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# The Puzzle of Political Reform in the Middle East

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## Overview

With only a handful of exceptions, Middle East governments have failed to govern either fairly or competently, and ruling elites have generally been more intent on keeping power in their hands than on improving the lot of their citizens. Although reform initiatives have been announced periodically, business as usual has been the normal outcome. Individual or organized complaints about corruption or abuses of power have often been punished and thwarted, and many of the region's judiciaries have served as instruments of state power. The persistence of autocratic rule in the region stems from several factors, including the dominant role of the state in the economy, a 'ruling bargain' whereby citizens were promised prosperity in return for restrictions on freedom, and the preference of external great powers for stability over democracy. In the resource poor states, the ruling bargain became increasingly untenable vis-à-vis fast growing, better informed populations and state efforts to restructure economies (often under international pressure) produced widening unemployment and spread economic pain. After 11 September 2001 ('9/11'), the United States and several European powers declared their intention to foster reform and to spread democracy in the Middle East, but little was accomplished. Even so, dissatisfaction with government remains pervasive. In the extraordinary political upheaval that began in 2011, the accumulated rage against autocratic governments erupted into a quest for dignity (*karāmah*) and widespread demands for better governance and freedom. These demands remain largely unfulfilled, and solutions to the puzzle of reform remain elusive.

## Introduction

The wellsprings of anti-government enmity fed by false promises and thwarted hopes became apparent in 2011 when protests erupted in many Arab world locales. As the year began, protests were accelerating in Tunisia and, on 14 January, President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali fled into exile in Saudi Arabia. In neighbouring Egypt, the Tunisians' accomplishment lent momentum to widespread demonstrations, especially after 25 January 2011, designated (following Tunisia's example) as the 'Day of Rage' (*yaum al-ghadib*). Eighteen days later, after more than 800 demonstrators were killed by security forces and government-linked thugs, President Hosni Mubarak, who had ruled Egypt for three decades, resigned from office under pressure from the military. Across the Arab world, emulative protests spread in nearly every country, with varying success and sometimes with horrendous bloodshed. In Libya, a strongman met his demise; in Yemen, a dictator retreated from the presidency; in Bahrain, protesters demanding reform and equitable treatment were suppressed within weeks by a Saudi-led force that was intended to stymie demands for reform; and in Syria, chants of *Irhal! Irhal!* ('Go! Scram!') were met by brutal government violence and a descent into a civil war that by mid-2015 had claimed at least 230,000 lives and uprooted about half of Syria's population of 23 million people. (See 'The Arab uprisings of 2011' later in the chapter for case studies illustrating the widely variant and sometimes catastrophic outcomes of popular demands for reform in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Syria, and Yemen.)

In Arab discourse, 2011 has been described by many people as *al-sahwah* ('the awakening'), or *al-nahdah al-thaniyah* ('the second Arab renaissance'), or even *al-thawrat al-arabia* ('the Arab revolutions'). Challand (2011) succinctly refers to a new sense of collective autonomy, *tasayir dhati*, in Arab societies. In Western circles, the burgeoning protests, which typically included the trademark demand *al-sha'ab yurid usqat al-nizam* ('the people want the fall of the regime'), were styled an 'Arab Spring' (*al-rabi'a al-'arabi*), but the seasonal metaphor implies a transformational episode whereas mass protests need to be understood as part of a long process of political change.

Although largely unnoticed outside of the region, the first decade of the twenty-first century witnessed numerous demonstrations by organized labour, and other economic segments affected by economic reforms and high levels of under-employment and unemployment. The governments' stifling of political dissent by secular groups lent further momentum to culturally entrenched Islamists. As disillusionment with government spread, a variety of Islamist groups that offered religious answers to complex political and economic questions benefited and significant segments of the population lent them support.

Arguably the core demand of the protests was a clamour for respect and dignity. All too often, it is argued, Arab governments have treated their subjects and citizens with disdain, sloughing off their legitimate demands. Whether in terms of monarchy or Arab republic, authoritarianism in the Arab world has been characterized by the depoliticization of public space. Other than political humour, politics in many corners of the Arab world have been consigned to a private sphere, and even then broached only cautiously with trusted intimates. The depoliticization of public space is illustrated in places such as Saudi Arabia, where a hint of dissent provokes an iron fist response (as well as prophylactic cascades of

money—after 2011, US\$36 billion in new funding and subsidies to address domestic concerns was announced).

### **The authoritarian state model**

In order to appreciate the immense challenges that face proponents of political reform in the Middle East, it is important to consider the legacies of state formation that shape the contemporary political systems, as well as the changing economic and social parameters of societies in today's Middle East. The following sections discuss the formation of modern states, many of which emerged only after the Second World War, as well as the institutional and political impediments to political reform, and particularly to democratization.

Most Middle Eastern states won their independence from European domination only in the latter half of the twentieth century. The new governments that emerged faced formidable challenges, particularly in promoting prosperity and sustaining growth in late developing economies that were ill-equipped to compete in the world economic system. The chosen path centred on a large statist economy that, in time, swelled government employment and disadvantaged private enterprise.

Another challenge was to foster a collective sense of civic identity, the essence of citizenship. In general, personal freedom was sacrificed in the interest of state security, often with reference to the Arab–Israeli conflict, which has continued since 1948. If political space was dominated by the state and controlled by ubiquitous police apparatuses, this reflected a tacit compact between government and citizen that was wearing thin. In short, in return for loyalty to the state, the citizen would be offered a healthier, more prosperous life. Unfortunately, clientelism and its handmaiden, corruption, often came to define the relationship between ruled and ruler.

Democracy was not much discussed. 'Democracy' refers most basically to the ability of citizens to hold their governments accountable and to change their political leaders at regular intervals. Instead, accountability to the public has been generally weak in the region, and particularly in the Arab world rulers were more likely to change as a result of actuarial realities than a withdrawal of public confidence. In 1979, a revolutionary regime came to power in Iran, and promised to offer a distinct model of political development to the Middle East and the Muslim world, but the promise has not matched the reality. In the nearly four decades since the revolution toppled the monarchy and established the Islamic Republic in Iran, some institutions of democracy, such as competitive elections for parliament, gained popular legitimacy, but the levers of power remain in the hands of conservative clerics who evince little enthusiasm for loosening their grip on power. When President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won re-election in the 2009 elections, many Iranians suspected that the balloting was rigged in order to deny victory to Mir-Hussein Mousavi, a former prime minister who espoused a modest reform agenda. The green movement, which had been inspired by Mousavi's campaign, launched massive protests, but the protesters were confronted with an iron fist and leading opposition figures were either arrested or kept isolated under long-term house arrest, or simply intimidated into silence. The Iranian case illustrates that, even in the face of broad disenchantment, militarized regimes retain an impressive capacity to forestall change through coercion and repression but the underlying popular appetite for reform continues. In 2013, Hassan Rouhani, a reformist cleric who was hardly favoured by the entrenched political elites, enjoyed overwhelming support and was elected President of Iran.

The exceptions to the rule of a non-democratic Middle East include Israel and Turkey. With more than half a century of democratic experience, democracy is still strikingly incomplete in Israel and Turkey, where ethnic minorities (some non-European Jews and especially Arab citizens in Israel, and Kurds in Turkey) often find their freedoms curtailed and quite incomplete.

### **Human development and democracy**

Given that the exceptional cases of Israel and Turkey entail predominantly non-Arab societies, it is clear that the democracy deficit applies significantly to the Arab world. An appropriate first task is to weigh what is known about the correlates of democracy and to determine what patterns emerge in Arab states. In a ground-breaking study published by a United Nations agency, a group of respected Arab scholars examined political, social, and economic conditions in the Arab world (UNDP 2003). This incisive and rich report attracted wide attention in government circles and in the press.

The authors identified thirty-one indicators reflecting the level of democracy and freedom. These indicators are summarized in three major clusters: government process; government capacity to implement and shape sound policy; and the level of respect displayed by both citizen and state for social and economic institutions. When these clusters of indicators are correlated with measures of human development and then compared to those of the rest of the world, the findings show clearly that even wealthy Arab states provided fewer outlets for political expression, fair government, and responsive government than states with comparable incomes and quality of life outside the region. Using a carefully designed composite measure, fewer than 9 per cent of Arab citizens rank in the middle level of material well-being and freedom, and none are found in the highest level. Only sub-Saharan Africa has a poorer record of fairly applying the rule of law.

Across the region, utter poverty (living on less than US\$1 per day) is relatively uncommon and afflicts fewer than 2 per cent of all Arabs. Yet, in the poorer Arab countries the United Nations reports that 25 per cent of the population is malnourished. It has often been argued that as income and other measures of well-being increase, the chances for democracy grow. In the aggregate, per capita income in the Middle East is considerably higher than either East Asia, or Africa, yet both regions have shown much more democratization than the Middle East. The Arab middle class varies widely in size, but in many countries, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Algeria, it is quite large. However, since the government sector is often massive and employs a large percentage of the middle class, government employees are reluctant to slap the hand that feeds them. For example, despite programmes in recent decades to shrink the public sector, the government employs one person for every two-and-a-half people in the private sector. The corollary is that the large state sector stifles the development of market economies that might produce more challenges to the autocratic state.

### **Explaining the democracy deficit**

The weak progress of democracy in the Middle East has fascinated many scholars. Some offer a 'one size fits all' cultural explanation of the absence of democracy. The late Elie Kedourie asserted that 'the idea of democracy is quite alien to the mind-set of Islam' (Kedourie 1992: 1).

This implies that only by changing the mindset of the adherents of Islam is democracy likely to be embraced—and Kedourie held that to be improbable. Yet it is apparent that Muslims do practise democracy in a variety of settings, including India, Indonesia, Holland, Lebanon, the United Kingdom, and the United States. To discover whether Muslims embrace democracy, one may learn less by examining non-democratic settings than by considering democratic contexts. The notion that Muslims are unwilling to embrace democracy for deeply seated cultural reasons simply does not stand up. Given the opportunity to play by democratic rules, Muslims have been quite adept at forming political parties and interest groups, and building effective coalitions.

Prior to the awakening of 2011, a variety of scholars and policy experts eschewed cultural explanations for their cynicism about the prospects of democratic reform, the activism of a vibrant civil society in the Arab world, or the relevance of oppositional voices. Instead, they focused on adaptive authoritarian tactics. The prevailing perspective on the dim prospects for Arab democracy was captured in Steven Heydemann's widely cited monograph on 'authoritarian upgrading', which was published by the Brookings Institution, one of Washington's leading think tanks (Heydemann 2007). He argued that the Arab regimes had adopted sophisticated techniques with which to dampen domestic demands for reform. These techniques included a sophisticated combination of limited political reforms, middle class co-optation, patronage, surveillance, and coercion.

Eva Bellin offered a conceptually rigorous account showing how the educated middle class has been co-opted by autocratic regimes. She emphasized the coercive apparatus of regimes and the prevalence of patrimonial leadership that is common in the Middle East. She did not see much prospect for major political demonstrations. Writing in 2004, she said that the region was characterized by a 'low level of popular mobilization for political reform' (Bellin 2004: 150).

Once the momentous events of 2011 were under way, there were *mea culpas* from some scholars—notably Gregory Gause, who admitted his own blindness to the emerging social forces in the region. He also noted that many academic experts had got it wrong by succumbing to 'groupthink' about the durability of authoritarian regimes (Gause 2011a). To be fair, some experts understood how vulnerable the Arab regimes were and how deeply rage penetrated Arab societies. In a much-discussed book, Nazih Ayubi emphasized the 'hollowness' of the 'fierce' regimes (Ayubi 1995). Some of the more prescient scholars tended to be on the margins of the policy world, which may have insulated them from the dangers of groupthink. Asef Bayat, for example, anticipated the potency of popular demonstrations by 'ordinary people' in a number of his writings, including *Life as Politics* (Bayat 2010). In relation to Egypt, Joel Beinin and others (2010) were alert to the widespread and spreading labour unrest and strikes that the Egyptian government proved helpless to stop.

### Public opinion

Viewed from the West, political attitudes in the Middle East are often hidden not only by barriers of language and distance, but also by metaphors that betray stereotypes rather than reveal reality. An example is the use of 'the street' to refer to opinion in Muslim countries, especially in Arab countries. Arab journalists and others use the term, often in a sense that corresponds with a Lebanese proverb, *ra'i al-baqir ahsan min siyasa al-bashar* ('the opinion of a cow is better than the politics of the people'). Certainly, in Western usage, the term 'the

street' implies a formless mass of people swayed by the sentiments of the moment and manipulated by autocrats—a modern parallel to 'the mob' in revolutionary France. 'The street' implies that there are few nuances of opinion and no need to stratify points of view to discern class, gender, age, regional, or occupational distinctions. 'The street thinks ...' intone sage-sounding commentators, as though talking about tidal movements (Norton 2003).

The evidence does suggest that many people wish they were governed better than they in fact are. A number of leading polling firms, such as the Pew Research Center, Gallup and Zogby Associates, have turned their attention to the region and the broader Muslim world.<sup>1</sup> In addition, a cadre of regionally based public opinion specialists has produced high-quality scientific surveys of opinion (for example, Khalil Shikaki, the Palestinian scholar).

The picture that emerges from these opinion studies are highly differentiated views that confound easy generalizations. For example, when questioned about US policy in Iraq or in the Arab–Israeli conflict, views are overwhelmingly negative, with approval ratings of less than 5 per cent. In contrast, US democracy, education, and technology evoke robust approval ratings. Of course, the opinions vary by age and education, with younger people (those aged 18–35) more likely than older respondents to offer a favourable view (Zogby 2002).

### **The role of outside powers**

While Western diplomats and political leaders paid lip service during the 1990s to encouraging democracy in the Middle East, there was little real pressure on the region's governments to permit people an expanded voice in politics. Major powers, not least the US, the UK, and France, preferred stability over the uncertainty of democratization. Those who wielded power in Cairo, Tunis, and Riyadh, and other Arab capitals, grew accustomed to empty Western rhetoric about democratization. In the US, President Bill Clinton spoke melodiously in the 1990s about the promotion of democracy around the globe, while his administration's leading Middle East diplomat, Martin Indyk, simultaneously disparaged the notion of democracy for Arab states as destabilizing and threatening to the 'peace process' and to Israel. Western governments were perfectly happy to cling to autocratic rulers, rather than to gamble on the uncertainties of more open political systems (Indyk 2002).

For many years, regional governments were able to fragment or suppress those groups that were calling most strenuously for reform, with few criticisms from Western capitals. The Islamist political movements of various stripes, the best organized opposition forces, posed a direct challenge to the monopoly on power held by the ruling elites. Where parliamentary elections were held, the Islamists' participation was carefully circumscribed (as in Egypt), if not outlawed completely (as in Tunisia). When Islamists were allowed to participate fully in elections in Algeria, they proved to be a popular alternative to the discredited secular ruling party.

Thus the contemplation of democracy in the Arab world prompted major outside powers and local dictators to see eye to eye in terms of the virtue of continuing the status quo and sustaining stability, which has been the obsessive focus of Western and, in particular, US officials.

The Al-Qaeda terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 ('9/11') changed Western, and particularly US, perspectives on political reform dramatically. Officials now argued that

stagnant political systems and stifled hopes were a formula for further disasters. Former US Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright noted, in a revealing 2003 comment, that she regretted not pushing harder for reform and she admitted that Middle East democracy was not a priority during the eight years of the Clinton presidency:

We did nudge at times, supporting Kuwaiti leaders in their initiative to give women the vote and encouraging the creation of representative bodies in Bahrain and Jordan. But we did not make it a priority. Arab public opinion, after all, can be rather scary.

(Albright 2003)

In November 2003, President Bush declared a sea change in policy that would see America exchange its obsession with stability for the promotion of democracy, arguing that:

Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe—because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty. As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export.

(Bush 2003)

Given the broad disdain for US policies in the Middle East—especially Bush's fulsome support for Israel, even when it acts in morally obnoxious ways against Palestinian civilians under occupation—such pronouncements evoked incredulity.

Powerful external powers, especially the US, now embraced secular democracy as a panacea for the region's ills. Top officials referred frequently to the 'freedom deficit' in the Middle East, and concluded that economic failure and political oppression fed despair, and conditioned people to succumb to ideologies of hatred and violence. President George W. Bush declared in February 2003 that: 'The world has a clear interest in the spread of democratic values, because stable and free nations do not breed ideologies of murder.'

In fact, evidence suggests that democratizing states are actually more prone to instability than authoritarian systems (Mansfield and Synder 1995). Thus while there are other good reasons to wish for more freedom for Middle Easterners, the project of democratization may not produce the democratic peace presumed by some officials and observers, at least not in the foreseeable future.

### **Iraq as a model?**

When the US and Britain invaded Iraq in 2003, officials and war proponents asserted that, by toppling Saddam Hussein from power, Iraq would be transformed from a republic of fear into a republic of freedom. Iraq would lead the way as a beacon of democracy for the region. Speaking before the US Congress in July 2003, Prime Minister Tony Blair declared: 'We promised Iraq democratic government. We will deliver it.'

Like Blair, Bush promoted Iraq as a poster child for democracy, especially after the predicted massive stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction that were supposed to be uncovered by the March 2003 invasion proved evanescent. Ironically, one of the most influential Iraqi advocates of this transformation from fear to freedom was dissident Iraqi intellectual Kanaan Makiya, who argued persuasively in 1989 that the regime of Saddam Hussein had obliterated civil society, the middle space between citizen and state, leaving Iraqis exposed

to the naked power of the state and able to find security only in the basic institutions of family and tribe—and sometimes not even there (Makiya, writing as Samir al-Khalil, 1989). If a democracy is to be durable, then an essential ingredient is a vibrant civil society, which certainly requires much more time than the few months anticipated initially by the US architects of the invasion.

The US and Britain's opportunistic embrace of democracy initially prompted some ruling autocrats to clean up their acts a bit, but the effect did not last. Neither the US nor Britain anticipated the difficulties that they would face in consolidating their occupation of Iraq following the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime. Some ill-considered decisions, such as the much-regretted edict to dismantle the Iraqi army shortly after the capture of Baghdad, only exacerbated the problems. The deadly resistance to the Allied occupation, the anger of many Iraqis at an often club-footed US response to violence, and an onslaught of bombings and assassinations against international and Iraqi institutions made a mockery of the project of democratizing Iraq.

While the advocacy of democracy by the US initially provoked considerable heated debate in the Arab world, the chaos unleashed by the war in Iraq discredited the idea. By 2005, even sympathetic Arab thinkers were looking at Iraqi 'democracy' as an exemplar of *fitnah* (that is, disorder or chaos). Autocrats who had felt compelled to respond to Bush's democracy initiative when it was announced, such as Mubarak in Egypt, began using Iraq as an argument against expanding freedom.

In any case, given the political economy of most of the region's regimes, reform, not to mention democratization, needs to be understood as a long-term process of change rather than as a 'two aspirins at bedtime' prescription.

### **The political economy of the state**

In Iraq, as elsewhere in the Middle East, the public sector is massive and any thoughtful effort to promote political reform must address the state's overarching economic role.<sup>2</sup> The Middle Eastern state extends well beyond the seraglios of the rulers. Outside of agriculture, the state is the leading employer. Thus many citizens have a stake in the state and their interests do not lie in destroying it, but in improving its performance. Government dominates the formal economy, in some instances through a phalanx of public sector companies; in others, through the flow of oil earnings and other 'rents' directly into the state coffers. As a result, government expenditures in the Middle East often make up a larger share of the gross national product than in other countries of comparable income level outside of the region. In some cases, government spending amounts to nearly half of GNP (for example, Egypt), compared to less than 25 per cent in middle-income countries generally (al-Sayyid 1991).

While the state's grip on the economy is important, considerable economic activity and resources lie outside of the state's control. A significant amount of largely undocumented economic activity occurs in the realm of the informal sector, which encompasses an array of craftspeople, doctors, lawyers, petty traders in legal and illicit goods, workshop operators, pieceworkers, and many others whose income is undocumented by the state. The informal economy has long been an important site for undermining and quietly contesting the state's authority (Singerman 1995).



### Rentierism

Yet the prevalence of rentier states in the Middle East means that governments are highly resistant to change. Unlike states that depend on taxation extracted directly from citizens, rentier states distribute rents rather than extract taxes. Rents are direct payments to government that may derive from natural resources, especially oil, as well as other significant transfers such as foreign aid. (For example, Egypt receives over US\$1.5 billion in annual military and development assistance from the US, which reduces the state's dependence on conventional taxation.) In 2014, the European Union provided €650 million in development aid, not including bilateral support by individual European states. Some of the smaller states in the region, such as Qatar or the United Arab Emirates, receive almost all of their income from oil or natural gas sales, rendering the government much more removed from public pressure than governments that depend upon taxation.

The prevalence of the rentier state in the Middle East has had a detrimental effect on both economic development and political liberalization. The state has, in effect, attempted to satisfy the population at large through provision of a host of services and economic activities paid through rent income. As long as rents from the outside world are available, the state will respond only to those concerns of the population that it finds necessary to maintaining its power and position. Moreover, the rentier state's often extensive economic programmes tend to co-opt the bourgeoisie and reward it economically in projects conceived and funded by the state. Hence the bourgeoisie's fortunes come to centre on the state and its defined economic goals.

The rentier state tends to become increasingly autonomous from society. The state can use the income from rent to enlist compliance and to pursue goals not necessarily in the best interests of society. Since most of the state's revenues are not extracted from the population, the corollary sense of obligation and responsiveness to society does not necessarily develop. So long as the rent continues to flow, rentier states have no incentive to liberalize their political systems. As Luciani has indicated in Chapter 5 and elsewhere, the oil rent becomes 'a factor perpetuating authoritarian government' (Luciani 1994: 131).

A state facing fiscal crisis and forced to resort to increased taxation will generate demands from within the society for accountability. Programmes of political reform in Jordan and Morocco bear out this argument, in that each state sought, through political reform, to salve the pains of extensive economic belt-tightening and tax increases. However, the idea promoted by major international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, that the path to democracy begins with economic liberalization has proven arguable. This may be true over the long term, but the short-term consequences of economic liberalization are often reduced freedoms. The case of Syria illustrates that economic crisis followed by a relatively steady economic liberalization does not lead to political reform. Similarly to some other authoritarian states, Syria controlled the bargaining process in its economic liberalization programme by confining it to a privileged few (Heydemann 1993).

### Divergent paths in rentier states: Iran and Turkey

The examples of Iran and Turkey also shed some light on how rentierism influences the prospects for political reform. In Iran, rentierism came to define the state in the 1970s. Its

systematic growth was conclusively evident after the oil boom that followed the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. Supremely confident of its economic and political positions in domestic, regional, and international arenas, the state's economic policies resulted in two simultaneous developments. It created a heavily dependent commercial and industrial modern bourgeoisie that benefited enormously from the state policies, but remained subservient to it. The private sector's influence 'was limited to implementation. Being totally dependent on the state, Iran's rentier bourgeoisie had neither the incentive nor the means to "capture the state"' (Shambayati 1994: 320-1).

The growth of rentierism also made the state essentially oblivious to the concerns and priorities of civil society. The pre-revolutionary Iranian state decided what was good for society and acted accordingly. When the state was eventually challenged during the revolutionary years, it was the traditional bourgeoisie from the bazaar, which had preserved some of its autonomy from the state, that took the lead and in reality bankrolled the revolution. Using the well-established bazaar-mosque alliance networks, the opposition legitimized its attack on the Pahlavi state by utilizing powerful Islamic ideology. The sharp lines of cleavage were defined in cultural and moral terms, much more so than economic ones, in order to mobilize support and attack the state where it was most obviously vulnerable (Ashraf 1988, 1990; Shambayati 1994).

The Turkish case offers a sharply different model. Although certain features of rentierism—remittances from workers abroad—are also present in Turkey, the state's income is based primarily on domestic sources, not external rent; hence rentierism has not dominated the Turkish economy. To increase revenues in the 1970s, the state had to increase taxation and domestic production. A number of policies, including import substitution and industrialization, were adopted to increase domestic production and to reduce external dependence. Although these attempts did not help Turkey's negative trade balance and foreign exchange crisis, they did prompt the state to engage in serious bargaining with the business community through chambers of commerce and industry. The ensuing cleavages within the private sector led to the creation of several organizations devoted to the management of commerce and industry. It is instructive that an early Islamist group, the National Salvation Party, was established to protect the interests of petite bourgeoisie against some of the more prominent organizations that were tied to the interests of larger industrial and commercial capitalists. Economic issues, rather than religious ones, defined much of the political agenda of this Islamist party, as well as the industrialists, in their interactions with the Turkish state. Structured as a set of autonomous organizations, the private sector was a serious force in the society at large and in its relationship with the state (Shambayati 1994).

In the absence of fully developed rentierism, increasing domestic taxation and extraction, foreign exchange crisis, and the willingness to engage opposition from within the society in an inclusionary way combined to increase prospects for democracy in Turkey. This pattern stands in sharp contrast to the Iranian case in the pre-revolutionary decade, during which rentierism and exclusionary politics were dominant.

### **The pressure mounts**

While literacy rates in the Middle East may be unimpressive by Western standards, the simple fact is that access to education has proliferated, including at the university level, so that many people's expectations have become more complex. In an era of straitened resources,

government's capacity to sustain the loyalty of citizens through patronage and subsidies is strained, and often overwhelmed, in the less wealthy states.

Especially in the 1980s and 1990s, the manifest failures of state-dominated models of economic development became undeniable. Repression lightened as a means of accommodating dissent and reducing government's culpability for failure. The population pressures are immense, as reflected in the aggregate figures on youths aged 14 or younger, who account for about 30 per cent of the Middle Eastern population according to 2011 data, and over 40 per cent in some cases, such as Syria and Palestine (Dhillon and Yousef 2009). Equally relevant is that 50 per cent of the total population of the Middle East and North Africa were aged 24 or younger in 2011. It is easy to visualize the serious challenges that this 'youth bulge' poses for government, not least in terms of schooling and job creation. While per capita measures of gross domestic product increased by an average of over 3 per cent in the first decade of the twenty-first century, in recent years growth rates have sometimes been negative and have not risen above 1.8 per cent annually (World Bank Group 2015, 141–8).

In the swelling working-class neighbourhoods of the region's largest cities, rural-to-urban migration has fuelled massive urban sprawl. To begin to grasp the sheer magnitude of the phenomenon, consider that some cities, such as Riyadh in Saudi Arabia, grew so quickly that populations doubled in as little as seven years, while already-massive cities, such as venerable Cairo, become home to millions of new residents each decade.

Where political space opened, individuals began to organize, giving new breath to long-suppressed associational life. The result was a rapid expansion of civil society, the melange of associations, clubs, syndicates, guilds, and other groups that enjoy a measure of autonomy from the state's control, and which ideally serve as a buffer between the citizen and the raw power of the state (Norton 1995). As early as the 1980s, more than 70,000 such groups were counted in the Arab world (Ibrahim 1995). While the components of civil society that attracted the most international attention were oriented to the protection of rights, such as the Egyptian Organization of Human Rights, or the Palestinian al-Haqq, the vast majority was not overtly political, and focused instead on aiding the indigent and the ill, or providing religious or educational resources. In cities such as Cairo, Istanbul, and Algiers, intricate networks defined by kinship, locality, and reciprocity intersect with other elements in civil society, the informal economy, opposition political movements, and government functionalities to define a complex setting for politics (Singer 1995; White 2014).

Equally, if not more importantly, large informal and undocumented sectors of the economy grew. Across the region, vast numbers of labour migrants were attracted to the employment opportunities in the oil economies of the Gulf. These workers, as they returned home to Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and Yemen, among other countries, brought hoards of hard currency that would be used not only to improve their families' standards of living and to start businesses, but also to fund opposition groups—especially Islamist movements.

## Muslims and the question of political reform

There are now over 1.6 billion Muslims in the world, including 525 million in the Middle East, and more than 370 million in the Arab world alone according to 2013 World Bank data. While it might be thought convenient if a preponderance of Muslims were to embrace

Western secular ideals, not to mention Western-style democracy, the picture is more complex. A relative handful of Arab liberals *do* share and espouse Western ideals, but they do not have a broad constituency. The dominant oppositional forces in the broader Muslim world, not least in the Arab world, have typically been hostile to secularism—particularly when ‘secularism’ is understood to mean that Islamic values have no place in politics—but they also embrace representative democracy. In a region in which religion is an important source of personal identity, any opening of the political system brings with it a debate about the proper role of religion in society and the relationship of religion to the state, but Middle Eastern governments have generally not been willing to experiment in political reform and allow that debate to occur.

In Middle Eastern societies the embrace of piety (*taqwa*) is common, but the content of that piety is actively contested and reimagined, especially among the youth. Islam has become increasingly personalized under conditions of growing urbanization, globalization, and the commercialization of identity, not to mention a new horizon for political imagination (White 2014). Political groups cannot help but be influenced by what Asef Bayat (2010) calls the ‘quiet encroachment of the ordinary’, whereby subtle individual actions resocialize religious movements and governments, and thereby create new identities and opportunities for change, including democratic change.

There are many variants of democracy, but a core component is the conduct of reasonably fair competitive elections. In many of the countries of the region, where credible political ‘secular’ parties have been repressed, Islamist groups are poised to seize the opportunity of open elections. Justifiably or not, this prospect generated unease in Western circles. At best, major external powers, such as the US, promoted a ‘go slow’ approach, but more typically sought to undermine elections that brought Islamists to power. The cases of Algeria and Palestine are instructive.

### Algeria

In the face of horrible unemployment, discontent, and economic failure, Algeria attempted democratization in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The ruling National Liberation Front (FLN) had monopolized power for three decades, ever since Algeria won its hard-fought independence from France in 1962. The FLN was soundly trounced by the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria’s first free elections, including municipal and then parliamentary elections. The Algerian army intervened in January 1992 to prevent the FIS from realizing its victory and civil war ensued. It is impossible to know whether the FIS might have ruled competently or incompetently, and whether it would have been able to impose its religious values on a divided society split between secularism and religious conservatism.

More than 100,000 people died in the internal war and Algeria became a cautionary tale invoked routinely by Middle East dictators, secularly inclined intellectuals, and Western officials alike. The failure of the Algerian reform experiment certainly illustrated the likely fate of ruling parties when exposed to reasonably free elections.

Algerian secularists who enthusiastically supported the coup in 1992 now often concede that it would have been far better to permit the FIS experiment to go forward, especially since the option of intervention would have continued to be an option for the Algerian generals who continue to wield enormous power.

### **Hamas and the 2006 elections**

When Palestinian legislative elections were conducted in January 2006, at US insistence, the unexpected, but clear-cut, winner was the Islamist group Hamas (Lesch 2007). Palestinian voters were expressing their anger at Israel's occupation and the burgeoning of illegal settlements on occupied Palestinian territory, as well as the notorious corruption of the Palestinian Authority and Fatah. Contrary to a sanguine acceptance of the wholly unexpected result, the US led a campaign to isolate the new Gaza-based Hamas government and to starve it of funds, which also entailed starving large numbers of aid-dependent Palestinians. European diplomats and some US officials urged a path of incremental inclusion instead, but the US rejected any attempt to co-opt Hamas as long as it refused to forswear terrorism or to accept Israel's legitimacy.

The policy was not successful and it has left Gaza impoverished, in large measure as a result of a blockade imposed by Israel and supported in recent years by Egypt. Hamas seized complete control of Gaza in 2007 and a rival Fatah-oriented government resides in the still Israeli-occupied West Bank. Despite a series of Israeli raids and bombardments that have killed many civilians—including military campaigns in December 2008 and January 2009, and in July and August 2014—Hamas continues to dominate Gaza and enjoys significant support in the occupied West Bank. Arguably, the path of incremental inclusion (as respected international diplomats urged) rather than exclusion would have been a wiser response to the Hamas electoral triumph. Hamas is indisputably an entrenched player in Palestinian politics.

### **The Arab uprisings of 2011**

Given the, at best, tepid external support for substantial political reform, particularly entailing the inclusion of Islamist opposition groups, and considering the hostility of Arab governments to meaningful political reform, the puzzle is: under what circumstances would the ruling structures be compelled to succumb to popular demands for change? For years, public space in Arab countries has been depoliticized, so that even ephemeral attempts to organize or mobilize opposition were met with repression and intimidation. Short of an unlikely epiphany within the political class, only sustained popular demonstrations and resistance that dwarf the capacity of the repressive apparatus might convince those who work the levers of power of the imperative for embracing reform (the sincerity of the embrace would be another matter). When are people willing to go to the street, to act collectively and put their lives at risk for change? A solution to the puzzle arrived in Tunisia, when fruit seller Mohammed Bouazizi set himself alight in the city of Sidi Bouzid, on 17 December 2010, in a desperate quest for dignity and massive protests followed.

Not to diminish the profound sacrifice of Bouazizi, the more important fact was that within weeks an enduring Tunisian dictator was forced from office and fled into exile as millions watched the events unfold on satellite television and celebrated the event in text messages, and on social media, particularly Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (few of the region's governments then anticipated the importance of such platforms). These were exhilarating moments of enthusiasm when the people imagined they could topple a regime.

Popular despair gave way to anger in 2011. For the multitudes of men and women across the Middle East with limited access to government services, who struggle daily to make ends meet, live in fear of abusive police and witness government corruption regularly, a credible opportunity for better lives elicited tremendous excitement. Young people in their teens, twenties, and beyond, hoping for a good job, accumulating the resources necessary to marry or simply finding a decent place to live, were galvanized by a chance to level the playing field. Unlike in Europe, Japan, or North America, in many Middle Eastern societies there is an inverse relationship between higher education and employment, which is to say that better educated people are more likely to be unemployed than less well-educated people. While the duration of protests varied, in the early months of 2011 large-scale, sometimes huge demonstrations occurred in nineteen Arab countries, most momentously in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen.

In reality, as events unfolded it would be all too clear that displacing a few men at the top of a regime hardly constituted a revolution. Often left intact was the 'deep state'—the webs of bureaucratic power centres, including military and security agencies through which power is exercised, not least in Egypt. The one exception is Tunisia, where consequential and perhaps enduring changes have occurred.

### **Tunisia: the Jasmine Revolution**

Of all of the North African countries, Tunisia would seem to enjoy the best chance for a democratic transformation. The population of 11 million is generally well educated, and there is a sizeable middle class and an impressive civil society. Tunisia has also been a pioneer in its commitment to women's rights, which are arguably more respected in Tunisia than in any of the other North African countries. The small Tunisian military, which includes fewer than 40,000 people under arms, is led by a professional official corps that has neither been the power behind the curtains nor infiltrated the civilian economy in the same way as the behemoth Egyptian military has done.

North Africa, the Maghreb ('the West') is a region of remarkable cultural and political diversity. While the population is predominantly Arab, there are also ethnic minorities, especially the Berbers, who comprise important and often restive minorities in Algeria and Morocco (with sizeable numbers as well as in Tunisia and Libya). While this may change, within Tunisia, the Arab-Berber divide has been far less important than it is in either Morocco or Algeria, where the Berbers have insisted on education in the Berber language, as well as cultural autonomy.

Tunisia's Islamists are led by Rachid Ghannouchi, who is often celebrated as a moderate figure. He returned from exile only in February 2011, after years of living in London, where he played an important role as a voice for Muslim accommodation in Europe. The Renaissance Party (al-Nahdah), which Ghannouchi founded, managed to survive years of state suppression by maintaining a covert presence in society and cultivating a youthful leadership. Tunisia is also known for its strong labour union movement—one that is without parallel in North Africa, or the Arab world for that matter. At moments of political impasse, the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), which boasts a membership of more than 500,000 and is one of the most powerful institutions in the country, played a decisive role by brokering compromises between al-Nahdah and its secular opponents.

Transparent and well-designed elections for seats in the proportionately distributed 217-member National Constituent Assembly were held on 23 October 2011. The Assembly is charged with writing a new constitution. Thirty parties participated, but six won three-quarters of all seats. While al-Nahdah won the largest share, with ninety seats, a variety of ideological and regional groups won representation, and nineteen seats were allocated to Tunisians living abroad.

Time and again since December 2010, Tunisians rallied to preserve the momentum of the Jasmine Revolution. In contrast with other Arab states, the Tunisians have revealed a penchant for reform. Thus, while the Secretary-General of al-Nahdah, Hamadi Jebali, became Prime Minister in December 2011, the Constituent Assembly named Moncef Marzouki, a highly respected human rights activist and physician, Acting-President (a weaker position than the premiership).

Over time, al-Nahdah lost support, particularly for failing to address Tunisia's deep economic problems, including the unemployment crisis. In parliamentary elections in October 2014, al-Nahdah came in second to Nada' Tunis (Call of Tunis), a party bringing together figures from the former regime, liberal opposition figures and elements from the UGTT. To its credit, the Islamist party gracefully conceded defeat and turned over power to the victors. In December 2014, Mohamed Beji Caid Essebi, the octogenarian founder of Nada' Tunis, was elected Tunisia's first freely elected President.

In his seminal article, Dankwart Rustow (1970) conceptualized the process of democratization as a process of habituation whereby the players learn and grow used to the democratic rules of the game. This is an important insight when considering Tunisia because it is unrealistic to presume that democratic systems begin with all parties fully imbued with democratic principles; indeed, even mature democracies are still evolving, still democratizing.

As in Egypt and across the Arab world, conservative and sometimes violent Salafists have asserted themselves in Tunisia, often targeting secular institutions such as universities for failing to adhere to strict moral standards, including permitting men and women to study together, or for not permitting veiled women to enter campus. While the Salafists are politically weak in Tunisia, neighbouring Libya provides a ready sanctuary and training site. So jihadist-oriented Salafists constitute a security threat to Tunisia and its economy, particularly in light of several attacks on key tourist destinations.

Elsewhere in the Arab world, Tunisia may prove to be the exception that proves the rule, namely that the legacy of decades of authoritarian rule is a weak foundation for the political reform. Arabs may be watching political developments in Tunisia with envy, but the short-term possibility of any Arab political system following the Tunisian example is slim indeed.

### **Egypt: the 25 January Revolution and its aftermath**

Egyptians chafed under the Mubarak dictatorship for years. While opposition activities were often stymied by repression and dampened by fear, labour strikes were increasingly commonplace and political activists continued to highlight regime abuses. Within opposition Islamist circles, there was much debate and discussion about themes of civil society, democracy, and tolerance (el-Sherif 2011).

Using word of mouth, text messaging, and social networking tools (especially Facebook, which had become a locus of opposition communication by the previous autumn),

25 January was declared a 'Day of Rage'. A variety of groups was involved, but for many the memory of Khalid Said, a young computer activist who was savagely beaten to death by police the previous summer in Alexandria, was vivid.<sup>3</sup> Tens of thousands turned out, especially in Cairo's Tahrir (meaning 'Liberation') Square, a central site adjacent to Egypt's famous archaeological museum, where chants of *Irhal! Irhal! Irhal!* ('Scram! Get out! Leave!') became commonplace. Although the momentum was tenuous, especially when armed thugs were unleashed by the government to foster a climate of lawlessness, the 'revolution' succeeded in a mere eighteen days in toppling Hosni Mubarak, who had ruled Egypt since 1981, when he had notoriously pledged to serve only one six-year term.

The old order was shaken, but no revolution occurred in Egypt. The massive Egyptian military holds the reins of power. It was the senior generals who told Mubarak that his time was up and pledged to superintend a transition to elections. The military has a big stake in the present distribution of resources and privileges, and it begs credulity to imagine that the uniformed brass will accept any political arrangement that challenges their vested interests. This is a gargantuan constraint on reform.

In March 2011, the Egyptians went to the polls and overwhelmingly approved (more than 77 per cent voted 'yes') a series of constitutional amendments intended to permit parliamentary and presidential elections. Despite promises by the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) that the new constitution would be drafted in an open process, the military unilaterally amended fifty-five articles of the existing constitution after the referendum. The full dimensions of the generals' agenda became clear on 1 November 2011, when SCAF distributed its 'Guidelines' for the drafting of a new constitution. These guidelines include provisions that there will be no scrutiny of the military budget by civilian authorities and that the military will retain veto power over any proffered drafts of a new constitution. (Two subsequent constitutions have greatly broadened the protections and prerogatives of the military.)

Although there were about twenty legal parties in Mubarak's time, few enjoyed anything approaching national organization. Ad hoc groups that played leading roles in the Tahrir Square demonstrations that toppled Mubarak, would have to start from the ground up to create a political party. The only opposition group that could boast national organization was the Muslim Brotherhood, which founded the Freedom and Justice Party. A variety of other Islamist parties have emerged, including the Hizb al-Wasat, the reformist Islamist 'Centre Party' that was finally granted legal status in 2011, after sixteen years of struggle.

The growing vitality of Salafist parties is noteworthy. The Salafists are generally contemptuous of profane politics, but they proved to be quite pragmatic in exploiting political opportunity in order to advance their goal of instilling a conservative Islamic order in Egypt. Salafi groups have long been especially active in Alexandria, but they also enjoy a national following.

Parliamentary elections were concluded in December 2011, and the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party and allied parties won nearly half of the 508 seats, with the Salafists coming in second with a quarter of the seats. The secularly oriented groups that played such a formative role in launching and sustaining the Tahrir Square demonstrations came in a distant third, with votes scattered among an admixture of small parties.

Presidential elections followed in June 2012. Non-Islamist candidates for the presidency included former Air Force General and Prime Minister Ahmad Shafik, a long-term Mubarak



ally, and leftist Hamdeen Sabahi. Non-Islamist voters split their votes between Sabahi and Moussa, so law-and-order man Shafik came in second and then entered a run-off against Muhammed Mursi, the Brotherhood's candidate. After days of suspense (and rampant suspicions that the results were being 'cooked'), Mursi was declared the winner, with about 52 per cent of the vote. What seemed to be a watershed moment in Egypt's political history became a catastrophe. Mursi proved to be an inept leader with a penchant for harangue rather than consensus. He and his colleagues in the Brotherhood were unprepared for the immense challenges confronting Egypt, and they were regularly undermined by components of the deep state that remained well-entrenched in power.

By early 2013, a massive anti-Mursi movement gained force—with generous support from rich opponents of the president, as well as massive funds provided secretly by the army by Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>4</sup> The army led by Field Marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, deposed Mursi in July 2013, and pro-Mursi demonstrators were brutally suppressed. In August, police and soldiers slaughtered almost 1,000 protesters. The toppled president and thousands of Brotherhood members have been jailed and face long prison terms (and death sentences, as in the case of Mursi), often under ludicrous charges in a court system that has inspired international derision. The Brotherhood was subsequently declared to be a terrorist organization. Public assembly has been severely restricted, and some of the leading secular figures in the so-called 25 January Revolution have been imprisoned for mounting peaceful protests. Meanwhile, jihadist groups unrelated to the Brotherhood (and now aligned with the so-called Islamic State, or ISIS) have mounted numerous attacks, particularly on security personnel, such as in October 2014 when five dozen soldiers were killed in Egypt's Sinai.

The deep state, led by the army, has clawed back power. In March 2014, Field Marshal al-Sisi won the presidency with 97 per cent of the vote, a result that is reminiscent of the Mubarak era. The economic problems that helped provoke the 2011 demonstrations remain largely unresolved, Egyptian society is now deeply divided along ideological lines and there is certainly less freedom today than during the authoritarian rule of Mubarak.

### Libya: the 'Mukhtar Revolution'

Muammar Gaddafi's strategy of ruling was premised on weak state institutions and alliances with favoured tribes.<sup>5</sup> His self-styled *jamahiriya* ('people's republic') was intended to preclude challenges to his power by diffusing power throughout society. Hence the Libyan Army was weak and fragmented; particularly in the case of the eastern units, it centred on the city of Benghazi. The judiciary was fragmented and the police forces lacked a central authority. As for civil society, any initiative that suggested establishing anything resembling autonomous local actors was suppressed or crushed by the state. This meant that any group seizing the state immediately confronted the task of building national institutions, as well offering impetus to civil society.

In Libya, swelling protests began in mid-February. On 17 February 2011, a proclaimed 'Day of Rage' inspired by the models of Tunisia and Egypt prompted a deadly response, especially against demonstrators in Tripoli's Green Square. A vindictive Gaddafi promised to tolerate no dissent, declaring that his opponents were drug-addled terrorists led by Al-Qaeda and calling on Libyans to fight the 'greasy rats'.

As the groundswell of opposition to Gaddafi's rule expanded in February and March, an inchoate civil society could be observed—but Libya lacks either an established political opposition or established legal institutions other than tribal-based traditions of customary law. The Muslim Brotherhood does enjoy considerable support, especially in the eastern cities including Benghazi, and Salafist groups have been picking up pace in recent years. The venerable Sufi or mystical orders, especially the Sanusiyya, played an important role in Libyan history, including leading the anti-colonial campaign against the Italians. Having been ruthlessly repressed by Gaddafi, the Sanusiyya are resurging.

In an extraordinary meeting on 12 March, the League of Arab States (LAS) voted to support international action to protect Libyan civilians, which was followed five days later by United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973. The Resolution enabled the US-European intervention to create 'no-drive' and 'no-fly' zones to stop attacks on Libyan civilians. The NATO effort evolved into a transparent campaign to destroy the military apparatus of the Gaddafi regime in support of opposition forces that were engaged in dangerous on-the-job training.

Gaddafi's capture on 20 October 2011, and his bloody, ignominious end, came amidst reports not only of government atrocities and mass executions, but also of scores of summary executions of regime loyalists by opposition militias. The legacy of disregard for legal processes and disrespect for fundamental human rights by both sides suggested that rocky days lay ahead in liberated Libya, where militias remain heavily armed.

Credible elections for the General National Congress or parliament were held in 2012 with over 60 per cent of eligible voters participating, but by 2014 less than 20 per cent of voters turned out to elect representatives to parliament. An admixture of Islamist groups performed poorly in the latter election, and the weak Supreme Court has challenged the legality of the election. A coalition of groups, notably the Muslim Brotherhood, supported by Qatar and Turkey claims to be the legitimate government and is based in Tripoli. The elected government resides in eastern Libya in Tobruk, near the border of Egypt; from which it receives significant support as well as from the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. Neither authority effectively controls its own territory and power is widely fragmented and alliances shift often, as might be expected in a state in which durable national institutions are largely absent. The prospect for a consolidated authority emerging by 2020 is not good.

### 'The Syria Revolution'

Following the death in 2000 of Hafiz al-Asad, who had ruled Syria for twenty-seven years, there was hope that his son and successor, Dr Bashar al-Asad, would shepherd Syria toward more freedom. Whatever Bashar's intentions, he promptly revealed his dependence on the authoritarian structure of power that his wily father had mastered. After a flush of excitement in 2000, opposition voices were soon stifled by the state.

The chant that became famous in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya was *al-sha'ab yurid usqat al-nizam* ('the people want the fall of the regime'), but in Damascus the regime was smugly confident that Syria would not be affected by the upheaval. Not only were the many agencies of the security apparatus vigilant to control dissent, but President Bashar al-Asad also

presented himself as a reformer. In 2011, he gave a long interview to the *Wall Street Journal* (2011), in which he argued that Syria was stable:

We always say that we need reform but what kind of reform? This is first. Second, if you want to make a comparison between what is happening in Egypt and Syria, you have to look from a different point: why is Syria stable, although we have more difficult conditions? Egypt has been supported financially by the United States, while we are under embargo by most countries of the world. We have growth although we do not have many of the basic needs for the people. Despite all that, the people do not go into an uprising. So it is not only about the needs and not only about the reform. It is about the ideology, the beliefs and the cause that you have. There is a difference between having a cause and having a vacuum. So, as I said, we have many things in common but at the same time we have some different things.

February passed with only a few small demonstrations, but by March it became clear that Syria was by no means immune: a surge of demonstrations began in the southern Houran district of Syria, particularly in the Sunni town of Deraa. The demonstrations were provoked by the arrest and heinous mistreatment of teenagers, who had been arrested by the police for posting anti-regime graffiti. The initial protests evoked a bloody response from the regime, but the demonstrations spread throughout the southern region, despite widespread arrests and indiscriminate killings by the army and police. As in Egypt, government thugs, known locally as *shabiha*, were commonly employed as well. No serious efforts have been made by the government to accommodate any of the demonstrators' demands, either in 2011 or since.

The initial waves of protests were peaceful, but within months an armed insurrection was underway, including significant number of soldiers who deserted to join the opposition. By mid-2015, credible estimates put the total deaths in what has become the Syrian civil war at nearly 250,000 people. In addition, nearly half of the country's population of 23 million have fled their homes. Over four million people have sought safety in neighbouring countries (primarily Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey) or in Europe, while millions more have been impelled to seek safe haven wherever they may find it in Syria.

The dominant forces opposing the regime have often been hostile to non-Sunni minorities, especially so in the case of Daesh (or Da'ish, the Arabic acronym for the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria; ISIS, which calls itself the Islamic State). Especially in Damascus and Aleppo, as well as in areas dominated by minorities such as Christian sects, Alawis, Kurds, or Druze, the regime has retained significant support. A majority of Syrians (about 65 per cent) are Arab Sunni Muslims, who dominate the opposition (yet many urban-based Sunni merchants have stuck with the regime).

Key elements within the military remain loyal to the regime, but casualties have taken a massive toll on what had been a standing force of 400,000. Tens of thousands of desertions and defections among non-Alawi soldiers and officers have eroded the military's strength, although these losses have typically been from less important units. For more than forty years, the Syrian regime has been dominated by the minority Alawi community, which accounts for about 11 per cent of Syria's population of 21 million, and the Alawis control all senior positions in the army. The Alawi sect is an offshoot of Shia Islam, but the sect is quite unique in its practices and structure. For generations, the Alawis were poor and

disadvantaged, but their path to influence and power was the military. Unlike either Tunisia or Egypt, where professional army officers broke with the president, this is unlikely to happen in Syria. The two most important army divisions are controlled by relatives of Bashar al-Asad—particularly his brother Maher, who has taken the lead in attempting to crush the growing insurrection brutally.

International efforts to foster a negotiated solution to the conflict have failed. The regime and its adversaries reject the principle that facilitated a negotiated end to the fifteen-year civil war in neighbouring Lebanon in 1990, namely 'no victor, no vanquished'. The major combatants have rejected compromise out of hand. Yet, neither side has the power to vanquish the other and to dominate Syria. This suggests that Syria will be a country-in-fragments for many years to come. Even if the level of violence recedes over time, the rebuilding of Syria's infrastructure will be a gargantuan if not impossible challenge, not to mention meeting the basic needs of millions of impoverished people struggling to live day-by-day.

### **Renewed dissent in Saudi Arabia and problems next door**

Significant demonstrations took place in Saudi Arabia and in Bahrain. In Saudi Arabia, the minority Shi'i Muslim community of the Eastern Province, who may account for 10 per cent of the country's population, mounted a 'Day of Rage' on 11 March—also styled the 'Hanin Revolution of 11 March', in reference to a document drafted by Shi'i intellectuals in 2010, which was presented to King Abdullah. The document calls for respect for the civil rights of the Shia, including the end of long-term imprisonment without trial (citing the case of some prisoners who have been held for fourteen years without trial). The police responded to the protests by about 800 people by arresting several dozen protesters, some of whom were alleged to have been involved in the 1996 bombing of the al-Khobar Tower barracks. The knee-jerk response of the Saudi authorities has been to describe Shi'i protesters as serving Iranian purposes, often with fallacious or weak evidence. Whether in the Eastern Province, in Bahrain, or elsewhere in the Gulf or in Yemen, the Saudi narrative grants little or no credibility to either local grievances or the distinctive qualities of various Shi'i communities. Instead, it is claimed that Iran's agenda is the key factor.

The government in Riyadh was also concerned that restive Sunni citizens would be inspired to protest. By March, several obliging senior clerics in the holy city of Mecca issued a religious opinion declaring that it was forbidden to protest because this undermines security and stability. Simultaneously, King Abdullah announced a large stimulus package to be spent on creating jobs, housing, and medical facilities. The expanded expenditures eventually totalled nearly \$130 billion. Subjects were also threatened with punishment if they mounted illegal demonstrations (and there is no possibility of 'legal' demonstrations).

Under King Abdullah some modest reforms were announced, including a September 2011 promise that women would be permitted to vote and stand for local elections beginning in 2015. With Abdullah's demise in 2015, and the installation of King Salman, even tepid reforms initiated under his predecessor are in doubt. Prior to ascending the throne, Salman served as the Governor of Riyadh for 48 years and he earned a reputation as the royal family's stern disciplinarian, probably not an obvious credential for a reformer.

Meanwhile, neighbouring Yemen, the Arab world's poorest country, was collapsing into civil war by 2014. Long-term dictator Ali Abdullah Salih was nudged from power with Saudi

help in late 2011 after months of demonstrations and violence. The conflict in resource-poor Yemen is extraordinary complex, and involves competing regional, ideological, and especially tribal interests. Major combatant forces include a formidable local branch of Al-Qaeda, elements of the military that remain loyal to Salih, military units that remain loyal to the legitimate government, pro-Saudi tribes and Houthis (Shi'i tribesmen who follow a different sect of Shi'ism than Iranians). The Saudi response to the unfolding civil war was to fall back on its narrative blaming Iran for inciting and arming insurgents, although Iran's role has been far more limited, as western diplomats are quick to note. Thus, rather than focusing on the need to accommodate competing Yemeni interests, Saudi Arabia decided to intervene militarily through a campaign of aerial bombardment beginning in March 2015 (with some support from other GCC states). While considerable physical damage has been caused by the bombing, as well as the deaths of hundreds of civilians, the internal balance of power in Yemen has not been meaningfully changed. Short of an enormously difficult ground invasion of Yemen, which was attempted with disastrous consequences by Egypt in 1962, the Saudi's capacity to impose a political solution on Yemen appears dim.

### The tragedy of Bahrain

In the small Gulf state of Bahrain, many of the complaints coincide with sectarian differences and disparities in privilege that are extraordinary because they are so readily noticed. Although Shi'i Muslims account for nearly 70 per cent of the small population (excluding expatriate workers, the Bahraini citizens number about 600,000), they have typically been on the short end of the stick in terms of access to government employment and favours. On a journey from the cosmopolitan capital of Manama to the predominantly Shi'i and very distressed Shi'i city of Sitrah, the differences are abrupt and stunning. Sitrah, along with many of the Shi'i villages in Bahrain, is a dreadful place to live. Unemployment and per capita income data speak volumes about the inequity that defines Bahraini society.

On 14 February 2011, protests were mounted by predominantly Shi'i demonstrators, although some reform-minded Sunni Muslims also joined them. Many of the demonstrators gathered around the Pearl Roundabout, a downtown Manama landmark where a white concrete pedestal held aloft a pearl, recalling earlier days when Bahrain was a world centre for their harvesting. The demonstrators were overwhelmingly peaceful and police efforts to dislodge them were largely unsuccessful, despite police violence that killed five protesters on 18 February. The government—urged on by the United States—sought a negotiated end to the protests. Crown Prince Salman took the lead in negotiations to initiate a serious dialogue about reform, particularly with Shaikh 'Ali Salman, the softly spoken and moderate head of al-Wefaq (meaning 'the Compact'), which held all of the elected opposition seats in parliament. Hardliners on both sides were sceptical of the proposed dialogue and it was stymied.

On the opposition side, the rival al-Haq movement declared that its goal was to overthrow the monarchy, while within the regime Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman, the uncle of King Hamad bin Isa and who had served in his post for four decades from the very beginning of Bahraini independence, was hostile to the prospect of reform. The reputedly corrupt prime minister, who enjoys close ties to Saudi Arabia, has long frustrated reformist efforts, not least those pursued by his grand nephew the Crown Prince. US efforts to encourage the reform dialogue seemed to be bearing fruit in early March, but any talk of dialogue ended

on 14 March when troops from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates troops crossed the causeway linking the main island to the mainland to lead a crackdown on the demonstrators. The Saudi-led incursion was clearly a riposte to the US, which King Abdullah felt was much too quick to jump on the bandwagon of reform and far too reticent to support old friends (including President Mubarak of Egypt). Within days, the very symbol of the protests, the Pearl monument, was demolished.

All talk of reform came to a crashing halt. Shi'i employees were dismissed from state jobs as punishment for having demonstrated and hundreds were arrested. Health professionals, who treated injured demonstrators and those accused of trying to overthrow the regime, were tried by military courts and sentenced to long terms in prisons. Under international pressure, some of the most egregious military trials have been overturned and referred to civilian courts, but little has been done to address the underlying disparities that gave rise to the protests, which continue periodically. The risk is that the majority Shi'i population, which has long been surprisingly moderate, especially given the discrimination that they face routinely, will be radicalized and that charges of foreign meddling by Iran will prove to be self-fulfilling.

## Conclusion

Never in the modern history of the Middle East have so many millions demanded the dismantling of their autocratic regimes with such unanimity, perseverance, and—it must be emphasized—courage as they did in 2011. Unfortunately, in all but one instance where rulers were toppled, the results have been horrendous. Embedded political elites have clawed back power, oppression and bloodshed have increased, and many people are living lives more miserable than they were before the protests. The authoritarian states have proven neither 'nimble nor effective' in their efforts to retain power.<sup>6</sup> Three countries are in the grips of civil war (Libya, Syria, and Yemen); Egypt is kept afloat by boatloads of cash from the rich Gulf states while a spreading jihadist insurgency replaces jailed moderates of the Muslim Brotherhood; and Bahrain imposes a police state on the majority of its population.

However, the memories of collective protests cannot be easily erased, as well as the lesson that public space can be reclaimed and repoliticized. The path of reform will indeed be long, far longer than so many people imagined in the uplifting days of 2011, but there is space for new political imaginaries. We need to ensure that our assessments allow room for surprise, including radically changing terms of reference for politics. Demands for accountability and a responsive political system may have subsided, but they have not disappeared.

## Further reading

Bayat, A. (2010, 2013) *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press)

A prescient, nuanced, and richly informed study of youth politics, Islamist politics, activism, and the prospects for mundane politics to foster reform.

Cammett, M., Diwan, I., Richards, A., and Waterbury, J. (2015) *A Political Economy of the Middle East*, 4th edn (Boulder, CO: Westview Press)

Extensively updated edition of the seminal reference on the interplay of politics and economics. The book combines lucid analysis with rich detail and well-reasoned insights.

Hilsum, L. (2012) *Sandstorm: Libya in the Time of Revolution* (New York: Penguin Press)

Exceptional reportage by a veteran journalist who witnessed the Libyan Revolution first-hand. Her account is noteworthy for its lucidity and its insights.

Ismail, S. (2013) 'Urban Subalterns in the Arab Revolutions: Cairo and Damascus in Comparative Perspective', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 55 (4): 865–94.

For the urban underclass their primary interface with government is with the police, who are much dreaded and feared. For many protesters, as Ismail reveals, the police became the primary target for their rage.

Norton, A. R. (ed.) (1995, 1996) *Civil Society in the Middle East*, 2 vols (Leiden: E. J. Brill)

The most comprehensive collection of studies on state-society relations in the Middle East, covering almost every country in the region.

Owen, R. (2012) *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press)

A very timely political history of the Arab world that explains how colonialism, the drive for sovereignty, and political economy gave shape to Arab political systems.

Salamé, G. (ed.) (1994) *Democracy without Democrats: Renewal of Politics in the Muslim World* (New York: St Martin's)

A ground breaking volume that explores the prospects for democracy in a region where leading opposition forces may initially spurn the concept.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2002, 2004, 2005, 2008, 2009, 2012) *Arab Human Development Reports* (New York: United Nations Publications), available online at <http://www.arab-hdr.org/reports/regionalarab.aspx>

These candid and penetrating studies by scholars from the Arab world examine the factors that impede freedom in the region, including corruption, the repression of political life, the status of women, and the role of external powers.

White, J. B. (2014) *Muslim Nationalism and the New Turks* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)

The author's extensive fieldwork in Turkey is the basis for her engaging study of 'Muslimhood'—a model for incorporating pious individuals and principles into the public sphere without excluding non-Muslims.

## Questions

1. What is the 'ruling bargain' that defined the relationship between many people in the Middle East and their governments? What factors have undermined the ruling bargain?
2. Many Middle Eastern states depend heavily on 'rents' as opposed to taxes to finance the government and provide service. Why might rentier states be more autonomous from society than states dependent upon taxes?
3. Islamist groups have attracted significant support in most, if not all Middle Eastern states. Given the opportunity to participate in the political systems, how have Islamist groups fared?
4. What factors motivated multitudes of people to take to the streets in mass demonstrations in 2011?
5. Ruling figures were toppled in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen as a result of the 2011 protests, and in Bahrain and Syria profound challenges were posed to the sitting rulers. In a number of these cases, the results have been dismal. What factors explain the poor outcomes?

## Notes

1. The Pew Charitable Trust also offers extensive polling reports. See the widely discussed Pew Global Attitudes Project, which includes a lot of material on the Middle East, online at <http://www.pewglobal.org/>
2. This section draws upon work originally completed jointly with Professor Farhad Kazemi.
3. See <http://www.elshaheed.co.uk/>
4. See S. Heydemann and R. Leenders (2014) 'Authoritarian Learning and Counterrevolution' in M. Lynch (ed.) *Authoritarian Learning and Counterrevolution. The Arab Uprisings Explained: New Contentious Politics in the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press), pp. 75–92.
5. Omar Mukhtar was a revered leader of the anti-colonial struggle against the Italians and was hanged in 1937.
6. Leaked transcripts reveal that by 2014 the cash infusions from the Gulf totalled \$39.5 billion, and perhaps as much as \$50 billion by 2015. See <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/does-sisi-retain-support-his-top-generals-1452666191>