Beyond Islamists & Autocrats

The Arab Spring at Six Years
LESSONS AND PROSPECTS

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Across the Arab 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 political 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 dilute the allegedly subversive effect of unchecked civil society activism, both governments took measures such as increasing the regulatory burden on budding organizations. Another common approach was to establish multiple organizations with more or less visible ties to the government and its acolytes, thus creating a semblance of vibrant civil society while syphoning funds and attention from more organic initiatives. Such steps weakened the potential for civil society as a low-cost, low-risk, but also low-potential pathway to reform and thus for helping cure the regional malaise. As with the Islamist option, civil society lacked a viable path to transforming Arab governments.

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-uprising 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 Qa-

dhafi, 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, grassroots 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 involving 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).

3. The structural versus cultural origins of the "Arab exception" were and continue to be subject to debate. For a nuanced cultural reading, see Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? The Clash between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003). For an incisive discussion of the "structural" argument, see Larry Diamond, "Why Are There No Arab Democracies?" *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 1 (January 2010), http://www.journalofdemocracy.org/article/why-are-there-no-arab-democracies.

4.   Amy Hawthorne, *Middle Eastern Democracy: Is Civil Society the Answer?* Carnegie Papers 44 (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004), http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CarnegiePaper44.pdf, provides an overview of approaches and assessments of Arab civil society in the pre–Arab Spring context.

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/.

7.   For the evolving self-image of Syrian Salafi-jihadists as moderates, see, for example, Labib Al Nahhas, "I'm a Syrian and I Fight ISIL Every Day. It Will Take More than Bombs from the West to Defeat This Menace," *Telegraph*, July 21, 2015, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/11752714/Im-a-Syrian-and-I-fight-Isil-every-day.-We-need-more-than-bombs-from-the-West-to-win-this-battle.html.

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Photo, p.1: Tahrir Square, November 20, 2011. Lilian Wagdy (DSC_9469, uploaded by The Egyptian Liberal) via Wikimedia Commons.