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Popular Mobilisation and Authoritarian Reconstitution in the Middle East and North Africa: Ten Years of Arab Uprisings

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ABSTRACT

The 2011 uprisings and the ensuing protests that re-emerged in 2018–2019 across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are representative of cyclical challenges between the forces of change and those promoting a continuation of the authoritarian status quo in the region. While geopolitical tensions have led to the present ascendency of counter-revolutionary and status quo oriented forces in the MENA, the uprisings continue to live on in the memories and aspirations of societies, having had a significant impact on the socio-political consciousness of the region. Employing history to underlining the reoccurring relationship of tension between reform and authoritarian reconstitution across the region in the post-World War II era, the analysis warns about the perils of a returning complacency with forms of authoritarian-imposed stability in the MENA, underlining how renewed protests and uprisings are likely only a matter of time.

keywords

Middle East | North Africa | Domestic policy | Authoritarianism | Political movements | Opposition

Popular Mobilisation and Authoritarian Reconstitution in the Middle East and North Africa: Ten Years of Arab Uprisings

by Andrea Dessì*

Introduction

The Arab uprisings, which began in Tunisia and quickly spread across much of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), have had – and are still having – a transformative impact on the geopolitical map of the region, as well as on the socio-political consciousness, fears and aspirations of citizens and ruling elites alike. Since late December 2010, millions have poured into the streets, braving the repressive apparatuses of authoritarian regimes to demand political reform, increased socio-economic rights and accountability. From Tunisia, protests quickly spread to Egypt, Bahrein, Libya, Syria and Yemen, with more limited demonstrations taking place in Morocco, Jordan, Algeria, Iraq and even Saudi Arabia and Israel during 2011. More recently, renewed protest waves have taken place in localities that had seemingly been spared from the initial uprisings. Since late 2018, citizens in Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan and Algeria – and in more limited forms in Iran, Morocco, Tunisia and Palestine – have taken to the streets to demand far reaching institutional and political reform, directing their grievances at the abysmal state of basic services, the endemic corruption of ruling elites and the ethno-confessional cronyism widely blamed for the persistent erosion of living standards, socio-economic rights and human security.

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The scenes of mass popular mobilisation, revolt and revolution that dominated the past decade – and hold certain similarities with wider instances of bottom-up protests in other regions of the world[1] – surprised global audiences, foreign powers and intelligence communities alike. Many had grown complacent with an unsustainable status quo, falling prey to flawed characterisations of a supposed political apathy in the region, an incompatibility between democracy and Islam or a binary choice between authoritarian-imposed stability on the one hand and insecurity and chaos on the other. Such approaches overlooked the MENA region's rich history of contentious politics and challenges to authority, both foreign and domestic, leading extra-regional states, as well as the MENA's authoritarian regimes themselves, to be caught off guard by the uprisings. Yet, the extent of popular frustration and lack of opportunities was such that protests gradually spread to a broad cross-section of society, reaching a critical mass that could effectively challenge the authoritarian apparatus of the state, demanding the downfall of the regime and an end to the corruption and cronyism that characterised – and still characterises – much of the ruling elites of the MENA.

While recognised as a critical juncture for the region, the uprisings that began in late December 2010 did not happen in a vacuum. The protests were not simply a sudden explosion of popular anger, facilitated by broader international trends such as the advent of new technologies, globalisation or disruptions in global supply chains that increased the cost of basic foodstuffs just prior to the advent of the protests. Rather, the uprisings are part and parcel of a broader continuum of social mobilisations, localised protests and challenges to authority that are traceable back well before 2010–2011, brewing in the margins of society and the peripheries of centralised state control as a result of a gradual erosion of social contracts and state governance systems since at least the 1980s. Collectively, these processes are reflective of an evolving socio-political consciousness across MENA societies and a constant struggle between a variety of forces pushing for change, reform or disruption contraposed against others that are inherently invested in protecting and promoting the status quo.

Like any social event of mass proportions, the uprisings have been influenced by broader global trends, including those hinted to above and relating to globalisation, new technologies and supply chains or the 2008 financial crisis. Such developments should be understood as contributing variables for the outbreak of protests, not

[1] Aside from the MENA, other examples of global grass-roots mobilisation, most notably the international Occupy movement, materialised during 2011. Between 2018–2019, multiple other examples of popular mobilisations have taken place across Latin and Central America, the US, Asia, Europe and the broader MENA region. See Cara Buckley and Rachel Donadio, "Buoyed by Wall St. Protests, Rallies Sweep the Globe", in *The New York Times*, 15 October 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/16/world/occupy-wall-street-protests-worldwide.html; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Global Protest Tracker*, last updated 7 October 2021, https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/interactive/protest-tracker; Samuel J. Brannen, Christian S. Haig and Katherine Schmidt, "The Age of Mass Protests. Understanding an Escalating Global Trend", in *CSIS Reports*, March 2020, https://www.csis.org/node/55678; John Harris, "Global Protests: Is 2011 a Year That Will Change the World?", in *The Guardian*, 15 November 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/p/33cjm.

their underlining drivers. Indeed, any search for causality must begin *within the region* and the individual national contexts in which protests and revolutions actually took place.

A political economy approach focussed on fraying social contracts, mounting socio-economic exclusion and the erosion of basic services is fundamental for such assessments.[2] These need to account for the individual experiences of state formation and re-formation, the history of prior revolts and revolutions and broader trends of geopolitical competition between status quo oriented powers and those seeking to promote revolutionary change or disruption. In short, assessing the evolution of contentious politics and bottom-up pressures for change and reform that erupted in late 2010 cannot discount previous instances of revolt and revolutions, creating a continuum across time and space and seeking to flesh out trends, similarities and/or the cross-fertilisation of ideas, tactics and grievances from one context to the next.

A reflection on the way protest movements in individual country contexts have internalised the experiences of other – previous or contemporary – episodes of revolt or revolution will help to underscore how these events have influenced the evolving socio-political consciousness of MENA societies and their relationship with the state. While status quo forces are clearly on the ascendance, the considerable worsening of socio-economic, political and security indicators across the region since 2011 – as well as the continued activism and poplar mobilisations in a number of localities – point to the risks of any return to complacency with authoritarian-imposed stability, underscoring how future protests and revolts are not only likely but also expected to be more violent, chaotic and disruptive than in the past.[3] Being mindful of the perils of generalisation and the fundamental role of historical contingency to explain the protest trajectories in each context, the broadly shared nature of socio-economic and political grievances across the MENA may provide avenues for cooperation and coordination among opposition groups and protest movements, including among diasporas. This dynamic may provide new means to increase the resilience of those forces pushing for change and reform in the post-2011 MENA, which require more genuine support from the outside, most notably by EU member states and institutions.

[2] See, for instance, Andrea Teti, Pamela Abbott and Francesco Cavatorta, *The Arab Uprisings in Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia. Social, Political and Economic Transformations*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillian, 2018; Andrea Dessì, "Crisis and Breakdown: How Can the EU Foster Resilience in the Middle East and North Africa?", in *IAI Working Papers*, No. 17|37 (December 2017), https://www.iai.it/en/node/8678.

[3] Marwan Bishara, "Beware of the Looming Chaos in the Middle East", in *Al Jazeera*, 3 August 2020, https://aje.io/qgw3q.

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1. Geopolitical trends and the post-2011 MENA

MENA states and societies continue to suffer from multiple overlapping challenges.[4] These include internal fragilities tied to fraying social contracts, declining economic indicators and rampant authoritarianism, and the external dimension, where trends of zero-sum geopolitical rivalry, mixed with legacies of foreign interventionism, continue to define the contours of a highly combustible regional ecosystem.[5] Looking back at the past decade, the interplay between domestic fragilities and external inter-state rivalry has been put on clear display, but little of concrete has been done to mitigate its implications.[6] The revolutionary fervour that erupted in late 2010 and continued to spread throughout 2011 represented a clear indictment of decades of failed Arab developmental policies and regime subservience to elite and foreign interests rather than the needs and aspirations of their citizens. If the initial phase of the uprisings in 2011–2012 represented a first inflection point for the region, refocussing attention on internal inequalities, authoritarian repression and corruption, the ensuing period, particularly in the wake of the 2013 military coup in Egypt, was instead characterised by a vengeful return of inter-state geopolitical rivalry and proxy conflict, bringing considerable destruction and suffering to the region.

During this second inflection point, revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces battled across the MENA in an effort to contain and redirect the winds of change unleashed by the uprisings. As a result, battle lines expanded outwards from concern over domestic fragilities and the political transitions in uprising states to offensive proxy conflicts in the killing fields of Syria and Iraq, the conflict in Yemen and finally to Libya. This occurred notwithstanding the emergence of the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014 and the shared threat it posed to all states and societies in the Middle East and beyond. The emergence of ISIS, like other salafi-jihadist actors, stems from a variety of historical and ideological drivers, but in more general terms can be explained as another manifestation of the failures of Arab governance and the inability to provide opportunities and feelings of belonging to citizens.[7]

[4] Small parts of this section are re-elaborated from a previous publication. See, Roberto Aliboni, Francesca Caruso and Andrea Dessì, "The Middle East and North Africa in 2021: Brewing Crises and Geopolitical Re-Alignments", in Salvatore Capasso and Giovanni Canitano (eds), *Mediterranean Economies 2021*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2021(forthcoming).

[5] See Rami G. Khouri, "How Poverty and Inequality Are Devastating the Middle East", in *Carnegie Topic Articles*, 12 September 2019, https://www.carnegie.org/topics/topic-articles/arab-region-transitions/why-mass-poverty-so-dangerous-middle-east; also see, Rami G. Khouri, "Poverty, Inequality and the Structural Threat to the Arab World", in *POMEPS Studies*, No. 34 (March 2019), p. 28-32, https://pomeps.org/?p=10700.

[6] See, for instance, Silvia Colombo and Andrea Dessì (eds), *Fostering a New Security Architecture in the Middle East*, Brussels, Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) and Rome, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), November 2020, https://www.iai.it/en/node/12507.

[7] See for instance, Fawaz A. Gerges, ISIS: A History, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2016; Lorenzo Kamel, "Cutting ISIS's Lifelines", in *Project Syndicate*, 4 January 2017, https://prosyn.org/ct59DVb.

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Instead of fostering joint action or cooperation, the rise of ISIS, like the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and the 2013 coup in Egypt, further enhanced the prevalence of inter-regional proxy conflict and competition. The Iran nuclear deal in particular became the target of a concerted campaign by Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to undermine the deal, judging it detrimental to their interests. These generally revolve around support for the pre-Arab uprisings status quo and massive US financial and military assistance. Significantly, this was the same grouping of states that had united into a semi-formal alliance of counter-revolutionary forces to oppose Turkey and Qatar's support for Muslim Brotherhood-linked parties in a number of Arab uprising countries since 2011. Unsurprisingly, the Israeli, Saudi and Emirati governments all welcomed the election of Donald J. Trump as US president as a means to roll back the Iran nuclear deal and return US policy towards its traditional support for (or subservience to) the interests of its regional and status quo-oriented allies in the Middle East.[8]

The four years of the Trump Administration would therefore represent the triumph of counter-revolutionary and status quo supporting actors in the Middle East. While socio-economic indicators and political repression continued to worsen within most states of the region, such trends were overshadowed by heightened geopolitical and military tensions with Iran and the opening up of new geopolitical faultlines, from the 2017 blockade of Qatar promoted by its fellow Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members Saudi Arabia and the UAE to the escalating conflict in Yemen and deepening intra-Arab and Turkish rivalries over Syria, Qatar, Palestine, Libya and the Horn of Africa. Trump Administration policies emboldened those status quo and counter-revolutionary forces, who consequently expanded their campaign to roll back and contain political Islam and any other force invested in seeking to upend the status quo in the MENA, including Iran and its so-called "Axis of Resistance".

Yet, these states would soon realise that President Trump, like his immediate predecessor Barack Obama, was not ready to commit to new military engagements in the region and rather sought to orchestrate a means for Washington's regional allies to shoulder increased military and strategic burdens in order for the US to refocus attention towards Asia. The absence of a strong US response to the military incident in the Persian Gulf in September 2019, with coordinated attacks on Saudi Arabia's oil infrastructure likely launched from Iran, was enough for certain Arab states in the Persian Gulf to move towards tentative forms of diplomatic de-escalation with Tehran. There were other reasons for such trends, however. The outbreak of renewed protests since late 2018 in Algeria, Lebanon, Sudan and Iraq – and in less prominent forms in Morocco, Iran, Tunisia and Palestine – would lead to fears of a new wave of uprisings, particularly in light of the accelerated erosion

[8] See for instance, Andrea Dessì and Vassilis Ntousas (eds), *Europe and Iran in a Fast-Changing Middle East*, Brussels, Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) and Rome, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), June 2019, https://www.iai.it/en/node/10554.

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of socio-economic indicators across multiple states in the MENA since 2010.

These occurrences would combine to herald a third inflection point for the region, after those of the 2011 uprisings and the 2013 Egyptian military coup, leading to a hesitant – but likely fleeting – diminishing of inter-state competition and proxy war across the MENA beginning in late 2019.[9] This interval emerged against the backdrop of mounting domestic threats to regime survival, the uncertainties surrounding US policy in the wake of Trump's electoral defeat and a seeming victory of those counter-revolutionary forces intent or returning the region to the pre-uprisings status quo. Such trends were further accentuated by the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic in early 2020, which heightened socio-economic stress across multiple states in the region. Add to this the impact of the oil price crash in March 2020, as well as the impending energy transitions that will further add burdens to many hydrocarbon-dependent MENA economies, and it appears that ruling elites consciously chose to refocus attention on internal fragilities rather than continuing to fund risky foreign entanglements that divert resources from the domestic realm.

This third inflection point would be characterised by growing conflict fatigue after years of offensive proxy conflicts in Syria, Yemen and Libya, leading counter-revolutionary states to employ other political and economic means to promote the pre-2011 status quo. This does not mean that the region is structurally more stable or secure, however. Rather, it is reflective of a growing confidence on the side of those counter-revolutionary and status quo oriented forces who had returned to the ascendance since the 2013 military coup in Egypt.[10] Supported by the UAE and Saudi Arabia, as well as segments of the Egyptian population, the 2013 coup overthrew the first democratically elected president linked to the Muslim Brotherhood. Further examples of these counter-revolutionary efforts were on display in Libya – where the UAE, Saudi Arabia and post-military coup Egypt intervened to battle a variety of Muslim Brotherhood-linked groups – as well as in the 2017 blockade of Qatar. More recently, the anti-Muslim Brotherhood coalition has also gradually begun to re-engage the regime of Bashar al Assad in Syria in an effort to weaken what remains of the Islamist opposition (segments of which they had initially supported) as well as Turkey's and Iran's positioning in the country.[11] By late 2019 a conviction about the waning appeal of political Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood across the region would contribute to tentative trends of de-

[9] See Nathalie Tocci et. al, "From Tectonic Shifts to Winds of Change in North Africa and the Middle East: Europe's Role", in *IAI Papers*, No. 21|12 (March 2021), https://www.iai.it/en/node/13022; Roberto Aliboni, Francesca Caruso and Andrea Dessì, "The Middle East and North Africa in 2021, cit.; Fawaz A. Gerges, "Morning in the Middle East?", in *Project Syndicate*, 4 August 2021, https://prosyn.org/ez8IcSj.

[10] See F. Gregory Gause III, "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War", in *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Papers*, No. 11 (July 2014), http://brook.gs/2bl1yS3.

[11] See, for instance, Sima Aldardari, "Strategic Interests Drive Gulf Policy Towards Syria", in *AGSIW Blog*, 29 December 2020, https://agsiw.org/strategic-interests-drive-gulf-policy-toward-syria; "Saudi Arabia's Intelligence Chief Meets with Syrian Counterpart in Damascus", in *Al-Monitor*, 5 May 2021, https://www.al-monitor.com/node/42512.

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escalation with Turkey, Qatar and even (and to a lesser extent) Iran,[12] consequently crystallising the beginnings of this third inflection point for the region.

As the protest movements that had emerged in 2018-19 receded with the advent of covid-19 in 2020, the self-confidence of the counter-revolutionary forces increased, especially given that the UAE and Saudi Arabia were well positioned to exploit the protests to serve their own ends. This was clearly the case in Tunisia, where the UAE supported the election of President Kaïs Saïed in 2019 as a counterweight to the mildly Islamist Ennahda party as well his July 2021 coup against the parliament and prime minister;[13] and in Sudan, where the post-revolutionary transition led by the army has been significantly influenced by Abu Dhabi and Riyadh.[14] Similar trends were at play in Lebanon, Iraq and Algeria as well. In these contexts, protest movements have been less influenced from the outside – with citizens taking to the streets through grassroots, decentralised and leaderless mobilisations – but from the standpoint of the UAE and Saudi Arabia (as well as Israel) the weakening of these countries is considered conducive to broader geopolitical goals. Such interests ranged from efforts to limit Iranian influence in Iraq and Lebanon or, when it comes to Algeria, to an erosion of that country's ability to counterbalance the growing influence of the UAE and Saudi Arabia across North Africa, most notably in Tunisia and Libya, as well as in Morocco, a key ally of the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf and traditional rival of Algeria.

A further element that would crystallise this third inflection point for the MENA came with the signing of the normalisation deals between Israel and a number of Arab states between late 2019 and 2020. These deals would formalise the alliance of counter-revolutionary and status quo-oriented forces in the MENA, enhancing the self-confidence of those actors seeking to contain both traditional rivals (Iran) and the more recent, post-2011 opponents Turkey and Qatar. The normalisation deals that involved Israel, Bahrein, the UAE, Morocco and Sudan would therefore crown the ascendance of counter-revolutionary forces, a move that would also serve to constrain the new US Administration of Joe Biden (and the European Union) from overhauling key tenants of President Trump's approach towards Palestine and the broader region. This allowed status quo forces to dampen offensive proxy conflicts in Libya and Syria – as well as Yemen – while forcing an increasingly isolated Turkey to reconsider certain elements of its previous support for the Muslim

[12] See, among others, Ali Bakir, "Turkey and the UAE: Making Amends and Talking Business in Post-Trump Era", in *Middle East Eye*, 2 September 2021, https://www.middleeasteye.net/node/224456; Ali Bakir, "Turkey-Egypt Relations: What's Behind Their New Diplomatic Push?", in *Middle East Eye*, 12 March 2021, https://www.middleeasteye.net/node/203396.

[13] See, for instance, "UAE Says It Supports Tunisian President's Decisions", in *Reuters*, 7 August 2021, https://www.reuters.com/article/tunisia-politicis-emirates-idAFL8N2PE0PD; Claire Parker, "Influential Voices in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and UAE Celebrate Tunisia Turmoil As Blow to Political Islam", in *The Washington Post*, 27 July 2021, https://wapo.st/3i8BlbT.

[14] See, for instance, Jean-Baptiste Gallopin, "The Great Game of the UAE and Saudi Arabia in Sudan", in *POMEPS Memos*, June 2020, https://pomeps.org/?p=12119; Desiée Custers, "Sudan's Transitional Process in the Face of Regional Rivalries", in *LSE Middle East Center Blog*, 20 November 2020, https://wp.me/p3Khxv-2Ja.

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Brotherhood, hesitantly leading Ankara to explore avenues for a resumption of low-level dialogue with Egypt, the UAE and Saudi Arabia.[15]

Further proof of this growing willingness to recalibrate their policies came in early January 2021, as Riyadh and Abu Dhabi moved to normalise relations with Qatar, ending the 2017 blockade and intra-GCC dispute. Clearly motivated by an effort to improve their standing with the incoming Biden Administration and limit elements of their previous foreign policy and military overstretch since 2013, this move also symbolised the growing ascendancy of counter-revolutionary forces a decade after the initial eruption of the uprisings.

2. Tracing historical continuums in the MENA

This evolving contraposition between the conservative, status quo and Western-backed states in the MENA, and those actors seeking to promote change, revolution or disruption to the prevailing order is nothing new. Like the 2011–2020 waves of uprisings, which have been contextualised as part of a broader continuum of cyclical efforts to engender reform but which have ultimately tended to result in forms of authoritarian reconstitution, the evolving ideological and geopolitical rivalry between status quo forces and those that sought to embrace and encourage the trends unleashed by the 2011 uprisings is similarly reflective of deeper, historical rivalries in the region. In this sense, to understand the uprisings and the subsequent social mobilisation, one has to also appreciate the history of prior revolutionary efforts in the MENA and the extent to which these experiences have influenced and/or been internalised into the socio-political consciousness of MENA societies, opposition movements and ruling elites alike.

Previous examples of revolts and revolutions continue to live on in the individual and collective memories of MENA societies, helping to break taboos, influence and inspire future modalities of protest and resistance. These range from the successful revolts against Ottoman rule and the European colonial powers, especially Algeria's struggle for independence from France in 1954–62, to more recent examples of elite-led military coups in post-independence Arab states (most notably in Egypt, Iraq and Syria). Since the 1980s, the region has witnessed multiple examples of bottom-up mobilisations, which similarly influenced the social consciousness, tactics and politics of the 2011–2020 uprisings. From the 1979 revolution in Iran, which began as a merchant-driven and broadly secular revolt against the Western-backed Pahlavi dynasty before being appropriated by religious scholars who transformed Iran into the present Islamic Republic; to the 1988 October Riots in Algeria, which led to the first multi-party elections won by the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in 1990, followed by the 1992 military coup and an ensuing decade of

[15] See, for instance, Pinar Tremblay, "Erdogan's Rapprochement with Egypt Comes at Expense of Brotherhood", in *Al-Monitor*, 1 July 2021, https://www.al-monitor.com/node/43499.

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civil war between the army and Islamist militias,[16] certain reoccurring trends are indeed identifiable when it comes to the history popular revolts and regime-driven responses in the MENA.

These historical events in Iran and Algeria are also representative of older struggles between political Islam on the one hand and the broadly secular but status-quo oriented and Western-aligned regimes on the other, a dynamic that emerged in the wake of the waning appeal of Arab nationalism in the 1970s.[17] This, in turn, was in many ways an *evolution* of a previous clash that traces its roots further back into history, during the so-called Arab Cold War which pitted secular Arab nationalism and Nasserism against the conservative, Western-backed and status-quo oriented Arab Monarchies during the 1950s–1960s.[18]

During this period, Arab nationalism had emerged as the primary anti-status quo force within the region, as Nasserism was opposed to both the Western-backed conservative states *and* the emerging forces of political Islam.[19] As the promise and appeal of Arab nationalism began to wane in the 1970s, the revolutionary mantle would pass on to political Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood, which gradually emerged as the most organised force promoting change, although it was able to find tactical forms of accommodation with the ruling regimes. This contraposition between status quo powers and those forces seeking to promote change via Arab nationalism (and pan-Arabism) first and Islamism (and pan-Islamism) later, is a re-occurring trend throughout the modern history of the region, one that has returned to the forefront of MENA politics since the 2011 Arab uprisings.

Aside from the Islamic revolution in Iran and the Algerian civil war, other turning points with important implications for the socio-political consciousness, tactics and aspirations of MENA states and societies include the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990); the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979; the Muslim Brotherhood rebellion in Syria in the early 1980s; the first and second Palestinian Intifadas (1987 and 2000); the Shia and Kurdish rebellions in Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s and first Gulf War in the early 1990s; the Islamist insurgency in Egypt in the early 1990s; the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 2000s; the 2005 Cedar Revolution in Lebanon; the wave of political and worker-driven revolts that rocked Egypt following the 2005 presidential elections; and the 2006 victory of Hamas in the Palestinian legislative elections. All of these occurrences are examples of this perennial tension between those actors seeking revolutionary change or disruption and others that are instead invested in the prevailing status quo.

[16] See Andrea Dessì, "Algeria at the Crossroads, Between Continuity and Change", in *IAI Papers*, No. 11|28 (September 2011), https://www.iai.it/en/node/3379.

[17] Fawaz A. Gerges, *Making the Arab World. Nasser, Qutb, and the Clash That Shaped the Middle East*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2018.

[18] See Malcom Kerr, *The Arab Cold War, 1958-1967. A Study of Ideology in Politics*, London/New York/Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1965.

[19] William Stivers, *America's Confrontation with Revolutionary Change in the Middle East, 1948-83*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1986.

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Collectively, these events point to the fallacy of a supposed political apathy across MENA societies and should rather serve as a warning against any return to complacency with a structurally precarious and ultimately unsustainable status quo dominated by authoritarian stability and socio-economic exclusion. A further trend that emerges from the above cursory overview is that of an incremental increase and gradual normalisation of violence and repression, a trend that has been accentuated by the repeated experiences of foreign military interventions, from Afghanistan, to Iraq and beyond. This trend involves both formal state apparatuses and a variety of non-state actors and jihadist groups such as ISIS, which have battled across the region, leading to widespread suffering and the wholescale destruction of entire states and communities. Such violence – in the post-2011 period like in preceding times – has become a tool in the service of the status quo powers seeking to deflate the promises of reform and revolution and constrain the ability of extra-regional actors in the West to revisit central tenants of their alliance frameworks, thereby ensuring continued Western support for counter-revolutionary forces well into contemporary times.

These above trends of ideological competition between what may be termed the forces of revolutionary change (Arab nationalism first, political Islam later) and the status quo oriented actors closely aligned with external Western powers on the other (Arab monarchies, Israel) would re-emerge again in the context of the 2010–2020 Arab uprisings. Initially, it would be the status quo powers that were put on the defensive. After the overthrow of longstanding regimes, political Islam would rise its head, emerging as the most organised and powerful opposition force in many national contexts, most notably in post-2011 Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and, to a lesser extent, Libya.

These events would in some ways recall the previous experiences of the 1979 revolution in Iran and the Algerian elections and ensuring civil war, developments that re-ignited fears among the Western-aligned Arab monarchies, as well as Israel, leading to a new chapter in the struggle between political Islam and the status quo powers of the MENA. It would be in this context that Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Israel would align into a semi-formal alliance of counter-revolutionary forces in the MENA, driven by the objective of undermining these nascent forms of Islamist governance in an effort to roll-back the winds of change and promote their own regime survival.

3. Authoritarian resurgence and the promise of future uprisings

While few can debate the renewed ascendency of status quo and counter-revolutionary actors in the contemporary MENA, one would be naïve to ignore the continued risks of internal revolts and revolutions, today and in the near future. The underlining socio-economic drivers for the 2010s uprisings have by no means been resolved. These grievances and internal challenges to stability can only be

expected to increase in the short to medium future as a result of the impending energy transitions, covid-19, the climate emergency and the continued lack of legitimacy of ruling elites. The increased use of political repression and the closing down of avenues for citizens and societies to peacefully express their grievances and aspirations for reform, risks further waves of radicalisation, in a highly combustible regional ecosystem where any single spark may well re-ignite waves of mass protests and mobilisations.

Regional meddling and outright violence and destruction have no doubt influenced the fears of other MENA societies, which do not want to replicate the tragic experiences of their brethren in Syria, Yemen, Libya or Egypt. However, it is also true that the scars left by previous experiences of protest and authoritarian reconstitution are fading and are no longer acting as powerful constraints for renewed citizen-based activism or calls for revolution. This is also facilitated by the advent of new technologies and broader trends of demographic growth, given that new generations are less influenced by the memories of previous revolts and the state-sponsored repression that followed.

Setting aside the protests in Sudan, which as mentioned above were hijacked by counter-revolutionary states to deflate much of its true revolutionary potential, the more recent protest movements in Iraq, Lebanon and Algeria – as well as Tunisia and Palestine – are less constrained by the memories of the past and are rather coalescing around new objectives. Protest movements in these states have widened the scope of their demands from the targeting of dictators and their immediate families or business elites witnessed in the initial phase of the 2011 uprisings to a more refined targeting of the broader systems of control and elite cronyism. This expanded focus is reflective of a growing socio-political consciousness and the cross-fertilisation of ideas and tactics between one context to the next.

While the targets and grievances of these more recent protests demonstrate a certain internalisation of previous experiences, it is also true that certain lessons – notably the need to translate protest movements into organised political forces able to promote institutional reform beyond street protests and mobilisations – have been lacking. This absence of organisation and leadership, a key dimension of the decentralised and horizontal nature of the MENA uprisings in 2011 as well as in 2018,[20] continues to be highlighted as a key weakness of these civic and citizen-based movements.

That said, this emerging socio-political consciousness will not be easily contained or repressed, not least given the absence of significant efforts to improve the living standards or socio-political rights of citizens. These new generations will not sit idly by as their corrupt and ideologically bankrupted leaders continue to mismanage the state, stripping national resources or employing forms of co-

[20] Asef Bayat, *Revolution Without Revolutionaries. Making Sense of the Arab Spring*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2017.

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optation and repression to scare off new protest waves, not least given their access to new technologies and growing awareness about the realities of other states as well as the imbalances of an international system that has failed to provide social goods and improvements to MENA societies. While regimes and status quo actors will continue to push back, banding together and seeking to deploy old tactics of divide and rule, it is unclear that such methods will succeed and if so for how long.

These realities serve as the ultimate reminder that the promise of authoritarian imposed stability has always represented a mirage, at best delaying but never preventing new eruptions of protest and mobilisation. Such explosions are only a matter of time and in the absence of fundamental socio-economic and political reforms as well as an end to intra-regional proxy conflicts and foreign meddling, each successive revolt is likely to be more violent and disruptive than the past. Like any other region of the world, stability can only be ensured via legitimate institutions and an equitable sharing of social goods, elements that require more transparent and accountable state-society relations as well as a movement away from the prevalence of zero-sum intra-regional competition and rivalry among MENA states and their extra-regional backers. Stability, therefore, cannot be imposed and sustained via top-down co-optation or repression, and neither can it be imposed from the outside, via foreign interventionism, sanctions or diktats. The MENA's historical continuum will therefore continue.

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