

State-Breaking and the Crisis of Arab Authoritarianism

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The Arab world is witnessing one of the most prolonged and violent periods of revolutionary change in its modern history. The decades-long dictatorships of Zeen al-‘Abadin Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt have collapsed and major protests and violent regime countermeasures have erupted in nearly every country in the region. What makes this moment so remarkable is that the Arab world had been the most stable bastion of authoritarianism on earth. In some ways, this crisis has been a long time coming, stemming from the breakdown of the Arab world’s distinctive political economic bargain whereby authoritarian states gained legitimacy by guaranteeing a robust social safety net and public sector employment. Anemic private sector growth after the turn toward economic liberalization in the 1980s and 1990s, though, left many Arabs, especially the young, with bleak prospects. Today’s revolutionary movements have proven remarkably adept in channeling quotidian anger and frustration into new repertoires of contention and protest.

How far will the revolutionary wave reach? What will be left in its wake? Outcomes will vary from country to country due to the differences in opportunity presented by the compounding demographic and economic crises and the abilities of the opposition trying to seize them. Like the opposition they desperately seek to defeat, incumbent regimes themselves try to adapt and regroup, positioning themselves for counterrevolution. Democracy could arise either by successful post-revolutionary elections or more gradually through concessions by incumbent

regimes that allow greater public participation in legislation and more effective checks on executive power.

Still, while many policy-makers are preoccupied with whether revolutions will deliver liberal democracy or provide an opening to repressive Islamic groups, a third possibility has emerged: political and social chaos and state-breakdown. As Samuel Huntington pointed out, even more fundamental than the form of government is the degree to which any Arab state will continue to govern after the wave subsides.¹ While problems of state failure have gained new attention in the international policy community, they are mostly thought to pertain to the poorest and most beleaguered states, like Somalia, Chad, Zimbabwe, and the Congo. Yet the sudden eruption of civil insurrection across the region has called into question the very basis of political order. The same factors of political and economic stress that precipitate revolutions can also plunge countries into civil war.² Indeed, the recent intrastate conflicts in the Arab world, including in Iraq (2006-2008), Lebanon (1975-2000), Algeria (1991-2001), and the ongoing impasse between Hamas and Fatah in the Palestinian territory, show how political openings in the context of severe fractionalization lead to violence rather than democracy. This scenario is in some ways the most dire.

The Failure of the Arab Authoritarian Bargain

Following the wave of military coups that deposed the monarchies in Egypt, Iraq, and Libya in the 1950s and 1960s, conservative monarchies and radical republican regimes alike turned to similar socio-economic formulae to buttress their rule. The result was a distinctive “authoritarian bargain”: in return for political quiescence, governments redistributed wealth to

¹ Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 1.

² Jack Goldstone, et al., “A Global Model for Forecasting Political Instability,” *American Journal of Political Science*, 54 (2010).

ensure equitable and universal access to basic necessities like food, shelter, education, and health care. State-owned enterprises, protected by import substitution systems, absorbed tens of thousands of workers into what was essentially a civil service corps that guaranteed lifetime employment at livable wages. Labor unions were co-opted under state corporatism. Since they drew their members entirely from employees of state-owned enterprises, the unions became mere adjuncts of ruling parties.³

Even as these measures solidified autocracy, they simultaneously established public expectations that governments would act to limit inequality and promote public welfare through generous spending. In its heyday, the Arab welfare state was indeed robust. Subsidies kept food, gasoline, healthcare, and housing within everyone's reach. Such government intervention in the economy brought about dramatic improvement in human and economic development. In the span of two decades, infant mortality was halved and secondary school enrollment doubled.

As early as the mid-1970s, though, it was clear that neither the bloated civil services nor inefficient state-owned industries could take in the next generation of workers. Urged on by the United States and international lending agencies, Egypt's Anwar Sadat turned to the private sector to drive economic growth in the mid-1970s. Others soon followed. Similar to China's economic liberalization, reform was calibrated to enhance regime control. Key segments of the state-owned economy were sold off to regime insiders who formed a new class of state-dependent capitalists. Food subsidies and other key elements of the social welfare system, as well as public sector hiring, were cut in the name of austerity, but military pay and benefits

³ Tarik Yousef, "Development, Growth, and Policy Reform in the Middle East and North Africa since 1950," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 19:3 (2004); Steve Heydemann, "Social Pacts and the Persistence of Authoritarianism in the Middle East," in Oliver Schlumberger, ed., *Debating Authoritarianism: Dynamics and Durability in Non-Democratic Regimes* (Stanford University Press: Stanford, 2007).

remained unchecked to ensure the loyalty of this core constituency. The new era of authoritarian capitalism had begun.⁴

Yet in making this transition, the Arab regimes failed to offer a credible alternative to the old authoritarian bargain. While China successfully enticed foreign investment with the promise of access to enormous markets and built national champions into global competitors, the private sector in the Arab world never exhibited the dynamism necessary to carry the economy forward. With a frozen public sector and anemic private industry, the biggest losers in this transition were the tens of millions of young people born to parents between the late 1960s and 1980s, when continual improvement seemed the norm. Indeed, as Ragui Assad and Farzaney Roudi-Fahimi note, the last decade has seen an enormous demographic shift, with around half the population of the Arab world under the age of thirty. Under certain conditions, such youth bulges can be a demographic gift, spurring economic development such as the American baby boom. Arab economies, though, were in no position to absorb this new generation. By the mid-2000s, about one in four young Arab men were unemployed, with the situation in places like Jordan (28%), Tunisia (31%), and Algeria (43%) even worse.⁵

Besides emigration, the main option for millions of young job-seekers is to work in the informal economy. The effects can be seen on the streets of any major Arab city, as private cars double as unregistered taxis and teenagers tout pirated DVDs and knock-off clothing. Even university graduates, once assured stable civil service careers, have been forced to moonlight. Besides the economic cost of underutilized labor, the informalization of labor has severe political

⁴ For an excellent history of the region's political-economic transition, see Alan Richards and John Waterbury, *A Political Economy of the Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2007 [3rd edition]); Stephen King, *The New Authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

⁵ Ragui Assad and Farzaney Roudi-Fahimi, "Youth in the Middle East and North Africa: Demographic Opportunity or Challenge?" Population Reference Bureau, 2007, <https://prb.org/pdf07/YouthinMENA.pdf> (accessed March 12, 2011).

consequences. Toiling in the gray zone means being at the mercy of corrupt bureaucrats and police who control entry to the legal sphere through an endless maze of licensures and certificates.

This crisis became particularly acute in the last five years due to the volatility of two key elements of the region's political and moral economy: food and oil. The international food crisis hit the Middle East particularly hard. With states in the process of dismantling the food subsidies, increases in the prices of basic commodities like flour, rice, sugar, and bread hit poorer families particularly hard. This problem was complicated further by the boom and bust cycle in the price of oil. The early to mid-2000s were indeed boom years. Oil prices reached record highs, buoying newly liberalized regional stock markets. Even those countries with meager to no oil and gas had their economies tethered to the fate of the oil markets through pipelines, remittances, tourism and foreign direct investment. With national treasuries flush and stock markets booming, there were new demands to reinstate or at least retain the last vestiges of the consumer subsidies. But selling gasoline at subsidized rates entailed an enormous opportunity cost, especially as prices on the global market reached new heights. The region's habitual overconsumption of gasoline, another byproduct of subsidies, made this cost even higher. Citizens felt their countries were getting richer and government revenues were increasing, but more and more of the benefits of high prices were being taken up by the cost of subsidies. The Arab world was, in effect, eating its own feedstock.

Following the tenets of neo-liberal reform, regimes across the Middle East moved to cut gasoline subsidies, leading to dramatic spikes in consumer prices. Between 2004 and 2008 retail gasoline prices increased in Iran by almost 500%, in Syria by 85%, in Egypt by 75%, in Yemen

by 58%, in Tunisia by 41%, in the United Arab Emirates by 32%, and in Morocco by 17%.⁶

When oil prices abruptly collapsed in 2008, though, debates about economic restructuring that had been tabled during the boom quickly and urgently re-emerged. The bust caught even the wealthiest and seemingly most sophisticated Middle Eastern regimes, like the UAE, by surprise. Regional stock markets fell by half. The global recession foreclosed the option of emigration to Europe. The decline in food prices did not make up for the losses in revenue. In fact, the need for social spending only increased in this period of economic decline. From the mid-2000s onward, riots over the prices of food and fuel became commonplace across the Middle East. While sporadic and politically unfocused, these riots illustrated the extent to which the old authoritarian bargain had disappeared without providing a suitable alternative. The strain of demographic challenges coupled with economic crises demonstrated conclusively the indifference and incapacity of incumbent regimes to maintain a decent standard of living for their citizens.

Revolutionary Repertoires and Regime Responses

Despite their steadily eroding legitimacy, Arab regimes have, until now, exhibited remarkable resilience. Though politically closed, these regimes tended to lack the capacity to monitor or control many forms of public interaction, much less compel specific prescribed actions.⁷ Rather than seeking ideological conviction, regimes were willing to cordon off some forbidden behaviors while tolerating many seemingly innocuous social and civil activities. Government minders and informants kept close tabs on the activities of NGOs, opposition political parties, and the like, but a measure of free expression was allowed in the safe zones of

⁶ International Fuel Prices, <http://www.gtz.de/en/themen/29957.htm> (Accessed March 14, 2011).

⁷ Douglass McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 223.

mosques, chat-rooms, or family salons. Complaints about corrupt ministers or unjust policies were generally permitted so long as they stopped short of directly criticizing the ruler. This limited freedom was thought to provide a kind of outlet or release valve, averting outbursts of more serious dissent.⁸ In the revolutions of 2010/11 however, the opposition found ways to exploit the unique vulnerabilities of such liberalized authoritarian systems.

Many of the tactics visible in the Arab world parallel those seen in Ukraine, Georgia, Serbia, Iran, and Lebanon, as well as in the ongoing Palestinian resistance movement. With the rapid penetration of internet and satellite technologies over the last decade, the Middle East was perhaps the region most poised to make use of new social media to organize networks of supporters, exchange information, and coordinate campaigns of resistance.⁹ New media, such as Facebook and Twitter, and satellite television, played a critical role in disseminating information and coordinating networks of support.

In the cases of the two successful revolutions to date, in Tunisia and Egypt, opposition groups took advantage of tolerated or prescribed actions before escalating to more confrontational forms of protest, in effect hijacking the regime's own discourse. In Tunisia, where the revolutionary wave began, a seemingly contingent event provided the fodder for opposition mobilization. On December 17, 2010, Mohammed Bouazizi, a twenty-five year old street peddler from the town of Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, set himself alight in front of a provincial governor's office. According to an investigation by al-Jazeera, Bouazizi had been fined 400 dinars (\$280 dollars), the equivalent of two months' earnings, for selling without a license. His family related that what drove this young man to suicide was not poverty per se, but the shame of

⁸ Dan Brumberg, "The Trap of Liberalized Autocracy," *Journal of Democracy*, 13:4 (2002). See also Dan Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in the Age of Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁹ For a general discussion of information technology and political reform, see Philip N. Howard, *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Information Technology and Political Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

having been slapped by a policewoman in public while his wares were confiscated. Certainly, such humiliations at the hands of government officials are hardly uncommon in Tunisia and the rest of the Arab world. Bouazizi was not the first person known to have resorted to suicide as a form of protest, nor was he the first self-immolator. What was unique in this instance was that President Ben Ali visited Bouazizi's hospital bed in a misconceived public relations ploy. Instead of demonstrating the president's sympathy, broadcasts of the visit on state television only helped transform Bouazizi into a national hero. Upon his death on January 4, 2011, Bouazizi became an officially consecrated martyr. Bouazizi's death became a cause that dissatisfied but risk averse people could rally around without fear of government reprisal, as the regime had no choice but to tolerate funeral and memorial processions. These gatherings soon took on the trappings of a direct anti-government demonstration, which Ben Ali's own military proved unwilling to put down.¹⁰ Even though religious authorities generally discourage acts of self-immolation as contrary to Islam's ban on suicide, copy-cat acts were soon seen from Mauritania to Iraq, a new crop of martyrs who became foci of public outrage.

After Ben Ali's collapse, the Egyptian opposition was even more poised for confrontation. At the vanguard was the April 6th youth movement. Although it adopted a name commemorating the abortive strikes by workers in El-Mahala in 2008, the movement was not a labor organization but a rather a loose collective of well-educated activists and bloggers committed to a broad agenda of rolling back Egyptian authoritarian control. Leaders of the April 6th movement trained with leaders of Serbia's Otpor! (Resistance) youth movement, which orchestrated the demonstrations that took down Slobodan Milosevic in 2000, in the use of non-violent protest techniques. Wael Ghonim, an executive at Google associated with the April 6th

¹⁰ Yasmine Ryan, "The Tragic Life of a Street Vendor," Al-Jazeera English, <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/features/2011/01/201111684242518839.html#> (Accessed March 14, 2011).

movement, had launched a Facebook campaign to memorialize a young man killed in police custody in 2010, gaining an estimated 400,000 members. The April 6th movement seized the opportunity to move their protests from the web to the streets using another established and prescribed national ritual: the parades of Egypt's Police Day on January 25, 2011. Under the guise of celebrating this lackluster national holiday, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets of every major Egyptian city, including tens of thousands in Cairo's Tahrir Square alone.

Though Egyptian security services had apparently been monitoring internet traffic and even arrested some members of the April 6th group, the first major demonstrations seemed to catch the regime by surprise. The regime girded to block the next round of demonstrations from taking to the streets, increasing police presence and arresting various opposition leaders. Again, however, the opposition exploited a zone of tolerated action, launching their next major protests on Friday, January 28. The very word for Friday in Arabic, *yawm al-juma'a*, means day of congregation. It was simply unconscionable for the Egyptian government to prevent people from congregating for Friday communal prayer, even though protests were likely to ensue. The protests that ensued that Friday afternoon were even larger than those held on January 25, forcing the government to withdraw the police and deploy the military, the crucial decision that brought Mubarak's downfall, as the military itself refused to attack protesters and eventually moved to unseat Mubarak.

Across the Arab world, oppositions seized the banal national emblems, flags, and crests, once exclusively the regime's domain. Instead of specific programmatic or ideological demands, protests were couched in the vague but potent slogans of sovereignty, nationalism, and democracy—the very virtues the regime claimed to defend. In monarchical regimes, early demonstrations tended to demonize the cabinet and ministries while swearing devotion to the

king. These safe zones of tolerated speech provided a common denominator to link a broad segment of opposition forces normally divided by ideological, economic, and generational cleavages. As theory of collective action amply demonstrate, though dissatisfaction maybe widespread, few individuals would take part in protests without the confidence that they will achieve enough critical mass to at least provide anonymity from government retribution, much less ensure success.¹¹ Drawing from a broader base helped overcome this problem and moved the movement toward the tipping point.

This strategy also had implications for regime-opposition relations. As in the case of Ben Ali, many rulers have tried to smother the opposition by embracing the cause of reform as their own. Beside the usual litany of bogeymen (Israel, al-Qaeda, drug smugglers, the U.S., etc.), some of the first scapegoats were the leaders' own ministers. Early on, King Abdullah of Jordan and President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority sacked their entire cabinets, promising a new era of reform and clean hands. Sultan Qaboos of Oman, President Saleh of Yemen, and President Assad of Syria, among others, have done the same. Kaddafi is reputed to have announced that he would join the protest during the February 14 "day of rage." Familiar promises of political liberalization and constitutional reform have echoed across the region.

Such displays of sympathy for reform, however, also provided further cover for opportunistic elites to defect from the ruler's orbit. Ministers and diplomats across the region are resigning in droves, suddenly registering protests over the behavior of regimes they have dutifully served. In Tunisia and Egypt, underlings went so far as to depose the ruler themselves, claiming power as national saviors. In Tunisia, the ruling Democratic Constitutional party essentially dumped Ben Ali and took the lead in setting up a transitional government. In Egypt,

¹¹ Mark Lichbach, *The Rebel's Dilemma* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998)

the military ousted Mubarak, suspended the constitution, dissolved parliament, and named itself the transitional government, all in the name of democracy.

In a deeper sense, the responses to revolutionary challengers drew from what Joel Migdal calls “the politics of survival”—the tendency to pursue regime longevity at the cost of state cohesion.¹² Beyond shuffling the bureaucracy, autocrats have sought to divide and rule the opposition. Nearly every Arab regime immediately offered public sector wage hikes and increased public subsidies in an attempt to placate the presumed majority of the protesters whose main complaint is economic. Coercion remained at the ready when strategies of cooptation fall short. Such aggressive action can crush the opposition without having to make any significant concessions. Even where violence has not erupted, this is at least in part due to the deterrent offered by a strong show of force by the security services.

In divided societies, regimes often portray the opposition as narrowly sectarian or representing a foreign power. Bahrain’s ruling Sunni Khalifa family, descendents of Sunni tribes from Arabia, had long viewed the Shi’is who comprise about three quarters of the island’s inhabitants as a potential Iranian fifth column. Key positions in the civil service and government were reserved for Sunnis and the regime cultivated ties with Sunni Islamist political parties. The Bahraini security services were traditionally staffed by Jordanian and Pakistani officers who were granted citizenship in return for their loyal service to the crown and therefore have little sympathy for Shi’i complaints about their systemic marginalization.¹³ As the conflict between regime and opposition escalated, sectarian divisions became more pronounced. The first protests of February 14 were spearheaded by a small Arab nationalist party that enjoyed, at best, a modest

¹² Joel Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 214-222.

¹³ For more on sectarian relations in Bahrain, see Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Yitzhak Nakash, *Reaching for Power: The Shi’a in the Modern Arab World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), Chapter 2.

following from both Sunni and Shi'i middle class intellectuals. Consistent with the patterns in other cases, demands were relatively modest, calling for investigations into corruption and political liberalization, but they were nonetheless met with violent suppression. Members of Al-Wifaq, the most powerful legal Shi'i political organization and largest party in the Bahrain parliament, announced their boycott of parliament and called for a general strike. As the momentum of protest grew, so too did the regime's resort to the logic of sectarianism. Beyond the brute suppression of the opposition, culminating in the storming and razing of Manama's Pearl Square roundabout, the regime came to rely increasingly on distinctly Sunni voices for its defense. Two major Sunni Islamist parties, who had been at least sympathetic to demands for reform, issued joint statements affirming their loyalty to the crown and decrying what they described as the opposition's irresponsible attempts to undermine the unity of the country.¹⁴ Sheikh Yusuf al-Qardawi, the most prominent Sunni cleric in the world, added moral weight to this notion of sectarian defense, claiming that Bahrain's was not a "popular revolution" (*thawra sha'abiyya*) like Egypt's, Libya's and Tunisia's, but a "sectarian revolution" (*thawra ta'iffiyya*) backed by foreign (i.e., Iranian) forces.¹⁵

If the leader falters and his subjects are neither longer confident in his ability to deliver patronage nor fearful of his wrath the entire fabric of political order can collapse. Defections in the Libyan military and security services serve to highlight the tribal networks that Kaddafi wove together.¹⁶ In Yemen, Saleh's web of tribal alliances frays in the midst of long-simmering

¹⁴ International Crisis Group, "Popular Protests in North Africa and the Middle East (III): The Bahrain Revolt," April 6, 2011.

¹⁵ Fahd Saud, "Qaradawi: What Happened in Bahrain was a Sectarian, Not a Popular, Uprising," Al-Arabiyya Online, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/03/18/142113.html>, (Accessed March 31, 2011), in Arabic.

¹⁶ Mohamed Hussein, "Libya Crisis: What Role Do Tribal Loyalties Play," BBC News, February 21, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12528996> (Accessed March 15, 2011); "Expert: Elite Forces Key to Kaddafi's Conflict in Libya" *Asharq Alawsat* Online, March 15, 2011, <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=612587&issueno=11795> (Accessed March 15, 2011), in Arabic.

insurgencies in the north and south and more vocal protests in the capital. General Ali Mohsin Ahmar, a top general involved in the suppression of the northern rebellion, and Sheikh Sadeq al-Ahmar (no direct relation), leader of Saleh's own tribal confederation, have come out in support of the opposition.¹⁷ Even in Egypt, where the army enjoys a prouder tradition of corporate cohesion, Mubarak's last ditch effort to mobilize armed non-state actors undermined the state's supremacy over the means of legitimate violence. Cairo has been beset by an unprecedented wave of street crime, violence between Muslims and Coptic Christians, and continued shortages of flour and propane. In the absence of an effective police force, civilians are forced to take security into their own hands through neighborhood militias.¹⁸ Once such patterns of self-defense are established, it becomes progressively more difficult for any regime to recover their elusive monopoly over force.

One boon to struggling authoritarian rulers has been the emergence of a Saudi-led regional coalition devoted to upholding the authoritarian status quo.¹⁹ Citing provisions in the Gulf Cooperation Council treaty calling for mutual aid in case of foreign threat, Saudi, Qatari, and Emirati troops crossed the causeway to help the Bahraini government put down the popular protests. The GCC has also gone on the offensive in Yemen, albeit more subtly, by helping to exacerbate the fractiousness within the opposition. The GCC's "transition plans" allowed Saleh an open timetable for withdrawal and provided immunity from any prosecution, a proposal

¹⁷ Laura Kasinof and Neil MacFarquhar, "Key Tribal Chief Wants Yemen Leader to Quit," *New York Times*, February 26, 2011; "Key Supporters Are Forsaking Yemen Leader," *New York Times*, March 21, 2011. "Major tribes of Yemen Joining the Protest," *Asharq Alawsat* Online, March 15, 2011. <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=1&issueno=11795&article=612639&feature=> (Accessed March 16, 2011), in Arabic.

¹⁸ Ingrid Wassmann, "Firearms, Another Friday Night in Cairo," <http://www.kippreport.com/2010/02/firearms-and-another-friday-night-in-cairo/> (Accessed March 15, 2011); Ali Abdel Mohsen, "Law-Abiding Citizens: Egypt Struggles to Cope with Police Absence," *Al-Masry Al-Youm* Online, March 8, 2011, <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/node/344501> (Accessed March 15, 2011).

¹⁹ For a fuller discussion of Saudi policies, see Toby C. Jones, "Counterrevolution in the Gulf," U.S. Institute of Peace PeaceBrief No. 89, April 15, 2011.

accepted by regime insiders like Gen. Ahmar, since it provides an avenue for a quick power grab comparable to that of Egypt's Military Council, but rejected by the youth-based revolutionary movement in the streets, who insisted on the regime's immediate and complete ouster.²⁰

The only case where outside actors seem to have definitively turned to support a revolution has come in Libya. Media coverage of blatant acts of violence, particularly attacks on civilians on Benghazi, helped spur the Western powers to establish the no-fly zone. Kaddafi, though, was an easy object of international opprobrium, already associated with international terrorism and general belligerence (despite his 2005 rehabilitation in the international community). The Arab League re-paid Kaddafi's decades of open contempt by assenting to the intervention. Though couched as a humanitarian measure, the mission has quickly morphed into one of essentially providing air cover for the armed rebellion, whose forces proved too ineffective to combat even a weakened Kaddafi. Again, however, other regional players sought to defend the status quo, as the African Union belatedly offered its own plan calling for a graduated transition that would likely lead to the eventual handover of power to Kaddafi's sons or other members of his inner circle. Rebel leaders rejected it out of hand.²¹

As the only global superpower, the U.S. has played an oversized but also contradictory role in the revolutions. With the exception of its brief foray of airstrikes against Libya, U.S. policy has been limited to the use of "softer" forms of power. On one hand, the threats to withdraw the \$1.3 billion in annual military assistance likely played a major role in convincing the Egyptian military not participate in a crackdown against civilian protesters. Mubarak's

²⁰ Arafat Mudabash, "Yemen: Uncertainty About the Fate of the Gulf Initiative," *Asharq Alawsat* Online, <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=617001&issueno=11824> (Accessed April 13, 2011), in Arabic; "Yemen Opposition Parties to Sign Gulf Mediation Deal to Resolve Crisis Within '24 Hours,'" *Washington Post*, April 25, 2011.

²¹ "Libyan Rebels Reject African Union Cease-Fire Proposal, Demand Gadhafi's Removal," *Washington Post*, April 11, 2011.

departure, though, only served to usher in a military government which was still largely amenable to U.S. designs.²² On the other hand, in Bahrain, which hosts the largest U.S. naval base in the region, has significant oil and gas reserves, and where the opposition was suspected of being an Iranian stalking horse, the stakes were dramatically different. As much role as the U.S. had in ushering Mubarak out, it was equally complicit in Bahrain's crackdown. Not only did the U.S. allow Bahrain and its GCC allies to deploy American-made weapons and American-trained troops against civilians, but it has even agreed to expand its sale of equipment to Saudi Arabia in the coming months.²³

Though it helped set the stage for the Arab revolutions, at first inadvertently by promoting neo-liberal economic reforms that eroded the old authoritarian bargain, then more deliberately, by championing political reforms that further undermined Arab state's legitimacy, the U.S. balked at the outbursts of popular unrest in late 2010 and early 2011. The nature of superpowers is to favor the status quo and be risk averse. For decades, the U.S. has relied on friendly dictators to help suppress Islamic terrorism, maintain a steady supply of oil, and dampen belligerence toward Israel. The Iranian revolution of 1979 illustrated the risk that popular demonstrations might open the door to the seizure of power by radical anti-American Islamic factions. The debacle of Iraq dashed any illusions that the U.S. might realign the regional order by deposing dictators and installing moderate, pro-Western democracies. The Wikileaks cables show that U.S. officials were aware of the vulnerabilities of the venality of the allies, skeptical of their invoking the Islamist threat as a bogeyman to gain more from their international sponsor, and warned of their possible overthrow. But American policy-makers were also befuddled by

²² "Unrest Tests Egyptian Military and Its Crucial Relationship with U.S.," *Washington Post*, January 20, 2011; Elizabeth Bumiller, "Pentagon Places Its Bent on a General in Egypt," *New York Times*, March 10, 2011.

²³ In an op-ed, King Hamad even went so far as to point out his own training at the U.S. Army War College at Ft. Leavenworth. See "Stability is a Prerequisite for Progress," *Washington Times*, April 19, 2011.

the alternatives. Thus, the U.S.—like its Arab allies—was caught flatfooted when faced with popular demands for change.

Conclusion: Transition to Nowhere?

A few months ago, the prospect of peaceful political transitions in the Middle East seemed laughably implausible. Though the old social contract had clearly eroded, Arab regimes seemed content to rely on a more impromptu combination of coercion and economic incentives aimed at specific segments of the elite. Paradoxically, the persistence of political violence in the form of terrorism and insurgencies seemed only to further justify continued authoritarian rule. The emergence of non-violent protests in the winter of 2010/11 suddenly raised the possibility of a peaceful transition of power and continuation of the global momentum of the Color Revolutions. As Jack Goldstone notes, these revolutions averted the internecine bloodletting and civil war seen in revolutionary France, Russia, and Mexico because members of the revolutionary coalitions eschewed polarizing ideological or factional claims.²⁴ At the same time, though, the impacts of these revolutionary moments have proven somewhat impermanent and reversible. Already the many gains in Lebanon’s Cedar Revolution and Ukraine’s Orange Revolution, for instance, seem to have been rolled back.

Already revolutionary Tunisia and Egypt confront the similar prospect of a stalled transition. While Tunisia has seen an efflorescence of new political parties, including the long-banned Islamists Nahda party, the transitional government remains dominated by insiders from Ben Ali’s RCD and the army. Repression, including the arrest of protesters and bloggers, continues. The lack of personal security and ongoing economic woes has spurred new waves of

²⁴ Jack Goldstone, “Rethinking Revolutions: Integrating Origins, Processes, and Outcomes,” *Comparative Studies in South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, 29:1 (2009), 29-31.

refugee outflows. With inchoate opposition groups forced to wait until July 24 for their first chance at an electoral challenge, the incumbent powers seem to be positioning themselves as the choice for a return to normalcy.

In Egypt, the military government has driven a wedge between secular and youth-oriented organizations and Islamist parties. As in Tunisia, though the emergency law has been lifted and secret police dissolved, the transitional government continues its harassment and intimidation of secular-oriented youth and labor movements that refuse to stand down. For its part, the Muslim Brotherhood has turned on its erstwhile political allies in the opposition, joining Mubarak's NDP in backing the military's plan for a limited constitutional reform package and early elections. In fact, the Brotherhood portrayed objections to the army's proposal as a ploy to allow secularists to excise all Islamic clauses in the constitution. With the military's proposal winning resoundingly at the polls, a new alliance in which the NDP and Islamists divide the parliament and military retains its privileged position as 'guarantor' would foreclose hopes of more thorough going economic and social reforms.

Despite these setbacks, the relatively homogeneity of Tunisia and Egyptian societies and cohesion of their state apparatus make them the most likely places to see even a modicum of political reform. Where there are more pronounced societal cleavages and states power is more severely hollowed by the pyrrhic logic of regime survival, revolutionary breakthroughs are far more likely to prelude violence. Despite opposition efforts to maintain a modicum of cohesion, many Arab uprisings already exhibit these centripetal tendencies. Rather than an outlying case driven by Kaddafi's rather bizarre leadership style, Libya's descent into all-out civil war should be seen as a harbinger of the future scenarios for countries where tribal and ethno-sectarian tensions are already severe, such as Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain. If regimes stumble in their

defensive strategies, countries like these will be plunged into periods of political flux that are far longer, and bloodier than either the opposition or the regime anticipated.