or anti-Shiite or anti-Sunni), the platforms of Syria's internal opposition entities are explicit in their commitment to democracy. Yet these groups, which include the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change (NCB), the Building the Syrian State (BSS) movement, and the Popular Front for Change and Liberation, have been dubbed by the regime as the “patriotic opposition”²³ and are generally irrelevant, given their ultimate dependence on regime toleration. They thus hold little legitimacy or leverage in opposition-controlled areas.

The various Damascus-based opposition blocs formed throughout 2011 as protests continued and veteran opposition figures attempted to bring organization to the popular unrest. Whereas some of these opposition groupings would join the Syrian National Council, ultimately based in Istanbul, and later joined the larger SNC, the leaders and members of these parties for the most part remained in Damascus. The Popular Front for Change and Liberation is a legally recognized opposition party, which gained seats in the parliament after opposition parties were legalized in 2012. The NCB and BSS are both technically illegal opposition coalitions comprising smaller parties, and their leaders and members have been occasionally arrested by the regime.

All three parties espouse a future Syrian government based on democratic principles including equality, inclusivity, and a rejection of sectarianism. Although both the NCB and BSS take a more critical view of the Assad

regime, their stance does not even approach the vehemence of the external opposition. The NCB, which was formed first, has called for “prosecuting those responsible for violence”²⁴ and for an interim government, as well as other reforms. The BSS, created out of frustration with the NCB’s perceived ineffectiveness, “rejects dialogue while government troops operate against the opposition.”²⁵ Founder Louay Hussein has also said that the regime is “incapable of protecting the country.”²⁶

The NCB and BSS, like other internal opposition groups, share a rejection of foreign military intervention and the militarization of the opposition. In 2014, both the Popular Front and the NCB signed a memorandum of organization calling for “comprehensive grassroots change, which means the transition from the current authoritarian regime to a democratic pluralistic system within a democratic civil State based on the principle of equal citizenship to all Syrians regardless of their ethnic, religious, and sectarian identities.”²⁷

As already noted, these groups—among the more influential of the internal opposition—have little leverage over events on the ground. The Popular Front has only 5 of 250 seats in a Baath Party–dominated parliament, while the BSS and NCB attend what have proved to be sideshow conferences arranged by Russia and Egypt aimed at organizing Syria’s internal opposition. Their representation on the High Negotiation Committee in Geneva, itself a seemingly doomed process, is limited to a handful of advisory positions. In the meantime, the political calculus for any settlement changes on the ground rapidly, further marginalizing these groups.

Conclusion

Overall, many opponents of Syria’s autocratic Assad regime espouse pluralism, religious tolerance, and individual freedoms, while opposing Islamist and sharia-based agendas. Despite this, the degree to which such lofty goals meet the reality on the ground is increasingly in question, as the war’s bloody trajectory has led nearly all parties to use extreme means to pursue increasingly extreme and noninclusive goals.

In selecting groups to work with in Syria during and after its civil war, the United States will likely need to weigh criteria besides rhetoric to locate a middle ground between autocrats and extremists. Political organization, viability, and control of territory and constituencies will be key, as will the support such groups receive from Syria’s neighbors that have carved out spheres of influence inside the country.

Six years into the Syrian war, the United States has little to show for the billions of dollars it has spent proping up opponents of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. Yet as a de facto partition looms—and both the Assad regime and opposition face manpower shortages—Washington may yet be able to wield its influence more effectively. In the past, U.S. goals were often viewed through the lens of democracy promotion and regime change. In the future, by comparison, they are likely to be seen as efforts to both combat jihadism and hedge against the return of the durable safe havens in which jihadists train.

Notes

1. See the Syrian National Coalition charter, “Declaration by the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces,” <http://en.etilaf.org/coalition-documents/declaration-by-the-national-coalition-for-syrian-revolutionary-and-opposition-forces.html>.
2. “Syrian National Council,” National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, <http://en.etilaf.org/coalition-components/syrian-national-council.html>.
3. “Syrian Muslim Brotherhood: Pledge and Charter on Syria,” Carnegie Middle East Center, June 1, 2012, <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=48390>.
4. Xanthe Ackerman, “Here’s How Syria’s Opposition Government Essentially Went Broke,” *Vice News*, May 6, 2015, <https://news.vice.com/article/heres-how-syrias-opposition-government-essentially-went-broke>.
5. “Several Local Councils Withdraw from National Coalition, Calling for Its Restructure” (in Arabic), *Smart News*, June 7, 2016, <http://washin.st/2o2MPSv>.

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7. Sam Heller, "Are Syria's Rebels at Al Qaeda's Mercy?" Century Foundation, July 26, 2016, <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/syrias-rebels-al-qaedas-mercy/>.
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KUWAIT

Democracy Trumps Reform

■ DAVID POLLOCK

THE JULY 2017 headlines about a severe internal Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) crisis, pitting Qatar against Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain, note that the role of mediator falls to a fellow GCC member: Kuwait. This role befits Kuwait's status as a sort of middle ground, relative to its neighbors, in terms of several disputed issues: sectarian demographics, relations with Iran, and ties to Islamist parties or fundamentalist groups. In at least one respect, however, Kuwait stands out from many other Arab states today: it has a comparatively functional, stable, and peaceful system of parliamentary elections, including successful opposition candidates, a media environment freer than most, and an active network of relatively independent civil society organizations. So, on the face of it, Kuwait would seem to be a prime candidate for further progress toward something approaching Arab democracy, neither absolutely autocratic nor totally theocratic.

Yet, six years after the Arab Spring, Kuwait continues to present a series of 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 em-

powered democratically elected parliaments of any Arab state. Nevertheless, that parliament more often blocks rather than bolsters real political, social, or economic reform, and restricts rather than reinforces the country's struggling civil society beyond the chamber's walls. For the past fifteen years and more, the parliament has been dissolved by the emir, Sabah al-Ahmed al-Sabah, at irregular but frequent intervals amid increasingly raucous and rancorous public controversy. Moreover, sectarian tensions between the Sunni majority and the large Shia minority have risen steadily during the same period. Still, Kuwait remains largely stable, and when compared to so many other Arab societies, this little country remains a model of "consensual sects."¹

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All in all, politics in Kuwait represent more of a social safety valve than a vehicle for major policy changes, whether of the progressive or regressive sort. Autocrats, Islamists, and others jockey seriously and continually for power and privilege, but hardly anyone ever really wins or loses completely.² The would-be reformers, as explained in the following sections, are an exceedingly diverse lot, so they are unlikely ever to take over. Still, they effectively prevent either the autocrats or the Islamists from entirely controlling public life. In this sense, Kuwait's paradoxical and unusual situation can be considered something of a success story.

The Kuwaiti Context

Ten years ago, the author published a monograph about Kuwaiti politics that raised these introductory questions, all but one of which are still relevant today:

- What is the outlook for stability or reform in this evolving yet still essentially traditional society and governing system?
- How will it deal with possible democratic, demographic, and Islamist challenges?
- Will its fabulous oil wealth be more of a lubricant for, or a solvent of, the social sinews that have held it together?
- What is the likely spillover effect on Kuwait of the continuing crisis in Iraq, and of the emergence of Iran as a major contender for regional influence?

The sole question that is no longer relevant is the one about Kuwait's "fabulous oil wealth." Oil prices, on which the whole economy critically depends, skyrocketed to record highs throughout much of the last decade, only to plummet to historic lows in the past three years. The calamitous drop in oil prices, which shows no sign of a major reversal, means that the country is running a budget deficit for the first time in fifteen years. Kuwait is now compelled to borrow money, slash spending, and contemplate cutting consumer subsidies and even imposing a corporate income tax. Those prospects were primarily responsible for the emir's decision in late 2016

to prorogue the parliament and force a new election, despite the risks of losing his solid loyalist majority in that body and reviving large segments of the opposition. The question today is how this relative austerity or at least economic contraction will affect Kuwaiti politics, civil society, and public life generally over the coming years.

Before answering that question, another, logically preceding one must first be addressed: what else has changed in and around Kuwait over the past decade? The answer is everything and nothing. Just beyond the country's borders, the region has undergone incredible turmoil: the Arab Spring and its disastrous turn to civil wars, the startling spread of Iranian influence and murderous Sunni-Shia conflicts, the rise and fall of the Islamic State, and more. Inside Kuwait, over the same ten years, numerous parliaments and elections have come and gone; protest demonstrations and unrest erupted on an unusually sustained basis in 2011–13, among both youth and tribal elements of society; and the country's overall population of both citizens and expatriates increased by nearly 50 percent.

One astute young Kuwaiti political analyst, tellingly writing under a pseudonym to avoid prosecution, put it this way in late 2016:

Since 2006, corruption and incompetence have reached unparalleled lows in Kuwait, which stirred an opposition movement among all shades of society. The movement reached unprecedented levels in 2011, removing a sitting prime minister and presumptive heir to the throne, and along the way revived the all but dead nationalists and communists, galvanized the popular yet unorganized socialists, and reenergized the thriving Islamists. The movement has since receded, but with the increased government corruption and incompetence, it is bound to rekindle and gain momentum.³

Public, very concrete allegations of rampant corruption are common in Kuwait. One candidate for parliament in 2016, Abdullah al-Treiji, listed the Dow Chemical Company, the distribution of agricultural properties, and the Olympic Council of Asia as cases in point.⁴

Such charges ring more loudly lately because oil wealth is no longer the panacea for widespread cor-

ruption and favoritism in high places. On the contrary, the steep decline in oil prices and revenues is forcing Kuwait's government to contemplate painful cuts to the comfortable welfare-state cushion across the board. In this environment, popular pressures for good governance and even political transformation take on newly compelling urgency and resonance.

But the government's reaction so far has largely been to impose even tighter restrictions on freedom of expression and civil society—beyond those first instituted in response to the Arab Spring—rather than address the root problem.

Nevertheless, the November 27, 2016, parliamentary election suggested that Kuwait's main political and social issues, procedures, personalities, and overall trends and characteristics have hardly changed at all. As a subsequent section will explore in detail, various veteran opposition figures did score some electoral successes, but more than half the new deputies remain government loyalists. The country seems permanently stuck being among the most democratic but least dynamic of the entire region. Raucous political debate, yes; revolution or even real reform, probably not.

To be sure, a different way of expressing that paradox is to claim that Kuwait has remained among the most stable states in the region, even in the face of looming external and internal challenges. Moreover, this alternative view probably helps explain a lot about Kuwait's predicament.

Kuwaiti Public Opinion

Many, maybe most Kuwaitis, even if they are dissatisfied or disappointed with the status quo, nevertheless prefer it to the uncertainty of radical change—and certainly to the chaos and bloodshed they see all around them in the wider region. A rare political poll, supervised by the author in late 2015, showed that Kuwaitis overwhelmingly reject the most extreme version of Islamism, namely the Islamic State (or Daesh, in colloquial Arabic). A mere 3 percent rated the group at all favorably. Moreover, asked to pick their first and second priorities for Kuwait's foreign policy, respondents chose "the conflict against Daesh" over any of the five other choices offered.

The same survey, however, offers some insight into other axes of public opinion polarization. One axis is the sectarian divide. Around a quarter of Kuwaitis voice a positive view of both Iran and Hezbollah—roughly reflecting the proportion of Shia among Kuwait's citizens, and a higher percentage than in all other Arab publics polled, except plurality-Shia Lebanon. In sharp contrast, the majority of Kuwaitis say they have either a "fairly negative" (33 percent) or "very negative" (41 percent) attitude toward the government of Iran. And Iran's ally Hezbollah gets even more negative (78 percent) ratings.⁵

Given these views, and the disparity among different segments of the public, it should come as no surprise that many Kuwaitis are concerned both about Iran and about sectarian strife. From the list of six possible foreign policy priorities, "the conflict between Iran and Arab countries" and "the conflict between sects or movements of Islam" were tied for first place—each with about 20 percent of the total. In addition, just 15 percent of the overall public expected any improvement in Kuwait's own relations with Iran over the next few years.

On internal political issues, polling data are exceedingly sparse, and one must settle for educated estimates. One young Kuwaiti scholar provides this perspective:

Roughly only a tenth of Kuwaitis desire true democracy with a constitutional monarchy preserving the [symbolic] status of the ruling family. Another tenth prefer to live under absolute monarchy, while the remaining majority seek varying degrees of reform to the current system that would more or less preserve the status quo. This may be attributed to affluence, fear of change, and a lack of positive examples of democracies in the region.⁶

This seems a plausible assessment, given the hard data about widely perceived internal and external threats. In such circumstances, caution is likely to be the preferred option for most people. As a result, when considering the prospects for reform in Kuwait, expectations of popular support for drastic changes should be adjusted downward. In this respect, too, little has changed since the author wrote ten years ago that many Kuwaitis seem grudgingly content with "their own middling mixture of

oil-based affluence and traditional social surroundings, somewhere in between the atmosphere of Dhahran and Dubai.”⁷ More appealing than revolution or even dramatic reform to most Kuwaitis, and therefore more plausible, is a series of modest steps toward meeting certain popular demands. With that backdrop in mind, the next sections explore some of the most salient actors and avenues for gradual progress in that direction.

Islamists vs. Reformists

Activist advocates of change in Kuwait, a small but significant group, appear roughly evenly divided between Islamists and others, including an incongruous mixture of nationalist, populist, liberal, and tribal elements. The Islamists are themselves internally divided between Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and Salafi types, with the latter further split into pro- and anti-government factions.

Kuwaiti civil society is likewise divided. Some informal liberal or protest organizations have sprouted in the last few years, such as the anti-corruption National Committee to Monitor Violations, the student-oriented “Orange” and “Fifth Fence” groupings—which backed demonstrations and opposition parliamentary candidates—women’s support groups, and the Popular Action Movement (“Hashd”), which initially demanded serious political concessions but then split apart under government pressure. Such groups, however, are outnumbered and outspent by the recognized, mostly Islamic formal charity organizations. A partial roster tells the story: the Social Reform Society, Islamic Heritage Restoration Society, Direct Aid, Sheikh Abdullah al-Nouri Charitable Society, Prisoners’ Solidarity Society, Sunna Sciences Society, Kuwait Relief, al-Najat Charitable Society, Good Tidings Charity, and Patients Helping Fund Society.

All such social action groups are eclipsed by the panoply of more traditional Kuwaiti social gathering salons, whether of the Sunni (*diwaniya*) or Shia (*husseiniyah*) persuasion. These highly informal yet influential forums are the real arenas where much of Kuwait’s public policy is debated and initiated. Overall, however, they are fragmented by their individual focus on clan, local, or—at most—community interests and

issues. They rarely coalesce in any practical way. In part as a result of these divisions, no major policy departures, either reactionary/religious or relatively progressive, from either overtly political or civil society actors, appear on the near-term horizon.

For the medium term, the MB is probably the strongest of the lot. While no party is formally recognized, in the words of one local observer, it is

the only organized political party with a substantial following. Other parties either lack organization and structure or have only a small number of subscribers... Readiness on the ground puts the Brotherhood at an advantage to capitalize on sociopolitical change when it happens. Perhaps, similar to North Africa, Islamists are destined to be the gate through which democracy makes its debut in the Gulf.⁸

Indeed, at least one outside expert makes a powerful argument that Kuwaiti Islamists are already becoming less Islamist and more reformist. Courtney Freer writes that lately the movement “has emphasized compromise and gradualist reform over radical domestic political transformation...put aside their strict social agendas and worked more closely with non-Islamist opposition to advance common democratic aims.”⁹ Significantly, she sees this evolution as characteristic of several different strands of Kuwaiti Islamist organizations, from the MB-affiliated Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM) to the Salafists to some smaller groupings.

So far, however, this pragmatic tendency exists mostly in the realm of rhetoric, not action. Even so, it reflects not so much ideological evolution as practical necessity in response to the severe constraints imposed by the country’s competing political and social forces. And if the Islamists in Kuwait are patient, it is because alongside the country’s active and comparatively open political and commercial life, Kuwaiti society is already traditionally Islamic in many ways: no alcohol, no public eating during Ramadan, heavy doses of traditional Islamic education, sharia-based family law, and much more.

The next test will come in Kuwait’s incoming parliament, where Islamist and other opposition or independent members working in tandem could conceivably

muster a majority for significant reforms—especially in the economic but possibly also in the social or even political arena. If that happens, and if the royal family and its acolytes acquiesce, then perhaps the entire premise of this essay series will require refinement. At least in Kuwait, it will no longer be a matter of reform “beyond autocrats or Islamists” but rather of reformists, autocrats, and Islamists all engaged in pursuing incremental changes. Whether those changes will be truly significant or merely marginal lowest-common-denominator ones is necessarily an open question. So far, however, the historical pattern of marginal changes appears to be repeating itself.

So Who Are the Real Reformers?

In the longer term, there is some prospect that non-Islamist reformers might take the lead. The Kuwaiti observer cited before notes that

The last wave of political protests [was] neither led by nor incited by the Islamists...And the majority of the protesters...were of tribal background...This will grant emerging liberal movements greater access to larger numbers of tribal youths. In addition, low oil prices will rid the Gulf’s populations of the curse of affluence, which has paralyzed them for decades...Against this backdrop, it is still possible for future parties leading the sociopolitical change to be liberal and secular...The demonization of the Brotherhood and the outdatedness of Salafists diminish the Islamists’ chances of leading the political future of the country in the long run.¹⁰

In this long-shot scenario, Kuwait could eventually evolve into something more like a European constitutional monarchy, where the royals reign but do not rule. Real power would probably be exercised through the democratic forms already in place, perhaps with new legal guarantees for minority rights and individual freedoms. Islam would become more of a private choice than a set of public policies. And this transformation would be accomplished peacefully, if not by acclamation or consensus.

If this seems utopian today, recall the surprises of the past six years. While it is true that many parts of the region are even now experiencing a wave of reaction or counterrevolution against the excesses and unbearable strains of those changes, the unprecedented, protracted economic squeeze caused by the downturn in energy prices is a wild card that makes even remote possibilities, such as the one outlined above, worthy of contemplation.

For now, Kuwait’s most authentic reformers are keeping a relatively low profile while they assess the limits of official tolerance. Among them are academics like Shafeeq Ghabra, writers like Saud Alsanousi, journalists like Muna al-Fuzai, young entrepreneurs like Sulaiman bin Jassem, NGO leaders like Khaled al-Fadala, and youth movement organizers like Tariq al-Mutairi of the Civil Democratic Movement (Arabic acronym: Hadam). Add to this list parliamentarians or ex-parliamentarians like Musallam al-Barrak, Marzouq al-Ghanim, and the lone woman in the newly elected chamber, Safa al-Hashem. These are all impressive and often courageous individuals. What remains highly uncertain is whether they can coalesce into a more coherent trend, attract greater popular support, and ultimately succeed in advancing a serious reform agenda.

Reform and the Royal Family

A key factor here, yet one often overlooked in discussions of this kind, is how the government will react to pressure for change. The emir and his entourage have more power than the elected parliament or any realistic extralegal challengers. But the relationship between Kuwait’s ruling Sabah family and the country’s civil society and reformist movements is a complex one.

On the one hand, intrafamilial splits over succession, particularly between two powerful nephews of the aging current emir, play out in mutual public allegations of corruption, which energize the opposition and prompt protests calling for reform. On the other hand, the Sabahs are past masters at selectively either suppressing or coopting potential opposition elements, whether sectarian, student, tribal, populist, or other,

thereby effectively short-circuiting any movement for major political or social change. The suppression aspect is epitomized by the jailing last year, even after many protests and appeals, of their most outspoken parliamentary critic, Musallam al-Barrak, and by increasingly draconian restrictions on media and social media. The cooptation is most evident in the quiet deals made recently with various tribes, factions, or civil society groups to compromise on some of their concerns in exchange for political quiescence.¹¹

In this delicate political dance, the royals almost surely enjoy the support of the “silent majority” of their subjects, wary as they must be of violent instability, Islamic extremism, and sectarian strife, or just intolerable uncertainty. This has especially been the case in the past four years, as civil wars worsened in other Arab states—while Islamic State terror spread even into Kuwait itself with the worst terrorist incident in recent memory: the bombing of a Shia mosque, at the cost of dozens of victims, in June 2015.

But there is now a new factor at work in this complex equation—long-term austerity compelled by lasting low oil prices. The Kuwaiti government currently has no choice but to borrow money, slash spending, or do both—potentially leading to new outcries for some kind of change, contradictory and controversial as those calls might be. It is still far from clear whether the royal family will respond to this dilemma with more repression or more reform. The most plausible scenario, as in the past, is some ad hoc, incremental, and most likely incoherent combination of the two.

In this situation, the stage is set for Kuwaiti reformers to press cautiously forward on a number of fronts. One obvious, albeit difficult, first step would be to push for a reversal of the tougher limits on freedom of expression and association imposed in the past few years. Fresh anti-corruption measures in return for acceptance of other economic reforms, including some needed belt-tightening initiatives, could be another step. In subsequent phases, more fundamental reforms could be considered, from the institution of a true parliamentary system requiring an affirmative vote of confidence on cabinet appointments to curtailment of the emir’s unrestricted right to dismiss the parliament altogether.

Kuwait’s November 2016 Election

On November 26, 2016, Kuwait held a snap parliamentary election for the seventh time in the past decade. The result in all cases has been political stability, but bordering on stagnation. True to form, Kuwait’s latest election, while seemingly boosting the country’s opposition forces, is likely to prolong this trend. The new postelection cabinet showcases some personnel and portfolio shifts but holds little promise of big policy departures. This exercise in limited Arab democracy provides some intriguing lessons about the larger themes from the preceding discussion.

The previous parliament was dismissed by the emir, as allowed by Kuwait’s constitution, after deputies insisted on their right to grill cabinet ministers regarding controversial policy proposals. In this case, those proposals were two-fold: first, a cut in petroleum subsidies and related forms of official largesse to cope with the drastic decline in oil prices, on which the government and the whole economy largely depend; and second, a further tightening of the ongoing security crackdown on free expression and association—including an unprecedented requirement that every resident of the country submit a DNA sample for purposes of identification and possible investigation.

Both proposals were widely and understandably unpopular. But rather than confront and decide on the issues directly, Kuwaiti officialdom typically took a “time-out” by calling an early election. Thus, the first lesson of this episode, really a reminder of previous ones: this parliamentary electoral maneuver usually works to defuse a political crisis but at the price of postponing any serious policy departures, often indefinitely.

Second, on a related note, this time the self-styled opposition dropped its boycott of the two previous elections and was thus able to score a dramatic comeback at the polls. These longstanding critics of Kuwaiti cabinets and government policies, as previously noted, are a mixed bunch, the more so because formal political parties are not allowed. Some are Sunni fundamentalists of the MB type, known locally as the ICM; others are more traditional Salafists; and still others emphasize populist, nationalist, or occasionally even liberal positions.

In this iteration, ICM candidates garnered around four of the fifty seats in parliament, plus an equal number of

sympathizers. Salafists did approximately the same. An additional eight or so seats went to candidates vaguely identified with other currents in the “loyal opposition,” mainly of the populist or nationalist sort. Altogether, about half the chamber will now be considered not pro-government. This stands in sharp contrast to the previous two parliaments, for which the opposition boycott guaranteed the government a solid majority of support. Significantly, fully thirty of the previous fifty members were not returned to office. In this sense, at least, the election serves as a renewed safety valve for accumulated frustrations that might otherwise have spilled over into serious protest demonstrations, as occurred sporadically between earlier elections in 2011–13.

Yet even now, roughly half the parliament will remain pro-government. This segment is also a motley crew: some hard-core royalists, some tribal followers, some “service deputies” associated with patronage or other royal family favors—and six deputies from the Shia minority of this majority–Sunni Muslim society. The nearly even balance between opposition and pro-government camps practically ensures both continued controversy and continued policy paralysis. Thus the outlook: stability in the streets, but little real reform.

In this newly elected parliament, mainly because the Sunni opposition is back in the game, the Shia “lost” three seats compared to the previous one. They will be way down from their seventeen seats in the 2011 parliament, which more nearly reflected their proportion in the electorate. Nevertheless, Shia remain active, vocal, and lawful participants in Kuwaiti politics, and in the country’s overall economic and public life. One could rightly say that in a region tragically replete today with bloody religious conflict, Kuwait remains an admirable oasis of calm and coexistence. It represents a victory, however fragile, for democracy over demography and a model of peaceful political intercourse between sects.

More broadly, though, how representative will Kuwait’s new parliament be of the country’s overall population? The answer is not so much. Turnout in this election was estimated at 70 percent, considerably higher than in other recent contests, as the opposition returned to the fray. And the poll was fiercely contested, with more than four hundred candidates initially competing for the fifty parliamen-

tary mandates. However, three-quarters of Kuwait’s population of 4.5 million are noncitizen expatriate workers, along with over 100,000 *bedoon* (stateless) Arab tribal residents in the border areas, none of whom can vote.

Women citizens, by contrast, are allowed to vote and run for office, with greater potential power than in any other GCC state. Around 10 percent of the original candidates in this electoral round were women. But only one was elected, roughly similar to previous outcomes, since Kuwaiti women were granted the franchise a decade ago. This will not be a diverse parliament in that respect, although it is a democratically elected one. Ironically, the handful of women who have served in Kuwait’s legislature have almost invariably supported the government rather than the opposition, which has often been either indifferent or actively hostile to women’s empowerment. As with the Shia minority, certain democratic rights and freedoms are sometimes seen as receiving better protection from above than from below. This is one more example of the tensions in Kuwait between the impulse for reform and the reluctance to risk a frontal challenge to the unsatisfying yet generally tolerable existing system.

Can Democracy and Reform Coexist?

Kuwait, in sum, is a curious case of formal democratic elections and other institutions that temper both autocracy and potential theocracy—but also tend to work against deeper political, social, or economic reform, and even against the full development of civil society. Within this unusual framework, the distribution of power among the palace, the Islamists, and the non-Islamist reformers or government critics creates a kind of equilibrium beneath a surface picture of continual political turmoil. The long-term potential for major change exists; but it is usually sidetracked by the realities of Kuwaiti public life: the electoral safety valve, the deep divisions among would-be agents of change from different directions or communities, the social conservatism of most Kuwaitis in general, and the heavy economic dependence of nearly all Kuwaiti citizens on the state.

This country is thus a useful counterexample to some of the most notorious stereotypes about Arab political

behavior. It demonstrates that oil wealth does not necessarily preclude some forms of democracy, belying the elegant but oversimplified proposition that in all rentier regimes there can be “no representation without taxation.” Its parliamentary experience suggests as well that, at least in some cases, Islamist participation in electoral politics can be accommodated within a pluralistic, essentially moderate framework.

And if Kuwait’s example supports one generalization about Arab reform, it is that monarchs can triangulate reform and stability at least as well as elected rulers. They can supply a kind of balance to other political forces, including Islamist ones. They can act as arbiters, allowing different players to contend without undermining their own ultimate authority—and thus allow reform to proceed at a measured pace. Clearly, that pace is too slow and uneven for some Kuwaitis, and perhaps too uncertain or permissive for others. Indeed, Kuwaitis do not agree among themselves about the desired nature of reform—which is one reason this hybrid monarchy with some democratic features continues to function, even if few are completely satisfied with it.

For U.S. policy, Kuwait should be considered another welcome exception to the “rule” that Arab democracy tends to produce either instability or some form of Islamist or sectarian rule. Kuwait, in particular, is still an important regional U.S. military outpost, global energy partner, and geographic buffer against potential Iranian aggression in the vital Gulf arena. Even if the Trump administration cares less about democracy abroad than did its predecessors, or perhaps about the Middle East altogether, it can breathe a sigh of relief that Kuwait’s election probably makes it at least one strategic ally whose internal stability need not worry Washington unduly. Kuwaiti politics are a fragile balance of reform, repression, and reaction; but this very fragility makes almost all the players careful not to rock the boat too hard.

Given Kuwait’s conservative political and economic instincts, it is unlikely to adopt any major reform initiatives on its own. Nor should it be prodded to do so; greater U.S. or other outside involvement in its domestic arena would probably be counterproductive. The ancient wisdom of “first, do no harm” should be carefully heeded here.

Notes

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THE ARAB SPRING AT SIX YEARS

Lessons and Prospects

■ HASSAN MNEIMNEH

ACROSS THE REGION, authoritarian governments have been reinvigorated as they struggle against ever more radicalized militant groups, contributing to a dire threat landscape. Yet the basic dynamic that doomed autocracies to collapse following the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 while casting doubt on Islamists' long-term prospects remains in place. Namely, Arab governments are still failing to foster conditions for social justice, liberty, dignity, and individual empowerment. Further complicating the situation are entanglement by outside actors and intensified regional rivalries, which have fueled as well as capitalized on factionalism.

As of early 2017, the region's open conflict pitted two familiar models of government against each other, the first rooted in paternalistic absolutism, the second seeking totalitarian rule in the name of religion. Both are inadequate, and if history is a judge, neither will be able to eliminate the other or to facilitate the greater openness and sustained prosperity demanded by Arab societies. An added stress on the current systems will be the heavy remediation and recovery needed in war-

ravaged states—especially Syria, Yemen, Libya. As a result, a third way may ultimately rise by necessity to successfully challenge the twin pillars of autocracy and theocracy. The Arab Spring may thus appear to have been not an aberration but instead a premature manifestation of a regional order moving toward justice, peace, and dignity, within the framework of representative and accountable governance.

The Road to the Arab Spring

An important predecessor event to the Arab Spring was Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion of Kuwait. Before the invasion, Arab states had kept a lid on any aggressive impulses toward each other in the interest of maintaining a common security arrangement. The breach of this compact and Iraq's subsequent occupation of Kuwait thus caused many observers to opine that the Arab po-

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litical order would crumble. This did not happen, but around the same time a range of Islamist movements grew throughout the region. These movements sought the overthrow of existing powers and espoused competing, if often incoherent, visions of how their respective governments should be shaped. In response, standing leaders invoked the Islamist specter as a reason to maintain the status quo.

Over the last quarter of the twentieth century, Islamism had emerged as a grand narrative touted to replace the operative ideologies—revolutionary socialism, irredentist nationalism, and elite liberalism—that had failed to deliver sustained prosperity and wide opportunity to the Arab world. Yet Islamists constituted an opposition devoid of vision, and struggled to articulate a plan to carry out their inclinations, thus allowing the Arab political order to persist. Around the same time, more liberal reformists found ample opportunities for expression in globalization and new media, an unprecedented common cultural space that allowed them to weigh their ideas and plans.¹ Autocrats and theocrats may have dominated the political process, but ideas for progressive change, including a rising demand for democratic reforms, became increasingly prevalent in this cultural milieu.

An early outcome revealed both the weaknesses of such movements and the limitations of the region's autocratic systems. In Algeria in the 1990s, later known as the Black Decade, attempts to liberalize a closed political system previewed the patterns of the Arab Spring. The pivotal event, whereby the Algerian military preempted an imminent Islamist political victory, dragged the country into a crippling conflict that drew international rebuke yet ultimately proved the resilience of autocracy. Even as, two decades later, Algeria's authoritarian system remains fundamentally unchanged,² the country never found the policy balance that would foster democracy while safeguarding security. The dilemma of finding such a balance became an international preoccupation following the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States.

In the broader developing world, the Arab states were often regarded as a negative "exception." Whereas countries in Latin America, Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Indian subcontinent met or exceeded their

development goals, while parlaying political reforms into more effective governance, Arab states struggled to meet such benchmarks. In particular, Arab citizens often perceived a contest between the immediate security and stability provided by their autocratic rulers, however rife with cronyism and corruption, and the destabilizing, if more potent, Islamist alternative. Exacerbating social, economic, and cultural stressors were rising demographic and environmental challenges. A shakeup, thus, struck many as inevitable, although when this would occur and how the international community would respond were subject to debate.³

Under the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations, the United States employed enhanced public diplomacy to foster civil society in the Arab world, showing an interest in promoting alternatives to autocracy or theocracy. Whether in Morocco, Jordan, Yemen, Lebanon, or Egypt, Washington sought direct contact with previously neglected political parties and civil society organizations, according them U.S.-sponsored training and opportunities to meet U.S. embassy officials as well as political visitors from Washington. The responses by Arab governments to these overtures, which were cast in the language of globalization, varied in their resistance. These governments feared the threat posed by such efforts to their legitimacy, and additionally saw an opportunity for stealth Islamists to gain Western acceptance.⁴ Although a full accounting of the impact of the Clinton and Bush administrations' engagement with Arab civil society is still due, it may indeed have empowered some worthy groups and causes—ranging from those advocating women's legal and legislative rights in Jordan and Lebanon to those alleviating social alienation through art in Morocco. Few such groups, however, realized a path to sustainability. More concerning still, these groups have inadvertently grown less responsive to their local audiences as they have become more reliant on the international donor community.

In the decade or so leading up to the Arab Spring, two autocracies that presented themselves as being on a path to democratization, Egypt and Tunisia, devised means to constrain U.S. empowerment of Arab civil society. Seeking to void the allegedly subversive effect of unchecked civil society activism, both governments

took measures such as increasing the regulatory burden on budding organizations. Another measure was to establish multiple organizations with more or less visible ties to government and acolytes, thus creating the semblance of a civil society while syphoning funds and attention from more organic initiatives. It was clear that the civil society route, as a low-cost, low-risk, but also low-potential pathway to reform, would not be the solution to the regional malaise. Regime change may have been deemed ultimately inevitable, but neither the agency of such change nor the shape of the alternatives was conceptualized.

Between the early 1970s and the Arab Spring, the only Arab state to experience true regime change was Iraq. And this development came not from internal forces but rather from the outside invasion led by the United States in 2003. This effort, which sought to replace Saddam Hussein's dictatorship with a representative and accountable government, yielded mediocre results at best, while stirring a bloody years-long insurgency. Nor did the intended domino effect, whereby other Arab states would adopt democracy after the Iraqi model, play out. Instead, the regional order remained as it was. Indeed, pointing to the mayhem in Iraq, neighboring governments cited the country as proof that toppling regimes yielded only further misery. The authoritarian Arab political order thus became more secure in asserting its permanence. Whereas in 2005 the Egyptian government felt compelled to practice a degree of fairness in its conduct of parliamentary elections, by 2010, confident in its own impunity, it not only eliminated the modest space occupied by a bona fide opposition but also prepared openly for a filial presidential succession. In 2000, when Syrian dictator Hafiz al-Assad died, he was succeeded by his second son, Bashar, in light of the accidental death several years earlier of the elder son, Basil. Prior to his fall, Saddam Hussein was grooming his two sons as successors, as were Libyan despot Muammar Qadhafi and Yemeni autocrat Ali Abdullah Saleh. Steps for the anointment of Gamal Hosni Mubarak as the next Egyptian president thus aligned with a regional trend further blurring the slim distinctions between monarchies and "republics."

The Turning Point

The floodgates opened on December 17, 2010, when Muhammad Bouazizi, a vendor in a Tunisian coastal town, set himself on fire after being mistreated by police. Protests subsequently erupted across Tunisia, soon cascading to Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria and posing serious-to-existential challenges to these governments. In Morocco, Jordan, Oman, and even Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, authorities were able to defuse protest movements before they spun out of control. In the Sunni-majority provinces of Iraq, the demonstrations were distinct for their factional character, a stark contrast to the civil, inclusive tone embraced elsewhere in the regional uprising's early stages. In the collective Arab public consciousness, Iraq was never part of the Arab Spring.

With the abrupt departure in January 2011 of Tunisian president Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, and the abdication the very next month of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, the Arab Spring seemed on the verge of becoming the epic transformation that would defeat the Arab political order. Yet durable, domestically generated transformations would not occur in other countries as they did in Tunisia. In Libya, for example, Qadhafi's ouster was achieved only through NATO's might. Elsewhere, pre-empting leaders eventually managed to retain various levels of power: Yemen's President Saleh reluctantly abdicated only to return as a spoiler; the monarchy in Bahrain successfully contained, then put down its country's civil uprising; and the Syrian dictatorship continues to engage, with abject international impunity—at least until the U.S. airstrikes conducted in April 2017—in open warfare against its population.

A Postmortem

Tunisia remains the lone bright spot six years after the Arab Spring began, and even its outcome is far from ideal. Tunisia today has a recognizably democratic government—albeit a precarious one, with many members of the old leadership now holding power and the country facing serious economic and security challenges. In addition, the government must resist the

temptation to use authoritarian tools to address the threat of radical militancy.

Any consideration of Tunisia's success, and its ability to serve as a model for other Arab countries, must consider the following societal attributes: a progressive educational system, a considerable middle class, a meaningful nongovernmental sector with a deeply rooted union movement, a forceful women's movement that has defended gains acquired over decades, and an Islamist bloc steeped in the traditions and concerns of the local society.

Of these elements, Tunisia's "deep society"⁵ and the nonpolarized character of its ideological currents have perhaps been most crucial in staving off the discord that has afflicted other Arab countries. In particular, the National Dialogue Quartet—consisting of two labor unions, a lawyers association, and a human rights organization—successfully demanded compromise and clarity from the political factions, offering the country a path out of political impasse, a remarkable feat for which the Quartet earned the Nobel Peace Prize. Furthermore, Ennahda, the Islamist party that led Tunisia from 2011 to 2014, set a precedent by surrendering power and declaring the primacy of the nation-state over any transnational ideological claim. It thus represents a potential Tunisian contribution to resolving conflicts elsewhere in the region.⁶

Luck likely also played a role in Tunisia's success. Indeed, other Arab Spring societies enjoyed some or all of the attributes mentioned for Tunisia, although perhaps not at levels as favorable. Yet in every context, tactics and incidental developments drove events to a large degree, as separate from intrinsic strategic realities:

■ **EGYPT.** In obstinately usurping the leadership of the revolution, later reneging on preelection promises to conduct an inclusive transition of power, and ultimately seeking to consolidate its rule by decree, the Muslim Brotherhood gave the military an easy excuse to mobilize militants against Mohamed Morsi, the country's first democratically elected president, and then to forcibly remove him. The Egyptian counterrevolution was thus a product of the infighting and shortsightedness of revolutionary partners.

■ **BAHRAIN.** Those Bahrainis engaging in protest and civil disobedience strove to maintain a coherent, peaceful stance despite recurrent abuses and excessive wielding of force by the government. In addition, the Bahraini opposition effectively countered cynical efforts to sow factionalism and thereby discredit the movement. Ultimately, though, the opposition proved no match for the well-resourced Saudi-backed government and, abetted by international apathy, the movement has been effectively contained.

■ **LIBYA.** NATO intervention might have saved countless lives from an impending killing spree by Qadhafi, but countless others were lost as a result of NATO's quick exit and the failure to bring order to a rapidly changing situation on the ground following the regime's collapse.

■ **YEMEN.** On the southern flank of the Arabian Peninsula, Saudi and Gulf Cooperation Council negotiators were outmaneuvered by the challenged president Ali Saleh, resulting in terms that inadvertently enabled his return, whereupon he forged an alliance with the Houthis, who served as would-be Iranian proxies. This alliance triggered Saudi military involvement in an increasingly intractable situation.

■ **SYRIA.** The immense tragedy in Syria may have been prevented at a relatively modest cost—namely, deeper Western involvement, including support for "moderate" rebels, before the conflict became internationalized in recent years.

Uprisings, in these instances and others, are asymmetrical forms of confrontation. Invariably, the initial protestors are vastly outnumbered by government elements, which additionally hold the advantage of potentially wielding coercive force. In initiating an uprising, citizens are implicitly calculating that they can mobilize others, eventually complicating, disrupting, and neutralizing government attempts at repression. At the same time, they must consider whether the government will activate forces to repress its own population and whether the international community will tolerate these repressive measures.

In its early, civil phase, the Syrian uprising lacked for neither mobilization nor organizational capacity. On the first count, hundreds of thousands of protestors joined demonstrations across the nation; on the second, grass-roots Local Coordination Committees emerged nationwide, framing and amplifying the impact of the uprising as a national, inclusive revolution. The regime, for its part, faced serious challenges in its quest to use security forces to stoke violence and repress citizens. Defections were numerous and they multiplied. Fearing an international backlash, the regime initially hesitated to engage in brute force openly, resorting instead to deniable “messaging” through indiscriminate killing that was widely known to be perpetrated by the regime but denied by regime officials for international media consumption. When, however, Assad and his backers understood the weakness of international resolve to bring about the regime’s demise, the Syrian leadership provoked the uprising to further violence, fueling radicalism and allowing a reluctant international community to more easily justify its abstention. The country itself ultimately became collateral damage for a regime that prioritized only its own survival.

Given that each country discussed here has experienced fundamentally different outcomes, however negative, the question arises of whether the umbrella term Arab Spring can even be justified. Those who say “no” may cite the very different historical experiences and makeup of each country, on sociopolitical, economic, cultural, and religious grounds. Tunisia, for instance, has a constitutional tradition dating to the mid-nineteenth century, while its neighbor Libya is a mere construct of Italian colonialism. Moving eastward, Egypt is predominantly Sunni Muslim, with a significant Christian Coptic minority, whereas Syria hosts an array of religious communities, each with a now-heightened sense of group identity. The Alawites, constituting about one-tenth of Syria’s population, serve as the main base of regime support. Different motives, likewise, have been cited for the various protests, from a desire for economic opportunity to demands for political reform to a full-on determination to topple the regime.

These differences notwithstanding, all the Arab Spring protests emerged from a common cultural context in-

volving the broader dynamics of governance and dissent. As the protests spread across the region, voices in a given Arab country invariably referenced the discourse and events in others. Thus, as diverse as the structural realities may be in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen, they are united by a shared cultural stimulus. Even more striking is that this stimulus did not involve Islamism.

Agency and Actors

Although the Arab Spring has indisputably failed to usher in a transformation of Arab politics, the current reality clearly does not reflect the will of Arab societies. Indeed, the many factors that sparked the Arab Spring uprisings remain operative. (This, of course, discounts “creative chaos” conspiracy theories that ascribed the Arab Spring to a U.S., or Israeli, scheme to fragment the region.) Therefore, absent a deliberate effort to address these underlying causes, a second “Arab Spring” may well occur, although where and when cannot be predicted. Four actors carry particular agency in affecting how such a future development might unfold: Arab governments, Islamists, participants in the larger Arab cultural space, and the international community.

Whether monarchies or nominal republics, the Arab states have all historically shared the concept of rule by “gravitas” (*haybah*, in Arabic), whereby the legitimacy of paternalistic leaders issues from a mix of attributes such as charisma, dynastic lineage, revolution, and religion. Citizens have demonstrated allegiance based on fear of punishment as well as an expectation of rewarded loyalty in the form of welfare, services, and employment. Over time, an illusion of permanence allowed rulers to reduce their magnanimity while relying ever more on disproportionate coercive force. An alternative response, carried out in countries such as Morocco, has been to provide citizens with incentives such as raises, grants, and widened privileges. These moves, enacted both before and during the uprisings, reflected attempts to restore credibility to national leadership and could well be construed as a positive “Arab Spring effect.” To forestall a future Arab Spring, however, leaders will need to take more sustained actions

toward bringing about reforms and responsive governance. Perhaps only such developments could allow these leaders to retain power and arrest momentum toward calls for a sudden paradigm shift, as occurred in 2011.

Following the Arab Spring, an “Islamist Winter” experienced brief success because Islamists of many stripes held the only effective organizations capable of challenging and then taking over for the falling governments. More ominously, Islamists propagated a narrative against the patriarchal rulers that appeared to gain more traction than any others. But in time, the Islamists, whether radical or accommodationist, failed to deliver on multiple levels. In Egypt, for example, the Muslim Brotherhood engaged in a power grab that stretched across state institutions, but in doing so exposed its lack of human talent, as demonstrated in shoddy appointments and public statements, leaving even supporters questioning their original support. In Syria and Iraq, under the Islamic State, residents saw their Muslim faith used as a cover for atrocities and endured a form of totalitarian rule that exacerbated the hardships of life under dictatorships, as experienced in Syria under Assad and in Hussein-era Iraq. In practice, these early attempts at Islamist rule failed to forge a model that departed from the oppressive approach undertaken by the autocrats. Riven by ineptitude, corruption, and other abuses, the Islamist project mirrored the failings of the autocrats, even as the cloak of Islam was implicitly invoked as carrying forward the notion of patriarchy based on “gravitas.” Despite its performance failures, Islamism has maintained dominance in Arab discourse and intellectual debate, albeit defensively. Nevertheless, the erosion of this dominance is under way.

As for the rise of Islamism in the Arab cultural space, since the 1990s, traditional and new media have converged to create an unprecedented venue for the sharing of sociocultural concerns and intellectual ideas—a development that aided in the rise of Islamism. Satellite television and the Internet have been central in the dissemination of such ideas, with print materials also gaining wider audiences. On the hard end, Islamist militants have efficiently used the Internet and its evolving platforms for networking and recruitment. But as this

discussion has already shown, translating these ideas into governance and leadership has not been smooth. The political, social, and economic ideas propagated online turned out to be deficient at best. Yet as Ennahda’s recognition of the primacy of the nation-state in Tunisia showed, Islamists are capable of reshaping their positions to the benefit of their societies. Even certain Syrian jihadists have engaged in self-reevaluation.⁷ But the Arab region needs far more such transformations—not only among Islamist ranks but also outside them.

At this point, however, no amount of Arab self-motivated reform, ideological reconsideration, or alternative philosophical models will be enough to solve the region’s conundrum. With international players having become stakeholders in Syria, Yemen, and Libya, these outside powers will have to be enlisted in developing clear understandings before any credible effort can be made to stabilize the region. These powers include the United States—yet under former president Barack Obama, Washington clearly sought to distance itself from primary responsibility for resolving the region’s issues. Such an outlook was evident in the prompt U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, the swift termination of the NATO mission in Libya in 2012, and the steady resistance to any decisive action in Syria. But Washington did not so much abandon the region as engage at a lower intensity, with a focus on managing crises and seeking to prevent their spillover and expansion.

In light of the region’s continued disarray, the new administration may well recognize that the former approach has not worked. Even though blame for the dismal situations in Iraq, Libya, and Syria should not fall principally on the Obama team, U.S. inaction did permit these national crises to worsen and spread beyond their original borders, whether through the transit of refugees or, more gravely, of terrorists. Indeed, the U.S. strike on a Syrian base in April 2017 indicated some willingness to engage more directly on the military level. This strike also predictably rankled Russia, the outside power seemingly most emboldened by the light U.S. footprint in the region. Russia has assumed an aggressive role particularly in Syria, where the Russians have a military base and strong historic ties to the

leadership. Iran, too, has shown its deep commitment to the Assad regime, amplifying an already dangerous crisis. In response to perceived Iranian expansionism, its Sunni rival Saudi Arabia has become embroiled in the earlier-noted war in Yemen, with no clear exit strategy. Even if the United States wishes to no longer be the world's police force, it remains the indispensable power in ensuring that crises are resolved while accounting for global strategic concerns. The restoration of U.S. leadership in the region, within a framework of international cooperation, is a required step to initiate a discussion about the fundamental challenges facing the Middle East.

Soft Landing for a Second Arab Spring

As hindsight makes clear, the region's political order was entirely unprepared for the spate of demands made six years ago during the Arab Spring. But the protestors, too, were unprepared. They lacked the organizational strength and conceptual clarity to successfully compel reforms in their respective countries. Islamists filled the resulting void, casting themselves as agents of dissent in the protest movement. But the Islamists themselves lacked the language, ideas, and tools to respond to the demands—e.g., for greater government accountability and personal opportunity—that sparked the initial protests. A movement rooted in concrete demands thereby deteriorated into one of arcane theological debate, with points of dispute having origins more than a millennium ago. The resulting violence has been tragic—and entailed intensified polarization between Sunni and Shiite, as expressed in the Saudi-Iran contest. But Arab countries, setting aside those ravaged by war and requiring full-scale reconstruction, face the same conditions of decay that brought about the initial calls for wholesale reform. Thus, as this paper has argued, a new Arab uprising may be imminent, with unknown consequences for the region and beyond.

Before the Islamists coopted the protest movement,

Arab participants were essentially voicing universal aspirations: for economic and social justice, liberty, dignity, and individual empowerment. In simpler terms, they sought the right to be respected and to seek prosperity. Arab citizens largely lacked these freedoms prior to 2011, and most still lack them. Meanwhile, the original duel between autocrat and theocrat has resumed, further suppressing the messages articulated by Arab citizens in 2011.

In the absence of a focus on universal rights and reforms, international attention has turned to hard security, terrorism, and the havens weak states provide for transnational militants. An unabated demographic explosion meanwhile continues, even amid the chaos of countries still burdened by war (Syria, Yemen, and Libya). Throughout the region, strained natural resources present the prospect of future security crises focused on water, food, energy, and the environment. To prepare for such eventualities, the Gulf states have adopted longer-term visions for a post-hydrocarbon future. Egypt, with Chinese support, is seeking to expand its infrastructure as a means of reinvigorating an economy that seems otherwise heading toward crisis.

Against a backdrop of disruptive violence, the future poses distinct challenges to the region's nonradical Islamists as well as to non-Islamist citizens. For the former, the task will be to develop an ideological framework that fosters coexistence in Muslim-majority countries, while recognizing that each society is distinct in its makeup. Non-Islamists, in turn, must acknowledge that their Islamist peers will continue to promote various forms of their ideology across the political landscape. Another concept, which one might call "cultural security," bears mention in closing. Cultural security involves the right to feel safe in expressing one's own ideas and engaging in one's own culture, as long as such expression does not infringe on the security of others. Ensuring cultural security could, possibly, provide the soft landing the region needs to fend off another devastating wave of uprisings, while beginning the slow process of rebuilding its societies anew.

Notes

1. See Hassan Mneimneh, "The New Intra-Arab Cultural Space: The Debates over an American 'Letter,'" *Social Research* (Fall 2003).
2. A well-articulated discussion of the dynamics of discontent in Algeria in reaction to the Arab Spring is provided in Frédéric Volpi, "Algeria versus the Arab Spring," *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 3 (July 2013).
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5. The author first heard the term *deep society* used in the Tunisian context, as a counterbalance to the more often referenced *deep state*, by Abdel Basset Ben Hassen, president of the Tunis-based Arab Institute for Human Rights. The term aptly describes the aggregate presence in Tunisia of nonstate organizations with firm institutional and cultural roots—namely, the labor movement, professional unions, and rights-based associations.
6. Ennahda's actions have generated mixed reactions and considerable skepticism. A representative critical example is Mohammad Affan, "The Ennahda Movement...A Secular Party?" Expert Brief (Al Sharq Forum, June 14, 2016), <http://www.sharqforum.org/2016/06/14/the-ennahda-movement-a-secular-party/>.
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