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## INTRODUCTION

### *Understanding the Arab Awakening*

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The Arab Spring is dead. Long live the Arab Spring.

The events that began in Tunisia in January 2011 and spread to Egypt and then Libya, Jordan, Morocco, Bahrain, Syria, and beyond, shook the political, social, and intellectual foundations of the Middle East. The tremors can still be felt, and no one is quite certain when the aftershocks will end, or when another shock wave of popular unrest might occur.

Nevertheless, enough time has passed to try to make sense of what has happened so far and, perhaps, gain an inkling of where the region is headed. Because we are still too close to the events to understand the meaning of all their complexities, our assessment can only be preliminary. In fact, many of those affected still do not understand the full extent of the ways in which they themselves and their circumstances have changed. Others have not yet taken the actions that history may record as having been produced by the Arab Spring.

Unfortunately, the United States does not have the luxury of waiting to make sense of what occurred. Although the shock of the initial events of the Arab Spring has ebbed, many of the miseries that gave rise to it persist and remain compelling motives for many people across the region. The changes that the initial wave of revolution left in its wake are barely half-formed. How they develop will be critical in shaping the longer-term effects, as will actions today of the United States and its allies, which remain important forces in the region. While these revolutions were not made in America, American actions may have an outsize impact, perhaps even on their ultimate success or failure. The storm of unrest that spread from the Atlantic to the Persian Gulf may have subsided, at least in some parts of the region, but its story has just begun.

## THE CAUSES OF THE ARAB SPRING

Like all great social upheavals, the Arab Spring was long in the making, and born of many intertwined causes.<sup>1</sup> It might have happened at any time over the past two to three decades, but each passing year brought new developments that made it that much more likely. Economic problems, social problems, political problems, juridical problems, and diplomatic problems all contributed to a furious sense of grievance across the Arab world that finally boiled over in the winter and spring of 2011.

The best way to understand what happened in the Arab world in 2011 is to start with the stagnation of the Arab economies—as Suzanne Maloney explains in chapter 8—because that is where the frustration began for the vast majority of Arabs, although that is certainly not where it ended. While other countries in the world evolved from agrarian economies to industrial economies to information economies, the Arab world lagged far behind. In particular, the educational system of the Arab world remained stuck in a pre-modern era. As the United Nations' *Arab Human Development Report* first warned almost ten years ago, the educational method of the Arab world hindered young Arab minds from thinking critically, producing knowledge, and mastering many technical fields.<sup>2</sup> While there has been no shortage of education in the Arab world in recent years, Arab schools and universities have not prepared their students for a modern, information-age global economy. With so little human capital available, relatively few entrepreneurs have invested in the Middle East, other than to harvest the region's plentiful oil and gas resources—investments that have benefited the regimes and their cronies, but not the vast majority of the people.

Even with economics as a starting point, one cannot get very far in explaining the origins of the Arab Spring without bringing in politics. Before 2011 the Middle East was a democratic desert: only Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories could lay any claim to democracy, and all three efforts were deeply imperfect.<sup>3</sup> These autocratic regimes added to the misery of their people by tolerating, and even encouraging, widespread corruption and sketchy legal systems that frightened away legitimate investors. As a result, foreign investment and development were replaced by those looking to exploit the region in cahoots with its semi-criminal elite.

The net effect has been a raft of ulcerous economic liabilities: unemployment (especially among the outsized youth population); underemployment (especially among the middle class, whose education and status make them believe that they deserve managerial or clerical jobs, rather than driving a taxi or working in a restaurant); yawning wealth gaps; low levels of direct foreign investment outside the energy sector; meager non-energy exports; disproportionately low levels of international trade; excessive dependence on the public sector for employment;

rapid urbanization coupled with inadequate infrastructure development; and heavy outflows of capital, both human and financial. In short, the economies of the Arab world (and Iran) have been failing their people for a very long time.<sup>4</sup>

Inevitably, people unhappy with their economic status look to their governments for help—in the Middle East no less than in the American Midwest. But in the Arab autocracies, the poor, the working classes, and the middle classes met only callous indifference, corruption, and humiliation when they sought redress from their governments. Indeed, the massive, bloated, corrupt government bureaucracies did nothing to alleviate the suffering of their people and a great deal to make it more painful. They cared nothing about the lives of their people, only about perpetuating their own advantages. “Good governance” was a bad joke in most of the Middle East—a taunt of what so many Arabs wanted and raged that they would never have. The monolithic regimes were not merely inert bodies unwilling and unable to make the situation better, but vast dead weights that pressed down on the people, holding the exploitative systems in place. And so, personal unhappiness grew into political discontent.

For their part, the regimes mostly reacted to burgeoning popular unhappiness with a combination of fear and contempt, which translated mostly into repression coupled with superficial (often deeply cynical) pseudoreforms. Repression can often succeed in controlling popular unhappiness, but, over time, if those grievances are not defused by somehow being addressed, repression typically acts as a pressure cooker: keeping the unhappiness bottled up but magnifying its volatility such that an unexpected event can produce a sudden explosion. No one could have predicted that the match struck by Mohammed Bouazizi to set himself afire in Sidi Bouzid on December 17, 2010, would ignite the entire Arab world, but the kindling had been laid and was there for all to see years before.

## CHARTING THE ARAB SPRING

We still do not know for certain why Bouazizi’s sacrifice caused so many Tunisians to take to the streets to demand the regime’s ouster. Perhaps it was simply the poignancy of the gesture. Certainly, the frustrations and humiliations that drove him to this final deed resonated with a great many of his countrymen. But when thousands of Tunisians succeeded in forcing their dictator, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, to flee for his life, it was a watershed for the rest of the Arab world. Suddenly, Arabs everywhere saw people just like themselves, angry about problems just like their own, defying vast autocracies just like those they lived under, and toppling regimes that had once seemed impregnable.

Even those who had long feared that the growing frustration of so many Arabs would inevitably result in explosions of popular unrest never imagined that a revolt in one country, especially a small state, would cause dominoes to topple

across the entire region. It was for this reason that the regimes themselves, and not just the rest of the world, were taken by surprise not only when Ben Ali fell, but also when his fall served as the earthquake that sent shockwaves from one end of the Middle East to the other.

As Shadi Hamid describes in chapter 12, Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak and his top advisers were also caught off-guard by the passion of the protesters and, as Mike Doran discusses in chapter 5, by their sophisticated use of new social media to mobilize and capture the sympathy of the wider international audience. More surprising for Mubarak was the fact that his own military had developed a corporate identity independent from his own rule. This meant that its leaders believed their own perks and privileges could best be guaranteed by sacrificing Mubarak in hope of holding on to the key aspects of his system that benefited them the most. Indeed, ironically, it was Mubarak's own past decision to try to meet the material demands of his officer corps by encouraging them to delve into Egypt's civilian economy that severed his "power of the purse" and gave the army an independent economic base, enabling and encouraging it to separate itself from the figure of the autocrat.<sup>5</sup>

With the strong dictatorships in Tunisia and Egypt overthrown, it was perhaps inevitable that the dysfunctional dictatorship lying between them—Libya—would face a similar challenge. Events in Libya demonstrated that what had happened in Egypt and Tunisia were not cookie-cutter models that could and would be applied across the region. The underlying set of political, economic, and social grievances were similar across the region, and in every one of the Arab states (and in Iran in 2009) they caused large numbers of urban, mostly secular, people to take to the streets and demand the overthrow of the regime and its replacement with a democracy. However, once these protest movements began, in every case they engaged the other, preexisting rifts in each country. Thus when Libyan crowds took to the streets to try to emulate the Egyptians in Tahrir Square, their protests against the regime immediately engaged Libya's long-standing geographic and tribal divisions, resulting in an outcome very different from that in Egypt and Tunisia. In Libya, the most important geographic rift is between Cyrenaica, comprising the eastern part of the Libyan coast, and Tripolitania, the western part of the coast. Since Cyrenaica had always opposed the Tripolitanian Muammar Qadhafi, it not surprisingly declared for the protesters, along with a number of tribes who decided their interests would be best served by Qadhafi's fall. Tripolitania remained more loyal to Qadhafi, as did a number of powerful tribes in other parts of the country.

Similar phenomena were found elsewhere across the region. In Bahrain, for instance, the protests immediately engaged the country's deep Sunni-Shi'i divide, to the point where it became unclear how much the new opposition was merely the old Shi'i opposition in a new garb and how much a different, more ecumenical

protest movement (one driven more by class grievances) that embraced a wider spectrum of the Bahraini populace. In Yemen, the protests immediately became bound up in preexisting fights between north and south, between Houthi Shi'ah and Sunnis, and between various pro- and anti-Saleh tribes. It is this mixture of common grievances coupled with country-specific rifts that has made the unrest across the Arab states very similar in certain ways, while nevertheless taking on unique characteristics in each country.

Each regime also responded differently. Where Ben Ali and Mubarak stepped down, Bashar al-Asad and Qadhafi dug in and proved willing, again, to slaughter their own citizens to try to hold on to power. Bahrain's leaders even turned to their ally, Saudi Arabia, asking Riyadh to dispatch troops across the causeway linking the two countries to suppress the protests. The Saudis, for their part, threw money at their own problems and helped bankroll other Arab monarchies to do the same.

In retrospect, part of the reason the protests in Tunisia and Egypt resulted in relatively quick and clean revolutions that succeeded in overthrowing the leaders seems to be the relative homogeneity of their populations.<sup>6</sup> While societal divisions certainly exist in Egypt and Tunisia (divisions that have, in some cases, been enflamed by the success of the revolutions), the protests actually brought disparate groups together in these states, while they tore people apart elsewhere in the region. This made Ben Ali's and Mubarak's regimes more vulnerable to a seemingly unified public outpouring against them: their security forces were less willing to fire on their own people, and the regimes did not have a significant section of the elite automatically behind them. Elsewhere, the deep, preexisting societal divisions have allowed the regimes to call on segments of the wider population to support them by claiming that the protesters represented their traditional rivals, just marching under different banners—Cyrenaicans in Libya, Palestinians in Jordan, Shi'ah in Bahrain, and so on.

Moreover, as others have observed, the Arab monarchies demonstrated much greater staying power than the secular dictatorships (euphemistically styling themselves “republics”). Several factors seem to be responsible for this. The monarchies often enjoy greater legitimacy than the republics.<sup>7</sup> Many can count on religious justifications, long-standing historical associations between the state and the ruling family, and a degree of popular affection—even pride—in the ruling dynasty. Because the monarchs technically stand above politics, they can divert popular ire from them to the governments by replacing the current cabinet as a sop to popular unrest. Although the term “monarchy” conjures up an image of a small family running the show, in reality many ruling families are vast clans that have forged marital, business, and political alliances with other major families. Some of the monarchs are even popular and respected by their people, as is King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, at least in part because of their ability to stand above politics.

Ultimately, while powerful protest movements rocked virtually all of the regimes of the region, relatively few fell. Most found ways to cling to power until the wave receded. They did it by relying on the inherent strengths of monarchical government. They did it by manipulating preexisting divisions in their society to mobilize support for themselves and opposition to the opposition. But they also did it by employing old-fashioned repression, sometimes in new-fashioned ways.

One critical, lingering question today is what did the regimes and the demonstrators learn? Did the regimes realize that they all sit on top of time bombs—populations furious at their misrule and looking for any opportunity to overthrow them? Or did they learn that repression, once again, works? That if repression is dressed up with a few hollow promises of reform to take the edge off, crushing popular opposition is a successful tactic and a perfectly viable long-term strategy. For their part, did the protesters learn that they have the power to topple governments under the right conditions? Or that no matter what they do, no matter how many risks they take, government repression always prevails? How these various groups answer these questions will go a long way to determining the fate of the Middle East in the years to come.

### DID THE ARAB SPRING MATTER?

Inevitably, scholars will debate the impact of the 2011 Arab Spring for decades, if not centuries, to come. A first impression suggests that what happened may not have overturned the political order of the Middle East but was nonetheless profound. More of the ancien regimes of the Arab world may or may not fall in the next few months (or even years); but regardless, what happened will have profound consequences for the future of the region, and beyond.

Perhaps the most obvious lasting impact of the Arab Spring will be the changes in governments, especially in North Africa. Mubarak's Egypt, Ben Ali's Tunisia, and Qadhafi's Libya are gone. Saleh's regime in Yemen will never be the same, even if it finds a way to cling to power. These changes have fundamentally altered the geopolitical map of the Middle East. If Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia eventually emerge as stable democracies—perhaps joined by a similar kind of state in Iraq—they will exert a profound influence on the internal politics of the region, by demonstrating successful alternative models to the autocracies and theocracies that have previously been the only choices on offer. They could also reorient the strategic balance of the region, perhaps by creating a new bloc of states that might stand apart from the monarchies, the dictatorships, and the Iranian theocracy.

The Arab Spring also shattered several important myths that had previously held sway both in the region and outside it. The first of these was that the Arab populations were largely apathetic. The Arab Spring (arguably, along with the birth of the Green Movement in Iran in 2009) demonstrated, across the region,

that the people of the Middle East are no longer willing to simply accept their misery. Rather, they are willing to take to the streets and risk their lives to demand change. Indeed, a critical corollary is that the Arab people themselves have, in many cases, found that when they take action, they can change their own circumstances. That new activism alone will transform Middle Eastern political dynamics.

The second myth that the Arab Spring shattered is that the Arabs do not understand or want democracy. This claim was always spurious, and there was tremendous evidence to the contrary long before the crowds gathered in Tahrir Square.<sup>8</sup> But it persisted until the people took to the streets and proclaimed their demands for democracy, not just in name but also in practice and in all its particulars. This realization will be important both for the regimes of the region and for the West. Neither will be able to hide behind the convenient fiction anymore that the Arab people do not want democracy. In particular, the United States will no longer be able to claim that its short-term interest in partnering with autocratic regimes does not conflict with its long-term strategic interest in (and national value of) promoting democracy.

For all of these reasons, even if another Arab regime does not fall in the near term, the impact of the Arab Spring will persist. The Middle East will never be the same. The forces that have been unleashed are likely to remain critical drivers in regional politics for decades to come. Unless the regimes of the region respond effectively to the underlying grievances that motivated the Arab Spring, it is highly likely that the autocracies that withstood the 2011 wave of unrest will face future waves. Indeed, the region continues to face widespread internal unrest from the first series of protests, and some of the states that survived this round may fall in future rounds unless they are willing to make many of the changes that animated the authors of the Arab Spring to begin with. In that sense, the full impact of the Arab Spring may not be felt for years to come.

## AMERICAN INTERESTS AND THE ARAB SPRING

For a very long time, the United States has defined its principal interest in the Middle East as “stability.” It never was. America’s primary interest has always been in the free flow of the region’s oil—preferably at low prices, although U.S. efforts to influence the price itself have been of a much more subdued nature. In addition, the United States has always had friends in the region that it wanted to see remain free and secure, Israel first among them since the 1970s. If the Middle East had been a roller-coaster of instability (which it mostly was), but the oil had flowed (which it mostly did), American interests would have been satisfied (which they mostly were).

Of course it is true that instability could menace those real interests, and from time to time it did so. The Arab-Israeli wars, the Iranian Revolution, the Iran-Iraq

War, Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, and other instances of instability did either threaten or cut into the region's oil exports. Unfortunately, Americans were misled by our mistaken fixation with "stability." We have misinterpreted it first of all to mean stability among the nations of the region—no wars among them. But we also have misinterpreted it as an interest in the status quo, both among the states of the region *and within them*. Washington wrongly assumed that the regimes of the region understood their domestic situations perfectly, and that their stagnant autocracies could last in perpetuity. Indeed, a critical element in America's approach to the Middle East over the past fifty years has been the assumption that the internal politics of the Arab states and Iran are irrelevant to American interests. The Iranian Revolution should have been the first clue that this was misguided, and 9/11 should have been another, but the United States is good at missing clues when it is not particularly interested in seeing them.

Hopefully, the events of the Arab Spring will finally shatter the cracked lens through which the United States has been seeing the Middle East and allow Americans to finally see it as it is. The anger and frustration that exploded onto the streets of Tunis, Cairo, Sana'a, Manama, Amman, Dara'a, Hama, and countless other cities across the region should make clear that change is coming to the Middle East, whether the United States likes it or not. The question is not whether, but when . . . and how.

In that sense, the Arab Spring may be the opportunity to end the tension between America's interests and its values in the Middle East, or more properly the tension between its short- and long-term interests in the Middle East. America has long espoused an interest in seeing democracies flourish and has embraced national self-determination, both because it is ethically right and because doing so is an important means of avoiding wars that could threaten our vital interests. But in the Middle East, Washington set those values and interests aside, both because it feared that their application to the Middle East would produce Arab states inimical to American interests and because we always had immediate concerns in the region that required the cooperation of America's Arab allies. The price for that cooperation was to disregard American values as well as our longer-term interests in seeing the region change gradually and peacefully.

Nevertheless, in the years ahead, there will doubtless remain a tension between short-term and long-term interests. Just because it is clear that the "unreformed" Arab states are unlikely to endure forever, it is equally unlikely that they will all be swept away as quickly as Mubarak's reign, or that the regimes will not endure in an altered form. Indeed, the best outcome for these states would be a gradual process of evolutionary reform that would eventually produce different, more democratic governments, but that might still include important elements of the current regimes.



Consequently, the United States cannot possibly dismiss the current Arab regimes. Many of those governments are hesitant to begin the process of reform, and will resist American pressure to do so. In addition, the United States may need the help of some or all of those regimes to achieve other American goals in the region—stabilizing Iraq, Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya; pressuring Iran to give up its nuclear program; keeping down the price of oil; containing spillover from civil wars in Yemen and Syria; and pushing forward peace negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians. Inevitably, those near-term needs are going to impose trade-offs with America's long-term interest in seeing peaceful, gradual change to head off future waves of violent, unpredictable change.

Even in light of the truth revealed by the Arab Spring, those trade-offs will not be easy, as many of the chapters of this book discuss in various respects. What Washington must avoid, however, is to fall back into its accustomed, wrong-headed pattern of assuming that change will never come to the Middle East. It cannot allow itself to believe that the Arab Spring really did not matter, or perhaps that it never really happened at all. It happened, and if the United States does not learn its lessons, it will happen again and again, and perhaps next time it will not be so kind.