



# MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

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## Turmoil and Hope: The Arab Middle East's Long Journey Out of the Tunnel

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Over the last few months I have felt a certain frisson of excitement as I listen to the news each morning: which seedy dictatorship, principedom, shaykhdom, or kingdom will be the next to feel its people's wrath? All through the spring of this year, the *New York Times* devoted a quarter page every day to a round-up of Middle East events, with a couple of sentences on the latest developments in Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and so on. After some 45 years' engagement with the Middle East, mostly at academic arm's length, it is immensely refreshing and exciting to live through these extraordinary events.

Why has the "Arab Awakening" happened, and why has it happened now? I am not sure how well I can answer the second question, but I will have a go at the first.

With the exception of Saudi Arabia, all the states mentioned emerged from various forms of colonial rule in the 1950s (Bahrain as late as 1971). The colonial and immediately post-colonial states were all fairly weak, and their institutions (whether republican, monarchical, parliamentary, or military) had been established more to serve the interests of the colonisers than of the colonised. The weakness, or relative autonomy, of these states meant that they were extremely vulnerable to seizures of power by disaffected elements in the armed forces, and a series of military dictatorships were established in a succession of *coups d'état*. Such coups occurred in Algeria (which emerged after a bitter civil war with France to become independent under the rule of the National Liberation Front in 1962), in Egypt in 1952, and in Libya and Yemen in 1969, as well as in Iraq in 1958 and in Syria at various times in the 1950s and 1960s.

In Morocco and Tunisia, more "traditional" arrangements had been maintained under French colonial rule, namely the continuation of the Moroccan monarchy and the beylicate in Tunisia. When these countries became independent in 1956 the semi-sacred status of the Moroccan king enabled him to hold on to power, while Tunisia quickly became a republic under Habib Bourguiba, the leader of the independence movement. Bahrain, which had been ruled indirectly by Britain since

the nineteenth century, briefly considered joining the United Arab Emirates, but decided against it and became an independent state in 1971.

Some of these states have oil and/or natural gas, and some do not. In the oil-rich Arabian Peninsula and Libya, the indigenous populations are relatively small, and the day-to-day functioning of the economy is dependent on migrant workers, mostly labouring under fairly draconian short-term contracts. For much of the latter decades of the twentieth century, unemployment or lack of opportunity in, say, Jordan or Egypt was made bearable by the availability of relatively well-paying work in Iraq or the Arabian Peninsula, but these openings have steadily declined, initially with falling oil prices in the 1990s.

One feature common to many Arab regimes, both monarchies and dictatorships, until comparatively recently has been their generally close and cordial relationship with the United States. Bahrain, for instance, where the level of violence has been quite high, houses the headquarters of the U.S. Fifth Fleet. There are a few exceptions: Libya's relations with the West were fairly hostile until it agreed to give up WMDs in 2003; for better or worse, Syria has long been regarded as an international pariah; and more than a decade of cordial relations between Iraq and the United States came to an end in the run-up to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990.

However, the degree of closeness to the United States had little or no effect on whether or not the states were democratic, that is, whether they upheld the rule of law and had governments that could be voted in or out by some form of universal suffrage in free, fair, and regular elections. Jordan, Lebanon, and Morocco have upheld such principles from time to time, but in general, democracy in the region has been conspicuous by its absence. Hence there were either no elections or rigged elections, major restrictions on political activity, the imprisonment of activists, the absence of legal opposition, and so on. This was the case both in states close to the United States (Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia) and in those much further from its good graces (Iraq, Libya, Syria). Why is this so? The events of the last months have shown that the standard and somewhat racist answer that Arabs (or Muslims) are somehow "incapable" of understanding or struggling for democracy no longer makes sense, although of course it never did. But why has some form of democracy so far eluded the Arab world?

There are five main reasons that helped to support and solidify authoritarian regimes in the region and to stave off democratic reform. **First**, the necessity of protecting the "free flow of oil" to the West has historically trumped other considerations; almost all Middle Eastern oil goes to the United States, Europe, or Japan, and the fact that most of the exporting states were either dictatorships or

“family enterprises” mattered far less to the consumers of oil than the rulers’ “reliability.”

**Second**, during the Cold War, in the countries deemed vital to U.S. interests, the obsession with the potential dangers of “communism” on the part of both the United States and of the local regimes led the states themselves to drive the “democratic left” into exile, prison, or worse, and it promoted the notion that the maintenance of the status quo was the least risky course of action. In addition, the richer states were able to buy off opposition by extensive welfare programmes, the creation of public sector jobs, and paying their more politically conscious citizens to keep quiet or stay abroad.

**Third**, the “post-revolutionary” states in the region trumpeted the ideology of Arab nationalism, which in practice was mostly chauvinistic, often anti-minority, and promoted a cult of blind obedience to the leader. In addition, long after the ideology had lost any popular resonance, the leaders (or their sons) remained implacably in power. As such, these states were equally worried by the democratic left and punished it accordingly, largely because of its brave, if futile, insistence on some form of democratic accountability. Consequently, the absence of opposition from the left shifted the focus of opposition movements to “Islam.” Although such Islamic movements (many of which also called for democratic accountability) could be and were harassed by the various states, the states could not, ultimately, shut down the mosques. Also, beginning most prominently with the assassination of President Sadat of Egypt in October 1981, some Islamic movements turned increasingly to violence, including suicide bombings and attacks against civilians, which, as had been the intention, terrified both the regimes and their patrons.

**Fourth**, in that context, the monarchs and the dictators were rather successful in convincing both friend and foe of the inevitability of Louis XV’s prediction of “Après moi, le déluge.” In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, and particularly after 9/11, the United States could easily be persuaded that, say, Hosni Mubarak and the son he was grooming to succeed him were the only ones capable of stemming the tide of fiercely anti-Western Islamic movements, which would surely emerge in the event of any openings toward greater liberalisation. Thus American aid flooded into Egypt, shoring up an increasingly repressive regime, and casting grave doubts on the genuineness of the United States’ commitment to democracy.

**Finally**, second only to its concern about the free flow of oil has been the United States’ desire to defend what it takes to be Israel’s interests—which have often not been entirely consonant with those of the United States. Hence the fact that the conservative Arab states had either treaties or “understandings” with Israel, and that both the monarchies and the “revolutionary states” had almost completely lost

interest in the Palestinians, was perfectly fine for all concerned—including for many Palestinian leaders in their dealings with Israel. But the Arab people did not feel as satisfied with the situation.

The roots of Arab discontent thus lie heavily in both past and more contemporary U.S. intervention. In response, people have spilled out into the streets, protesting against kleptocratic and often viciously repressive regimes (especially, in recent weeks, those in Syria and Yemen). We now see mass movements trying to restore agency to populations that have been pushed around, bullied, and humiliated by regimes that have never respected public opinion or popular will, and that have steadily stolen very substantial sums from their subjects.

Why now? Obviously, the use of communications technology has been a major factor in the revolutions (on a recent *Face the Nation*, Thomas Friedman noted that even the Egyptian Army has a Facebook page), but there are other reasons, including the continuing lack of employment for young people, even those with university degrees; the gradual but constant rise in the cost of living as a result of higher world food prices; and the fact that some of the dictators and monarchs are old and/or ailing and were trying to pass on the baton to their children (Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia). There have been earlier signs of dissatisfaction as well, including the *Kifaya* movement (*kifaya* means “enough” in the sense of “we have had enough”), which began in Cairo in 2005. We have also learned that there has been significant contact between the movements for change in Tunisia and Egypt going back two or three years, facilitated by the Internet. And of course success in one place spurs on similar efforts in another. Also, as many commentators and journalists have indicated, the Islamic movements, particularly extremist groups such as al-Qa‘ida, have generally kept a low-ish profile, puncturing, at least for the time being, the former regimes’ claims that they were the rest of the world’s only defence against an Islamist flood.

It is difficult to say where all this is going, as in all liberation movements, people are generally in greater agreement on what they do **not** want than on the details of what they do want. But in spite of the magnitude of the task of creating the institutions necessary to implement change, it is difficult to conceive that there will be any significant turning back. In 1917, Lenin wrote: “Democracy is a form of the state, one of its varieties. Consequently, it, like every other state, represents, on the one hand, the organized, systematic use of force against persons; but, on the other hand, it signifies the formal recognition of equality of citizens, the equal right of all to determine the structure of, and to administer, the state.”<sup>1</sup> Hardly a ringing endorsement, perhaps, but democracy at least holds out the possibility of a better life than the citizens of this troubled region have long been obliged to endure.

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<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Lenin, *The State and Revolution* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Reprints, 2001), 85.

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