Democracy in a Day, Capitalism in a Decade

The Arab Spring as a Two-Stage Political, then Economic Revolution
An Introduction to the Arab Spring and the Middle Eastern Political Situation

The new post-colonial and post-imperial Arab World is enduring one of the most formative periods in its young history. Over the past decade, popular revolutions have rocked the region and a normally passive citizenry frequently crams the streets to voice political demands. Traditionally stable, the rentier state model, essentially bribing populations with oil revenue to ensure unchallenged ruling party authority and political obedience has been significantly strained. This authoritarian bargain on which many Arab countries’ autocratic rulers rely, is crumbling under the weight of their palace’s economic mismanagement and political repression. Those unable to make reforms, or those unwilling to brutally crush their opposition have few options but to turn to their oil-rich neighbors to guarantee their throne for the sake of Sunni/Shia identity politics.

Overriding the discontent amongst MENA (Middle East and North African) populations, the Middle East is in the midst of a consequential Islamic ‘Cold War’ with Shiite Iran trying to unseat Sunni Saudi Arabia as the leader of the Muslim World and reverse the generations-long Sunni domination of the region. Further complicating the Middle East’s international position, the entire world, with a few exceptions, is driving to eradicate the cancer of the radical Islamic terrorism that metastasizes within some of the region’s conflict riddled weak and failed states.

Mainly the result of decades of severe economic mismanagement and political underrepresentation, the 2011 Arab Spring was both an inevitable consequence of upholding the Middle Eastern status quo and the explicit catalyst for current Arab political activism. Popular rebellions overthrew corrupt autocrats in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. Tunisia
and Egypt then attempted to institute democratic governments only to be forced to contend with political Islam. In Libya, Yemen, and Syria, where President Bashar al-Assad brutally put down a Sunni rebellion, the resulting brutal civil wars devolved into Sunni/Shia proxy wars, colossal humanitarian crises, proving grounds (or rather disproving) for Islamist ideology, and hotbeds in the global fight against terrorism. Frustration brought politically enlightened people to the streets across the Arab world, prompting protests in Bahrain, Algeria, Morocco, Kuwait, Iraq, Jordan, Oman, Sudan, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Djibouti, and even the Palestinian territory.¹

Most governments that survived responded to these events with minor reforms, government officials resigning, president’s promising to give up power at the end of their terms, or revisions to their subsidies. Jordan recycled its government three times and approved alterations to their constitution, though nothing fundamentally changed and protestors have returned to the streets calling for more concessions.² Though the young, U.S. built, popularly elected, Iraqi government withstood 2011 protests and remained in power, the Islamic State’s substantial growth during the neighboring Syrian Civil War, resulted in a civil war with ISIS.

While undoubtedly caused by the Arab Spring, Syria, Yemen, and Libya are still embroiled in never-ending civil wars that have been co-opted by larger proxy conflicts, preventing analysis from separating the consequences of the Arab Spring from those of the War on Terror and Sunni/Shia conflict. Furthermore, these endless proxy wars serve as

¹ Yahya, “The Middle East’s Lost Decades.”
² Muasher, “The Next Arab Uprising.”
deterrents to democratic reform as they hijack revolutions from the will of the people and turn them into never-ending battlefields for unrelated international agendas.

Though the initial wave of protests was more limited than many democracy advocates or protesters anticipated, the Arab Spring has fundamentally changed the Muslim World, bringing attention to the still unsolved issues that underscore popular discontent. Shock waves from the protests were felt from Nouakchott to Riyadh and the observing political community is still trying to figure out if they were signs of the most consequential upheaval to the Middle East’s status quo since the end of Western Imperialism or if they were brief moments in history that thousands of years of autocratic rule will ultimately subdue.

**Tunisia and Egypt: The Arab Spring’s Founders Awaken a Movement for the Future**

Despite token changes, after nearly a decade most of the Arab Spring’s fundamental catalyzing issues remain unaddressed and have significantly worsened. A myriad of economic, political, and demographic factors, combined with the still lingering legacy of imperialism, foretold the Arab Spring, but long-practiced economic mismanagement, increasingly unattainable standards of living, corruption, severe political repression, and lack of opportunity disproportionately affecting educated young people provided the movement’s most important kindling. In the decade since, these foundational problems have festered, making a resurgent movement seemingly inevitable. Tunisia and Egypt are the only two countries to overthrow a leader during the Arab Spring and emerge with functioning governments and respected sovereignty, though Egypt’s democratic experiment ultimately failed. Yet today, Tunisia’s democracy and Egypt’s autocracy are still struggling with the same fundamental problems that
they faced a decade ago, often with more robust symptoms. In understanding how Tunisia and Egypt’s revolutions evolved, we can see that the Arab Spring was the Arab democratic movement’s first step aimed at fundamentally reforming the Arab World’s political and economic systems, with new governments eventually creating favorable conditions to dismantle the entrenched monopolistic financial powers in order to build meritocratic economic foundations with diversified institutions.

Learning from Tunisia and Egypt, as well as observing the abundant presence of similar untenable economic and political situations throughout the Middle East, builds an argument that a successful Arab Spring revolution requires two sequential steps; first political, then economic. Step one, evident in the popular political protests in both Egypt and Tunisia, is to overthrow the existing autocrat with a grassroots political movement and subsequently form a democratically minded government. Step two is to fundamentally restructure the economy to remove the vested interests from power while granting individual opportunity through new institutions that do not directly benefit those with political power. Step two is where Egypt failed because the previous autocratic institutions regained power while a democratic government struggled to consolidate power. Successfully consolidating their democracy, Tunisia is further along on the road to economic reform, however they still have significant challenges, both economic and political, to overcome before their Arab Spring revolution can be considered a total success.
Tunisia's Revolution: The Fall of Ben Ali

Before the revolution, few expected Tunisia to change the Arab World. 99% Sunni, there is no significant ethnic or religious minority. Though the official language is Arabic, most Tunisians also speak French and it is considered to have natural borders unlike many mandate states in the Middle East. Despite its homogeneity, President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali’s Tunisia had significant shortcomings that culminated in his ouster in January 2011.

From the turn of the century until 2010, Tunisia was among many Arab countries following the International Monetary Fund's encouragement to privatize state owned industries in order to alleviate state resource strain. Yet these efforts yielded almost no benefits to Tunisians, as Ben Ali, like many of his counterparts, saw privatization as a “strategy for funneling assets to those already in power,” which meant his family. Ben Ali’s extended family was exceptionally corrupt, controlling 21% of the private sector profits and evading $1.2 billion in taxes between 2000 and 2010, dropping Tunisia 20 places to 59th on the Corruption Perception Index from 2003 to 2010. This stifled economic growth efforts resulting in a general unemployment rate of 13% and a staggering 31% rate among the disproportionately affected university educated youth by 2009. With the public sector inaccessible and the private sector monopolized by vested interests, Tunisia’s exceedingly young population turned to the informal economy, which by 2009 made up 40% of the market.

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3 Yerkes, “The Tunisia Model.”
4 Yahya, “The Middle East's Lost Decades.”
5 Yahya, “The Middle East's Lost Decades.”
6 Next Arab Uprising, Yahya, “The Middle East's Lost Decades.”
8 Yahya, “The Middle East's Lost Decades.”
On December 17th, 2010, Mohammed Bouazizi self-immolated in front of a government building in Sidi Bouzid after officials interfered with his fruit stand one too many times. Protests erupted across the country and people clogged the streets demanding jobs, dignity, democratic reforms, and Ben Ali’s removal. Reluctant media coverage led protestors to use Facebook and Twitter as their primary organizational tools. Protests intensified and by January 14th, 2011 President Ben Ali, ruler of 23 years, fled for Saudi Arabia after the military refused his order to suppress the rebellion, but not before his wife emptied the state coffers of gold.

In Ali’s place, Tunisia developed a secular democratic government that still rules today, making it the only relative success story in the region. Several challenges arose in constructing democratic government as the Troika coalition, a ruling alliance consisting of the Ennahda, the center-left Congress for the Republic (CPR), and the social democrat Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties (better known as Ettakatol) political parties, had to negotiate a constitution between secular parties and the Islamist Ennahda movement, which had won the highest portion of the 2011 vote. By 2013, primarily because of the negotiation and mediation efforts of the National Dialogue Quartet, a secular constitution was ratified and the Ennahda voluntarily stepped aside to allow for a technocratic government to be elected in 2014.

Though Tunisia’s democracy survives today, public trust in the government has drastically eroded and protest culture remains the preferred method to voice grievances. Politically, the country has made significant gains in its pursuit of democracy mainly because the parties in power have avoided resorting to autocratic tactics and have invested

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9 Yerkes, “The Tunisia Model.”
10 Yerkes, “The Tunisia Model.”
considerable resources into building a structure of consensus politics. Despite this, most of the 2013 constitution, especially judicial reforms, has not been implemented and trust in government sits at just 33%, though the free and fair handling of the 2018 local election is promising.

Unfortunately, much of Tunisia’s political gain came at great economic cost. Youth unemployment remains north of 30% and inflation is rising, leading thousands of skilled workers to emigrate. Terrorism continues to thrive within the country’s center and Tunisia has become notorious for exporting more jihadists than any other MENA country, despite being the only democracy. Terrorism is especially damaging to the once thriving tourism industry, stagnating a sector that used to make up 8% of GDP. Though problems continue to bring protests to the streets, Tunisia is on its way to becoming an Arab Spring success because it has avoided the emergence of an Islamist government, a relapse into autocracy, and devolving into a civil war or proxy conflict. Unfortunately, the same outcome could not be achieved in Egypt, the only other state where the Arab Spring overthrew a dictator and a new legitimate government was formed.

Egypt – Sisi’s Quiet Rise to Power

President Hosni Mubarak’s pre-revolutionary Egypt closely resembled the situation in Tunisia, sharing many of the same underlying issues, especially economic and demographic, that slowly eroded his authoritarian bargain. Like Tunisia, Egypt, the world’s oldest country, is...
99% Sunni, meaning it did not problematically suffer from a lack of national identity like mandate states. Demographically, 60% of Egypt’s population is under 30, making its youth bulge the biggest in the Arab world. Mirroring overarching Middle Eastern trends, literacy and school enrollment rose, but did not lead to jobs as public sectors stagnated and services contracted.

In economic terms, this well-educated Egyptian youth bubble boasted a 24% unemployment rate in 2010, double the normal 12% unemployment rate, which itself was up 3 points from 2009. Compounding economic issues, Mubarak was also privatizing state industry by 1998, dumping it off on his friends and relatives, while decreasing public sector employment from 32% to 26% in 2006. In total, Mubarak stole $3 billion from Egypt by selling state industries to Egypt’s vested interests. Echoing Tunisia, these actions dropped Egypt 28 places (to 98th) on the Corruption Perception Index from 2003-2010 and forced 40% of the unemployed youth to turn to the informal economy by 2009.

However, unlike Ben Ali, Mubarak faced and created issues on a much grander scale because Egypt’s population of about 100 million is ten times Tunisia’s. Egyptians also tended to be much poorer than Tunisians, with 58% of personal income being spent on food and a 2008 poverty rate of 22%, up almost 7% since 2000. Additionally, Egypt became urban concentrated, especially in Cairo, leading up to 2011. Young people looking for work flocked to

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16 Hessler, “Egypt’s Failed Revolution.”
17 Yahya, “The Middle East’s Lost Decades.”
18 World Bank, “Egypt: Youth Unemployment rate from 1999 to 2019,”
19 Yahya, “The Middle East’s Lost Decades.”
21 Yahya, “The Middle East’s Lost Decades.”
the cities and eventually settled in slums because the government had not foreseen or prepared for such rapid, large scale urbanization.

Egypt maintained a delicate relationship between their government and military, which was a much larger, capable, and independent organization than the irrelevant Tunisian force. To coup-proof his regime, Mubarak bribed the military by having them run 40% of the economy, which worked well until he was forced into a position where instituting neoliberal reforms that removed the military from the economic sphere was the only way to remain in power.

Tunisia’s eruption in 2011 surprised Mubarak. Egyptians, who’s population sported a median age of 23, crammed into Tahrir square and streets all across the country from January to February to protest police brutality, unemployment, and corruption as well as demand more freedoms and Mubarak’s removal. Mubarak reacted by having the Central Security Force, a police organization loyal to Mubarak’ violently oppose the rebellion. Protests continued unabated until mid-February, during which time while Mubarak instigated violence against the press, prompting Facebook and Twitter to become such effective public organization tools that Mubarak shut down Egypt’s internet. As protests grew stronger and Mubarak started to make concessions, the military began to play a more important role and the Central Security Force became less visible. On February 11th, 2011 Mubarak resigned and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) took over, promising elections in six months and naming an

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22 United Nations, “Egypt: Average age of the population from 1950 to 2050 (median age in years).”
23 Hessler, “Egypt’s Failed Revolution.”
interim transitional government, thinking that they could get a better economic deal from
Mubarak’s successor.

In the free and fair 2011 parliamentary elections, the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni
Political Islam organization, emerged victorious and elected Islamist Mohamed Morsi as
president in June 2012. Morsi’s rule was short lived, as he tried to pass an Islamist constitution
that was widely opposed by the military and secular youth who sought to separate politics
from religion. In July 2013, in a widely popular move, Morsi was removed by the military and
the SCAF returned to power in response to continued popular protests opposing Morsi’s
constitution. The SCAF then wrote a constitution that gave them broad power and former
Secretary of Defense Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who had led the coup against Morsi, was elected
president in a 2014 election. Sisi’s election was widely celebrated across the Sunni Arab World
as the Muslim Brotherhood’s ouster was considered a consequential defeat for political Islam,
which has since largely lost its appeal in Egypt.24

Though sporting a stable government, Egypt’s Arab Spring legacy has been dreary
since Sisi’s 2013 coup d’état. A significant portion of Mubarak’s political infrastructure remains
and Sisi’s horrendous financial budgeting and nonexistent economic policies have made
conditions worse. Despite having highly favorable industrial infrastructure, exceedingly fertile
agricultural land, and the tremendous geopolitical commercial asset of controlling the Suez
Canal, Sisi has done nothing to bolster Egypt’s manufacturing sector, instead relying primarily
on energy production and extraction despite not having the resource base needed to sustain

24 Hessler, “Egypt’s Failed Revolution.”
this model.\textsuperscript{25} Tourism was also a large portion of the economy and has greatly suffered because of the region’s political unrest.\textsuperscript{26}

Additionally, Egypt’s budget is in disarray. 30\% is used for energy subsidies, 25\% pays loan interest, and a further 25\% is used to pay government salaries.\textsuperscript{27} The state has needed to be propped up by its Sunni neighbors, though Saudi Arabia suspended funding in 2018, causing Egypt to seek a $12 billion loan from the IMF.\textsuperscript{28} Unemployment has risen to 33\% in 2016 and the Egyptian Pound was devalued, increasing inflation.\textsuperscript{29}

Sisi has had a hard time reigning with Mubarak’s secret police and his regime is coming to be known as increasingly despotic. The security forces Mubarak built as a buffer against the army have proved particularly troublesome, doubling in size and committing more human-rights violations, drawing the ire of the people towards Sisi’s regime when has little control over the security force’s actions, such as the August 2013 attack on pro-Morsi protesters.\textsuperscript{30} Sisi distrusts the secret police, previously calling them the “million-man mafia” and has confessed to senior American officials that “I don’t control the police.”\textsuperscript{31} The New Yorker’s Peter Hessler describes the tragedy of Sisi’s rule; “Everything that it took for a man like Sisi to rise in a Revolutionary Egypt – secrecy, silence, and commitment to the system – has also made it impossible for him to bring about real change.”\textsuperscript{32} However, it is unfair to absolve Sisi of all responsibility regarding his despotic reputation. Human rights abuses have dramatically

\textsuperscript{25} Hessler, “Egypt’s Failed Revolution.”
\textsuperscript{26} Hessler, “Egypt’s Failed Revolution.”
\textsuperscript{27} Hessler, “Egypt’s Failed Revolution.”
\textsuperscript{28} Hessler, “Egypt’s Failed Revolution,” Muasher, “The Next Arab Uprising.”
\textsuperscript{29} Yahya, “The Middle East’s Lost Decades.”
\textsuperscript{30} Hessler, “Egypt’s Failed Revolution.”
\textsuperscript{31} Hessler, “Egypt’s Failed Revolution.”
\textsuperscript{32} Hessler, “Egypt’s Failed Revolution.”
increased since Mubarak, political prisoners have more than doubled, and Sisi’s government ‘disappeared’ 1500 Egyptians between 2013 and 2018.33

Public trust in the government is eroding, ironically forming an almost inverse relationship with the military’s rise in popularity. In 2011, 47% of Egyptians distrusted the government while 49% trusted the military, yet in 2016, both those figures were 60%.34 In a 2018 Zogby poll, over half of Egyptians said that they were better off in 2013 than they are now.35

Politically, the promised ideals of the revolution have not been realized and Egypt is far from a democracy. No political voice has been extended to Egypt’s youth, leading to continued protests against Sisi’s autocratic leadership. Though parliamentary elections are held regularly, they are far from “free and fair,” and Sisi just amended the constitution to enable him to rule until 2030. Despite his autocratic approach, as of 2016, Sisi is well liked by the Egyptian populace and numerous independent polls have put his support north of 50%, though 2019 protests are seen as cracks in his popularity.36

While the painted picture honestly showcases a dire situation with worsening economic conditions driving further social unrest under an increasingly unpopular autocrat, there are some bright points. On the economic front, Egypt has become a hub for Arab startups, evidence of the emergence of some private sector development. Egypt’s approach to terrorism also seems to be working. Sisi has touted his rule as “standing against the tide of radical

33 Yahya, “The Middle East’s Lost Decades.”
34 Yahya, “The Middle East’s Lost Decades.”
35 Yahya, “The Middle East’s Lost Decades.”
36 Hessler, “Egypt’s Failed Revolution.”
Islam.\textsuperscript{37} While his reforms and crackdowns have removed radicals from the pulpit, some argue that the Muslim Brotherhood’s recent political defeat is evidence for educated Islamic Egyptians abandonment of political Islam.\textsuperscript{38} Less Egyptians than Germans left to fight for ISIS in Syria and the terrorist presence in Egypt has virtually ceased, save small contingents on the Saini peninsula.\textsuperscript{39} The nature of the few residual attacks has also changed, focused less on foreigners and instead targeting the state.\textsuperscript{40} No matter who gets credit, Egypt’s terrorist situation is one of the most enviable in the Arab World.

Though autocratic rule supplanted a popularly elected democracy after the revolution, Egypt joined only Tunisia in replacing their overthrown leader with a legitimate government through Arab Spring revolts. Because Egypt is already 99% Sunni and defeated political Islam on their own terms, Egypt maintained its sovereignty and avoided becoming a proxy conflict for the Sunni/Shia competition gripping the rest of the Arab World. They also escaped Western intervention by countering extremism with supremely effective counterterrorism policies.

\textbf{Economics Make the World Go ‘Round}

\textbf{Regional Economic Commonalities}

Present in much of the Arab World, the economic disarray and stagnation that caused the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt were abundant throughout the Middle East, even in the wealthy rentier states prior to 2010. Though the Arab World was going through an apparent period of economic liberalization, it was not intended to produce the necessary free trade or

\textsuperscript{37} Hessler, “Egypt’s Failed Revolution.”
\textsuperscript{38} Hessler, “Egypt’s Failed Revolution.”
\textsuperscript{39} Hessler, “Egypt’s Failed Revolution.”
\textsuperscript{40} Hessler, “Egypt’s Failed Revolution.”
markets to supply opportunity to meet the growing demand. Mirroring Tunisia and Egypt, early 21st-century Arab economic privatization was a largely corrupt process that further empowered the elites and abandoned the populations. Resultantly, social services such as schools, healthcare, and other essentials were contracted while subsidies started to dry up, leading to a significant reduction in the standard of living.\textsuperscript{41}

Demographics matched Tunisia and Egypt as well, with many Arab countries sporting massive youth bulges. Public sectors that had employed significant portions of the population stagnated, raising unemployment, especially amongst the educated young generation that made up a disproportionately large percentage of the Middle Eastern body politic. Across the Arab World youth unemployment rose 25\% from 1998 to 2008 and by 2010 a quarter of young Arabs, many of them highly educated, were jobless.\textsuperscript{42}

Problems beset the rest of the Arab citizenry as well. By 2010, 40.3 million people were living below the poverty line and many were barely subsisting.\textsuperscript{43} In Yemen alone, 43\% of the population was below the poverty line in 2009, up from 35\% in 2005.\textsuperscript{44} In 2000, the MENA region’s overall median unemployment was 11\% and on energy subsidies from governments to their citizens averaged 11\% of GDP.\textsuperscript{45}

Though many governments weathered 2011’s storm of protests with stopgap measures that temporarily pacified their populations, like Tunisia and Egypt, they did not significantly alter their long-term economic paths, ultimately compounding eventual consequences. Saudi

\textsuperscript{41} Yahya, “The Middle East’s Lost Decades.”
\textsuperscript{42} Yahya, “The Middle East’s Lost Decades.”
\textsuperscript{43} Yahya, “The Middle East’s Lost Decades.”
\textsuperscript{44} Yahya, “The Middle East’s Lost Decades.”
\textsuperscript{45} Muasher, “The Next Arab Uprising.”
Arabia, the leader of the Arab world, is currently experiencing budgetary problems due to decreased oil prices that forced them to slash subsidies and benefits, introduce tax hikes, cut funding for Sunni allies Jordan and Egypt in 2018, and run 10% deficits until 2024 to find financing for an expanded budget aimed at maintaining their pacified population.46

Once again, the problems are region wide. In 2018, a fifth of the Arab World, 65 million people, lived below the poverty line, and the region had the lowest percentage of foreign direct investment in the world at 2.4%.47 Social services declined even compared to immediately pre-revolution numbers, with more kids attending school in 2007 than in 2016.48 Unemployment has marginally decreased to 7.3%, but remains 11% without oil states.49 Even then, Oman and Kuwait are slashing benefits and hiking taxes, while Jordan and Saudi Arabia both sport 30 plus percent youth unemployment.50 MENA regional economic expansion has also faltered, with growth rates tanking between 2016 and 2018.51 Public debt to GDP is becoming an issue, with Lebanon’s reaching 153% and Jordan’s reaching 95% of GDP.52 Oman’s credit rating was relegated to “Junk” and Saudi Arabia needs $31 billion in debt financing to balance its budget. Those enduring proxy wars in Yemen, Syria, and Libya are suffering under debilitating economic conditions, with poverty rates topping 80%, while tens of millions simultaneously combat famine, internal displacement, and being political pawns in refugee crises.53

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46 Muasher, “The Next Arab Uprising.”
47 Yahya, “The Middle East’s Lost Decades.”
48 Yahya, “The Middle East’s Lost Decades.”
49 Yahya, “The Middle East’s Lost Decades.”
50 Muasher, “The Next Arab Uprising.”
51 Yahya, “The Middle East’s Lost Decades.”
52 Yahya, “The Middle East’s Lost Decades.”
53 Yahya, “The Middle East’s Lost Decades.”
Compromising Consequences: Is Reform Without Revolt Possible?

Because these economically unsustainable conditions have been allowed to exacerbate, it is painfully obvious that the rentier state model is dying and that government’s need to diversify away from oil to become more economically efficient in the ultra-competitive global market.\textsuperscript{54} The powers that be are slowly recognizing their compromised position, acknowledging that this process will be long and difficult, ultimately resulting in a merit based competition for jobs and resources.\textsuperscript{55} The necessary economic reforms will induce a period of economic hardship that the citizenry will only endure if they emerge with a voice and formative input on government, therefore necessitating liberal political reforms that would jeopardize their autocratic legitimacy.\textsuperscript{56} Given this scenario, the situations of Middle Eastern autocrats continually compounds while they contemplate the impossibility of introducing reform without inciting revolt.

Historical Legacies and Political Catalysts

Imperialist Structures and Superpower Competition

While Tunisia and Egypt were lucky to escape the Arab Spring with intact governments, their history as natural states with developed national identities is a significant advantage that disincentivized foreign interference and likely prohibited prolonged civil war. As the world exited the imperialist era in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, Western powers left powder kegs throughout the Middle East in the form of mandate states. Per the Sykes-Picot agreement

\textsuperscript{54} Muasher, “The Next Arab Uprising.”
\textsuperscript{55} Muasher, “The Next Arab Uprising.”
\textsuperscript{56} Muasher, “The Next Arab Uprising.”
between France and the UK, the Middle East was indiscriminately divided up into “artificial states” with significant ethnic divisions. The French, British and Italians shrewdly empowered minority rulers to govern a massive, often hostile majority, ensuring internal instability and favorable relations with the previous colonizers due to reliance on European benevolence.  

Using this cold calculus ensured that the minority ruler would be motivated to hold on to power for as long as possible and always be dependent on imperial rule out of fear of reprisals or being relegated or persecuted within their own society should they relinquish power. Elsewhere, they combined multiple large ethnic groups into one “artificial state” in order to manipulate local loyalties, foment infighting, and stifle the development of national identities.  

Early in the 20th century, the French established Syria with an Alawite Shiite government to manage a Sunni majority and significant Kurdish population. Then, collaborating with the British, France fused or split ethnicities across Arabia to create Lebanon, Transjordan (Jordan), Palestine, and Iraq. Italy later formed Libya from three North African regions. Though imperialism faded, the local divisions the period cultivated remain strong.

Much like these mandate states, Yemen was also manipulated by superpowers to serve larger international agenda’s. During the Cold War, North Yemen was supported by the USA and South Yemen was a Soviet ally up until 1990. From 1990 to 2012, the country was united under Ali Abdullah Saleh and Yemen maintained a very tumultuous existence, with Zaydi Shiite Houthi’s from the north often rebelling against the Sunni government.

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57 Anderson, *Fractured Lands: How the Arab World Came Apart.*  
58 Anderson, *Fractured Lands: How the Arab World Came Apart.*  
59 Anderson, *Fractured Lands: How the Arab World Came Apart.*  
60 Anderson, *Fractured Lands: How the Arab World Came Apart.*  
61 Anderson, *Fractured Lands: How the Arab World Came Apart.*  
62 Riedel, "Who are the Houthis, and why are we at war with them?"
Proxy Wars and Political Islam

Today, while the motivations for popular revolt were based on Arab Spring ideals, Yemen and Libya devolved into civil war partly because of a lack of national identity holding opposition forces together. Yemen’s fragmentation is demonstrated by Saleh’s political survivalism, current President Abdrabbuh Hadi’s fractured opposition, and the Houthi movement. In Libya, the Government of National Accords and General Khalifa Haftar oppose the House of Representatives and several local militias. Syria has succumbed to the imperialist logic of the Sykes-Picot agreement, with minority Alawite President Bashar Al-Assad brutally suppressing the majority Sunni rebellion, debatably out of fear of retribution.

All three of these civil wars also quickly devolved into proxy conflicts, either furthering the Western War on Terror or in service of the Sunni/Shia conflict enveloping the Arab World. As they are proxy conflicts, many natural safeguards that would typically end civil wars have been removed, with neither side beholden to the population or limited by arms deficiencies. The unfortunate elimination of natural de-escalation and peace making mechanisms indefinitely prolongs these wars, shifting strategy to maintaining entrenched gains while preventing opposition victory. In forfeiting their accountability to the people, what started as grassroots popular revolutions based on the democratic fervor of the Arab Spring have been hijacked by international agenda’s that indefinitely prolong human suffering without advancing the people’s revolutionary goals or institutions. While restricted civil wars might be

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61 Laub, “Yemen in Crisis.”
62 Miller, “Filling the Vacuum in Libya.”
63 Fisher, “Syria’s Paradox: Why the War Only Ever Seems to Get Worse.”
64 Fisher, “Syria’s Paradox: Why the War Only Ever Seems to Get Worse.”
65 Fisher, “Syria’s Paradox: Why the War Only Ever Seems to Get Worse.”
acceptable collateral damage of democratic reform because of their natural controls and conflict settling characteristics, unbound proxy wars are simply not worth the risk to most Arab revolutionaries. Therefore, superpower and regional intervention undermines the Arab Spring’s democratic and populist goals.

Furthermore, proxy wars are the biggest threat to the Arab Spring because they give legitimacy to Middle Eastern governments who appeal to order. Existing autocrats were able to dispel revolutionary sentiment by scaring adversaries, contrasting the deadly costs of pursuing democratic reform against the safety and security of their commitment to order. Many potential revolutionaries therefore concluded that no matter how economically and politically oppressed they were, the status quo is better than eternal warfare.

The potential rise of Islamist regimes also scared secular protestors. While living under the current religious regimes is bad enough, living under a government that rules via Islamic Law is an even more unattractive prospect for secular youth who already think that there is too much religion. Though political Islam was defeated in both Tunisia and Egypt, its early gains leant well to status quo powers adopting platforms contrasting their commitment to harmony with the painful evils of Islamism.

**Critiquing Counterarguments: Proxy Wars and Political Islam**

Many in the academic community contend that the Arab Spring is dead because Western intervention suppresses popular rebellion and fear over Islamism squashes revolutionary appeal. However, because of omnipresent deterioration of the economic

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67 Muasher, “The Next Arab Uprising.”
68 Muasher, “The Next Arab Uprising.”
motivations that jumpstarted the Arab Spring and the inability of current state institutions to
deal with them, the emergence of proxy wars and political Islam serve as early reflections on
how to refine the Arab Spring for future success. The Arab Spring will reemerge again, but the
key to its continued success is finding opportunities to exploit lapses to proxy war
commitment, such as during power transitions or geopolitical crises that preoccupy the
concerned powers.

Preventing Islamism is more challenging, but Tunisia showed that a strong
commitment to secularism and consensus politics relegating Islamists to an actor in an openly
competitive, technocratic electoral system should ultimately remove them from power.
Ultimately, the success or failure of the Arab Spring requires international military non-
intervention so the untenable economic conditions are allowed to develop, on their own terms,
into popular revolutions that responsibly form democratic nations with viable economies built
using sovereign institutions and systems.

The 2 Step Process – Economic Restructuring Must Follow Political Revolution

These economic problems, both pre and post Arab Spring, are shared by the whole
Arab world, including Egypt and Tunisia, because of the entrenched economic models that the
region utilizes. Thus, the economic systems of Middle Eastern Countries represent a litmus test
for the Arab Spring because a democratic revolution will not be able to reconfigure the
economy until it has consolidated power. Due to the concentration of economic power in the
political elite, wrestling the economy free of the present system will require more than just a
democratic reform, though that is the necessary first step. A grassroots democratic protest can
transform a political system relatively quickly, but economic reorientation and diversification
requires a coordinated approach from the new political institution within a setting where those in control of the institution do not stand to gain. As the people of Tunisia are discovering, installing a democratic government does not immediately change the way business has been done for generations.

That being said, Tunisia is in a more favorable position than Egypt and the rest of the Arab World to begin to address their economic issues because their democratic institution stands to gain when the entire economy succeeds, instead of profiting the elite or the army. If Tunisia can mobilize its government to reconstruct their economy around a meritocratic system and successfully limit corruption without compromising their democracy, it will build a compelling legacy for other Arab states to follow. Even before Tunisia embarks on this process, Egypt is also realizing the necessity for political revolution to precede an economic redesign, as Islamic leaders believe that protests related to Egypt’s current economic disarray will ultimately lead to Sisi’s downfall before the economic issues are fixed.\textsuperscript{69} While not apparent in 2010, to fully realize the ideals of the Arab Spring, a two-faceted transformation of the Middle Eastern political and economic system must occur. This regional renovation starts within each country with grassroots political revolutions removing entrenched financial and political elite. Once a new government is in place, the political revolutions are then followed by the institutional redesigns of economies towards competitive markets by the new administrations.

\textsuperscript{69} Hessler, “Egypt's Failed Revolution.”
Developing a Voice – The Arab Spring’s Legacies of Fearlessness, Openness, and Togetherness

Defying the Authoritarian Bargain

While the economic rebuilding remains on shaky footing, the Arab Spring did develop a significant immediate legacy with its dismantling of the authoritarian bargain. The authoritarian bargain is a system of government widely utilized by Arab autocrats where the state doesn't tax, forgives debts, guarantees social services like education and healthcare, and ensures jobs so the country’s political elite can rule without worrying about popular rebellion. States that employ this model are often called ‘nanny states’ where the government takes care of everybody in exchange for the right to rule. Traditionally, Arab governments enforced their bargain through a combination of fear and subsidies, intimidating the population into accepting the benefits instead of demanding political voice.

Taking to the streets frustrated by their lack of input, the Arab Spring protests attacked the authoritarian bargain’s core by demanding a political voice. Openly defying one of the central tenets of their social contract, citizens showed that they no longer feared their governments. Though governments were able to temporarily pacify the people with increased subsidies, continual protests demonstrate an awakening of the Arab political voice that will only become stronger the longer they are denied their representation. Though most have not immediately transitioned their voice into action, prolonged resistance continues to

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70 Yahya, "The Middle East's Lost Decades."
71 Yahya, "The Middle East's Lost Decades."
strengthen the Arab Spring’s legacy as the catalyzing event for Arabic political voice and the beginning of the authoritarian bargain’s demise.

**Breaking the Information Monopoly – Social Media and Al-Jazeera**

In implementing their voice, the Arab Spring also developed another important legacy in terms of how revolutions spread amongst populations. Both the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions have been alternatively called the ‘Facebook Revolutions’ due to the effectiveness of the social media platform in coordinating events amongst the protestors while circumventing government media control. Tunisia’s protests quickly spread from Sidi Bouzid to Tunis while Egypt’s prompted Mubarak to shut down the internet because social media’s role as an open collaboration forum efficiently coordinated and galvanized people into action by sharing typically repressed content depicting crimes of the state. Critically, Facebook and Twitter enabled the revolutions to be grassroots, popular movements, preventing governments from ‘cutting the head off the snake’ by targeting, arresting, suppressing, or otherwise neutralizing movement leaders.

Being global internet entities, social media connected protestors to other movements within the region and, when combined with Al-Jazeera, the first media network to service most of the Middle East, the free flow of information allowed people to take collective action about issues concerning the entirety of the Arab World. Across the region, coordinated Arab revolutionary slogans always depicted “the people” against the government. Before social media, popular movements that bore this moniker were never insured to be representative of the entire population because social constructs and economic divisions separate portions of the citizenry from one another. For the first time, social media enabled “the people,” both
nationally and internationally, to openly and collaboratively form a consensus by connecting opposing and distant sectors of the population. Social Media’s revolutionary legacy, born out of the Arab Spring, has transformed the way revolutions occur across the globe by connecting distant groups of people and serving as an essential coordination platform for grassroots movements.

**Prognosis for the Future**

It is becoming glaringly evident that the Arab World is approaching economic insolvency and political catastrophe. Vested interests, corruption, and leaders who have little incentive to change the system can try to maintain the status quo for as long as possible, but the dire neglect of many of the Arab Spring’s underlying economic factors combined with the inevitable demographic shifts necessitate change. Tunisia and Egypt represented early examples of this change, both demonstrating the opportunity and pitfalls that emerge from the Arab Spring. For both, the economy remains a significant issue, but economic change does not happen overnight. Though confidence in the Tunisian government is low, there is hope as Tunisia theoretically begins to transition into rebuilding its economy after consolidating its democracy. Balancing the hope for Tunisia’s success is Egypt’s regression into autocracy, which provides a stark cautionary-example to the Arab world that cyclical autocracy is not easy to eradicate because the institutions controlling wealth need to undergo fundamental reform in order to bring about economic progress. The Arab Spring is a two-step process, and Egypt’s failed revolution is evidence that these steps build on one another. Economic reform must follow political revolution or else autocratic rule will re-emerge out of entrenched institutions.
Though there is optimism the process will be followed, the Arab World’s future is very uncertain and known to disappoint when it comes to democratic reform. At time of writing, no country has managed to address more than the political step of the Arab Spring. Tunisia is the closest, but they must still initiate economic reform, which could take several years (if not decades) and threatens to undermine their progress. Egypt has restarted at square one and proxy wars rage in Syria, Yemen, and Libya. The Sunni/Shia split has intensified proxy rivalries between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Though a resurgent Arab Spring seems economically inevitable, the potential for international intervention provides warnings for those seeking democratic reforms and may convince them that dealing with the current autocratic repression, no matter how bad, is better than the devastation of a proxy war. While people wait for the right time to engage in popular dissent in order to avoid this outcome, the most effective movements are spontaneous and fast moving. Being unpredictable takes advantage of the contemporary political landscape and surprises governments, leaving them with little action capacity.

With the underlying factors for the Arab Spring are abundantly present across the region, for the Arab Spring to succeed in its next incarnations, in addition to completing the two steps, two conditions, primarily aimed at removing the international concerns of domestic potential movements, must be met before spontaneous again revolutions take to the streets.

First, foreign powers need to demonstrate restraint when involving themselves in sovereign revolutions and avoid turning them into proxy wars.\textsuperscript{72} While foreign powers can assist in post-revolutionary state building aid and preventing atrocities, interference with

\textsuperscript{72} Jones, “The Mirage of the Arab Spring.”
grassroots movements is often counterproductive because it de-isolates the movement’s focus, instead politicizing the situation within the framework of the international geopolitical context. Tunisia and Egypt’s revolutions succeeded precisely because no foreign powers intervened in any military capacity. If democratic revolutions proceed without interference, there is the potential that many in the region will emulate them in quick succession based on the timeline of the first round of Arab Spring protests. If protests are repeatedly coopted by proxy conflicts, the existing Arab status-quo will remain, propped up by order, while the economic situation will continue to deteriorate.

Second, for the Arab Spring to succeed, a newly-minted Middle Eastern democracy needs to succeed in restructuring their economy, at least marginally. If Tunisia can show progress and prove that meaningful economic change is possible, this will provide the Arab World with a blueprint to follow. If Tunisia fails, it shows that a democracy is no more capable of reforming the economy than the region’s autocracies. Until one country completes both steps - political revolution and economic restructuring - the wanted mass movement of Arab countries converting to democracy in order to change their economic model is less likely to happen.

While these conditions seem highly improbable and uncertain, there is hope for the Arab World. Tunisia’s progress, while at times slow, shows promising potential for democracy and free market economics in the Middle East. While Egypt may have failed, their failure illustrated the unique regional pitfalls of Islamism and the strength authoritarian influence retains within the institutions the regime created. Egypt’s discovery of these pitfalls defines a path to success for the rest of the Arab World. This path, necessitating that a grassroots
political revolution must be followed by an economic restructuring, provides a beacon of light that may just lead to the downfall of the Arab authoritarian bargain and usher in a new regime of political freedom and economic opportunity throughout the Middle East.
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