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# **Seismic Shift:**

## Understanding Change in the Middle East

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## The Middle East Academic Community and the “Winter of Arab Discontent”: Why Did We Miss It?

*F. Gregory Gause, III*

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### Explanatory Note

**T**he academic community is distinct due to its established and formal procedures for reviewing original research before publication. As such, academic studies require a longer timeline than research from other communities. The life cycle from identifying a topic through field research to writing, peer review, and publication could take several years. While many academics interested in public policy also provide analysis for more informal channels, such as blogs or think tank publications, universities vary in the recognition they accord such outside work. For some, it enhances a scholar’s impact and the visibility of the university; for others, it is considered as an outside activity, and not recognized as part of a university scholar’s formal work.

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No academic specialist on the Middle East (of whom I am aware) predicted the timing and extent of the region-wide upheavals in the Arab world that began in December 2010 and continue today. This is not because the academic community believed that Arabs liked their governments, or that Arab leaders were popular figures with broad support bases. No one in the academic community made that argument. The academic literature tended to emphasize the problems that the Arab world faced (in many cases working from the extraordinarily detailed critique that Arab researchers put forward in the *Arab Human Development Reports* in the mid-2000s), including the demographic “youth bulge,” economic problems, and sclerotic authoritarian political systems. Nor did the academic community miss it because, as some commentators have implied, it believed that some combination of Islam and Arab cultural traits rendered the populations of the Arab world

less interested in or “prepared for” democracy than people in other world areas.<sup>1</sup> While some scholars who do not specialize on the region have made this kind of argument (Samuel Huntington, David Landes), almost all American Middle East specialists have rejected the “cultural barrier to democracy” argument because it is not grounded in the evidence of the region. Moreover, the vast majority of American scholars who write about the politics of the region are sympathetic to regional democratic reform and to American support for democracy promotion (though differing on the policy details).

Rather, the academic literature missed the 2011 eruption because it was focused (and in many ways rightly so) on explaining the anomalous regime stability that characterized the Arab world in the 40 years leading up to these events. Because the scholarly community knew that this stability was not based on the happiness or the apathy of the ruled, our focus was on the stability of state and regime institutions. It was the “robustness of authoritarianism”<sup>2</sup> in the face of serious problems and popular discontent that explained the lack of change, democratic or otherwise, in the Arab world. Thus, the literature on Middle Eastern politics in the 2000s sought institutional answers to explain regional stability. That focus led us to discount the possibility of mass political mobilization, largely because we had seen previous efforts in this direction fail. It led us to make assumptions about the relationship between regimes and their militaries that turned out, in some cases, not to be true. It led us to overestimate the regime-strengthening effects of neo-liberal economic reform. It led us to discount the regime-threatening effects of demographic change and new social media, not because we did not recognize the fact of demographic change and new social media, but rather because we thought the regimes were strong enough to absorb the pressures generated by them.

In this essay I identify five areas where our literature on the stability of Arab authoritarianism misread or missed important factors: the institutional strength of regime support (armies and ruling parties); the effects of limited political contestation; the economic bases of regime stability (neo-liberal economic reform and oil wealth); the effects of new media; and the regional “contagion” effect that common Arab identity generates. I then look at some representative examples of academic literature on other topics – labor movements, democracy promotion, and subaltern political activity – to see if they had a better sense that the upheaval was coming. While these literatures focused on important elements that have helped to create the “Winter of Arab discontent,” none predicted that the seemingly stable Arab regimes were going to face their greatest crisis in the near future.

Caution is advisable when writing about on-going political events. No Arab state has become a democracy as of May 2011. In only two states have the presidents been overthrown, and in both Tunisia and Egypt there is a distinct possibility that elements of the old regime will retain their power in whatever new political institutions emerge. It is entirely possible that popular revolts elsewhere will be squelched (as they seem to have been in Bahrain), and we will look back in 2012 and remark on how well the “stability

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Kristof. “Unfit for Democracy?” *New York Times*. February 26, 2011; and “Is Islam the Problem?” *New York Times*. March 5, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Eva Bellin. “The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective” *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (January 2004).

of Arab authoritarianism” literature has held up. But it is certainly time to reassess our understanding of Arab regime stability.

## The Literature on the Stability of Arab Authoritarianism

The literature that has emerged in the last decade on the stability of Arab authoritarianism is very good.<sup>3</sup> It addressed a political phenomenon that was important, set the Arab world apart from other world areas, and investigated a topic that had not been adequately addressed in earlier literature. It avoided the wishful thinking that had characterized the earlier spate of literature on nascent Arab democratization (a literature sparked more by the desire to fit into the political science trend of explaining the “Third Wave” of worldwide democratization than by real democratic reform in the Arab world).<sup>4</sup> It was based on generalizable and testable social science concepts rather than squishy and unprovable notions of the distinctiveness of Arab culture. Though prediction is one standard by which to judge an academic literature, it is hardly the only one. Accurately describing and explaining the past is an equally important standard, and by that standard this literature was very successful. And, depending on how things turn out, it might provide some answers to why some regimes successfully resisted the current regional upheavals. But we can, in a preliminary way, look to gaps and incorrect assumptions in this literature to help us understand why the Middle East specialist academic community failed to predict the upheavals of 2011.

### Institutional Supports For Regime Stability

The stability of Arab authoritarianism literature emphasizes the strength of coercive institutions as a major factor underlying regime stability.<sup>5</sup> This is hardly surprising. Arab regimes faced serious popular uprisings and upheavals in the period between 1970 and 2010, and relied on their militaries and security services to put them down: Oman in the early 1970s; Syria in the late 1970s and early 1980s; Egypt in 1977 and the mid-1990s; Jordan in 1970-71, 1989, and 1996; Algeria during its civil war in the 1990s; Saudi Arabia in 1979-80 and the mid-1990s, Saddam Hussein’s Iraq in 1991. This record of successful regime maintenance through repression led to an assumption that Arab militaries always would

<sup>3</sup> Important examples, aside from Bellin, include Daniel Brumberg. “The Trap of Liberalized Autocracy.” *Journal of Democracy*. Vol. 13, No. 4 (October 2002); Steven Heydemann. *Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World*. Saban Center Analysis Paper No. 13. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, October 2007); Stephen J. King. *The New Authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); Oliver Schlumberger (ed.). *Debating Arab Authoritarianism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007); Marsha Pripstein Posusney and Michele Penner Angrist (eds.). *Authoritarianism in the Middle East*. (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> On the earlier period of Arab democratization literature, see Michael Hudson. “Democratization and the Problem of Legitimacy in Middle East Politics – Presidential Address 1987” *MESA Bulletin*. Vol. 22, No. 2, 1988; the measured assessments in Ghassan Salame (ed.). *Democracy Without Democrats? The Renewal of Politics in the Muslim World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1994); and the somewhat more optimistic take found in many of the articles in Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany, and Paul Noble (eds.). *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World – Volume 1, Theoretical Perspectives* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> See particularly Bellin, pp. 144-147; and Jason Brownlee. “Political Crisis and Restabilization: Iraq, Libya, Syria and Tunisia” in Posusney and Angrist, *Authoritarianism in the Middle East*.

see their own corporate interests as identical to that of the ruling regime. This assumption further was strengthened by the military and security background of the Egyptian, Tunisian, Algerian, Yemeni, and Syrian ruling regimes. The scholarly community basically assumed that the military and the regime were one, and stopped studying the political role of the military (a very prominent topic in the academic literature on Arab politics in the 1960s and 1970s).

One of the few recent books on the topic, which looked at the role of the Egyptian, Algerian, and Turkish militaries in their politics, reinforced this conclusion in its two Arab cases. It found that the Egyptian and Algerian militaries were so entrenched in their political systems that they could “rule without having to govern,” and that the prospects for political change in such systems were very small: “Under such circumstances it is unlikely that the combination of either political activism or domestic crises could set in motion a transition to democracy.”<sup>6</sup>

The events of 2011 seriously call into question the assumptions made by the stability literature about Arab militaries. The Egyptian case demonstrates that even an army enormously implicated in an authoritarian regime can, in crisis, decide that its own corporate interests are separable from those of the political leadership. The Tunisian case indicates that even a small and seemingly marginalized army can play the arbiter role in a political crisis. The pattern observed so far seems to suggest that: 1) militaries whose officer corps share a minority sectarian or geographic status with the ruling elite will stand by the regimes in times of trouble (Saddam’s Iraq, Syria, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia); 2) militaries in uninstitutionalized regimes, where personal and family ties determine promotion and leadership of units (Libya, Yemen), will fragment under pressure into loyalist units (headed by relatives of the leader) and those willing to go over to the opposition; and 3) highly institutionalized militaries in relatively homogeneous societies are most likely to assume the arbiter role in political crisis, even if they are tied to the regime (Egypt, Tunisia). This is a very preliminary hypothesis, based on an incomplete understanding of the role the military has played in the various cases of Arab upheaval in 2011.

Another strand of the stability literature highlighted the role that ruling parties can play in preserving regime stability.<sup>7</sup> This argument did not contend that ruling parties were popular or could win fair elections. Rather, such parties like the National Democratic Party (NDP) in Egypt, the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) in Tunisia, the General People’s Congress (GPC) in Yemen, and the Ba’th in Syria could contain and channel political interests, and provide an institutional means to co-opt and control political activism. In many ways, they did for decades. But they proved particularly inept in either channeling or co-opting the popular upheavals of 2011. The two ruling parties that most specialists probably would have identified as most effective in the Arab world were the NDP and RCD, the two regimes that fell. The GPC has not prevented a massive and sustained popular mobilization against Ali Abdallah Salih. The ruling party in Algeria seems safe,

<sup>6</sup> Steven Cook. *Ruling But Not Governing: The Military and Political Development in Egypt, Algeria, and Turkey* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007). Quotes from p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Jason Brownlee. *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). One of Brownlee’s major cases in this book is Egypt. See also King. *The New Authoritarianism*, Ch. 3.

but even the Syrian Ba’thist regime might be in trouble. Ruling parties certainly are no guarantee of regime stability, and we have to rethink the role they play in Arab politics.

## Limited Political Contestation

One important stabilizing element that academic analysts saw as central to “upgraded authoritarianism” was the limited political contestation that Arab regimes permitted in the 1990s and 2000s. In an influential 2002 article Daniel Brumberg described the “trap of liberalized autocracy,” where Arab rulers allowed opposition groups to participate in managed – not completely rigged, not completely free – parliamentary elections. These elections allowed for the release of political tensions, the testing of the popular temperature, and some voice for opposition currents in public life. In exchange, the rulers received a degree of acquiescence, and sometimes even support, from the tolerated opposition movements. Conceptually, the “transitions to democracy” literature originally viewed such hybrid regimes – wherever they might be found – as inherently unstable: either way stations to full democracy or temporary expedients before the swing back to full authoritarianism. However, Brumberg noted that, empirically, liberalized autocracy – specifically in the Arab world – was proving much more durable than the theorists imagined.<sup>8</sup> Other scholars also emphasized the role limited political liberalizations played in authoritarian regimes’ efforts to deal with economic crises and to manipulate opposition sentiment.<sup>9</sup> In a similar vein, Arab authoritarians also opened up more space for non-governmental organizations to receive legal recognition, while hamstringing their independence and effectiveness through those new legal frameworks.<sup>10</sup>

There were certainly a number of Arab countries that, for some time, successfully combined authoritarian stability with limited political contestation. Among the republics Egypt (parliamentary elections in 1984, 1987, 1990, 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010); Yemen (parliamentary elections in 1993, 1997, 2001, 2003); and Algeria (post-civil war parliamentary elections in 2002, 2007) stand out as the leading examples. These elections differed in the extent of openness, opposition participation, and opposition success. Each country also held even more tightly managed presidential elections.

Elections in the republics sometimes exacerbated tensions more than alleviated them. The Islamic Salvation Front’s victory in the 1991 Algerian elections led to the military coup and the devastating civil war. Yemen’s 1993 election was followed by a brief civil war in 1994. But in each of these cases, the authoritarian regime was able to maintain itself.

There was an argument in this literature that monarchies were better able to manage the game of limited political contestation, opening up the field for parliamentary elections,

<sup>8</sup> Brumberg. “The Trap of Liberalized Autocracy.”

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Ellen Lust-Okar. “Divided They Rule: The Management and Manipulation of Political Opposition.” *Comparative Politics*. Vol. 36, No. 2 (January 2004); Ellen Lust-Okar. “Opposition and Economic Crises in Jordan and Morocco” and Marsha Pripstein Posusney. “Multiparty Elections in the Arab World: Election Rules and Opposition Responses” in Posusney and Angrist (eds.), [Authoritarianism in the Middle East](#); Ellen Lust-Okar. “The Management of Opposition” in Schlumberger (ed.), [Debating Arab Authoritarianism](#); Lisa Blaydes. [Elections and Distributive Politics in Mubarak’s Egypt](#) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); King. [The New Authoritarianism](#). Ch. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Heydemann. [Upgrading Authoritarianism](#). pp. 5-10.

secure in the knowledge that their executive authority, which (unlike in the republics) was not based on even the chimera of popular choice, would not be challenged.<sup>11</sup> Morocco (1993, 1997, 2002, 2007); Jordan (1989, 1993, 1997, 2003, 2007, 2010); Kuwait (regular elections since independence, with two periods of suspension in 1976-81, 1986-1992); and Bahrain (2002, 2006, 2010) all have had contested but managed elections to their parliaments over the past two decades.

The events of 2011 do not completely refute arguments about the stability of “liberalized autocracy,” but they do call them into question. Algeria, Jordan, Kuwait, and Morocco largely have been spared the large-scale popular uprisings. How much that can be explained by their semi-competitive political systems is an open question. But a number of the states that were leading examples of liberalized autocracies were the hardest hit by the wave of popular upheaval: Egypt, Yemen, and Bahrain. Likewise, completely closed systems in Tunisia and Syria experienced upheavals, while the Arab state without even a hint of democratic institutions – even sham institutions – at the national level, Saudi Arabia, avoided them. The preliminary evidence is that, while semi-competitive elections might provide some element of stability for certain regimes, they are no guarantee of co-opting and channeling popular discontent. Managed electoral systems are neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for authoritarian stability.

## **Economic Support for Authoritarianism: Neo-Liberal Reform and Oil Wealth**

Steven Heydemann argued that Arab authoritarians had “upgraded” their systems by “capturing the benefits of selective economic reforms” in recent years. Privatizing state-owned enterprises and allowing the lucrative telecommunications market to be dominated by the private sector (a choice few Arab regimes would have made in the 1970s) allowed regimes to “co-opt important segments of the private sector,” secure the privileged position of the all-important militaries (as they have become more important economic actors), and deflect international pressures for more thorough-going economic reform. Heydemann also thought that the opening up of Arab economies to global consumption networks – high-end coffee shops, McDonalds, fancy malls, and cineplexes – could help to vest the interests of upper-class consumers in the stability of the ruling regime. He certainly recognized the fraying of social safety nets in the Arab world, and that employing the “youth bulge” remained an overwhelming challenge for most Arab states. However, his conclusion was that “selective processes of economic liberalization provide enhanced economic opportunities for regime supporters, reinforce the social base of authoritarian regimes, and mitigate pressure for comprehensive economic and social reforms.”<sup>12</sup>

It has been frequently commented that the two countries where popular upheaval brought down presidents – Tunisia and Egypt – were the two Arab countries that had gone the

<sup>11</sup> For an early version of this argument, see Lisa Anderson. “Absolutism and the Resilience of Monarchy in the Middle East” *Political Science Quarterly*. Vol. 106, No. 1 (Spring 1991); more recently the argument is made most cogently by Michael Herb. “Princes and Parliaments in the Arab World” *Middle East Journal*. Vol. 58, No. 3 (Summer 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Heydemann. *Upgrading Authoritarianism*. pp. 13-18; quotes on p. 13 and p. 14. See also King. *The New Authoritarianism*. pp. 29-30.

furthest in adopting the policy recommendations of the “Washington consensus.” Both had been praised, as late as 2010, by the International Monetary Fund, for taking steps to open markets, privatize state industries, encourage private-sector activity, and integrate their economies into the globalized world.<sup>13</sup> Their economic growth rates were, among the non-oil exporting Arab states, very high. According to the simple logic that underlay much American discourse about democratization, Egypt and Tunisia should have been the best candidates for a gradual transition to democracy. Instead, if democracy comes, it will be through revolution.

It is now clear that “Washington consensus” economic policies, at least the way they have been implemented in the Arab world, are destabilizing for autocratic regimes. These policies exacerbate inequality. They create a politically connected privileged class that excites the hatred of the majority of the population and increases public cynicism about government. They loosen restrictions in the labor market, making it easier for employers to fire workers. They require government to cut the state sector, leading to fewer state jobs and reduced subsidies for consumer goods and utilities. Even while they encourage economic growth, they undercut political stability. This is certainly the lesson taken by the authoritarians who remain in power. As the wave of regional unrest spread, most Arab governments increased state salaries, postponed subsidy cuts (or increased subsidies), and promised more state jobs.

Even the groups that benefit the most from these policies, which might have been expected to back authoritarian economic reform regimes, apparently turned against their political benefactors, or, at a minimum, did not rally to support them in this crisis. The Tunisian bourgeoisie did not take to the streets in support of Ben Ali. Wa’el al-Ghoneim, the face of the Egyptian revolt (at least for the English-language media), epitomized the kind of person who was doing very well in Mubarak’s Egypt (though he was an Egyptian doing well in the Gulf): bi-lingual, well-trained, perfectly at home in the globalized economy. Yet he took great personal and financial risks in mobilizing opposition to the regime because of its denial of political freedoms.

“Washington-consensus” style economic reform (in the particularly political way it has been implemented by some Arab states) has not proven to be a stabilizing element for authoritarian regimes. But that does not mean that a return to more statist policies provides a better long-term bet for Arab authoritarians. Those with substantial hydrocarbon revenues might be able to sustain such a course (as I will discuss), but it seems unlikely that the non-oil Arab states have the resources to deal with their employment and social services crises through the statist economic policies of the past. The tragedy of the half-hearted and politicized economic reform efforts undertaken in the Arab world is that they have diminished the likelihood of more thorough-going reforms in the future.

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, “Arab Republic of Egypt – 2010 Article IV Consultation Mission, Concluding Statement” February 16, 2010. <http://www.imf.org/external/np/ms/2010/021610.htm>; and “Tunisia: Preliminary Conclusions of the 2010 Article IV Mission” June 15, 2010. <http://www.imf.org/external/np/ms/2010/061510a.htm>

The other economic factor identified by the authoritarian stability literature as central to explaining the longevity of Arab regimes was hydrocarbon wealth.<sup>14</sup> It is clear that having oil and gas money is no absolute guarantee of authoritarian regime stability. The fate of the Shah of Iran is testimony to that. But of the major Arab oil and gas producers, only Libya has faced substantial popular upheaval during the Winter of Arab discontent. With oil prices as high as they are, the oil producers have ample resources to placate citizen dissatisfaction and maintain their patronage networks. Saudi Arabia, the uber-rentier Arab authoritarian, made promises to spend more than \$100 billion on its citizens as popular protests gripped its neighbors.<sup>15</sup> Kuwait, despite a long history of political activism, has been relatively quiet during this period, as have Qatar and the UAE. Algeria, though not in the same league in terms of rent per capita as the Gulf oil monarchies, has not experienced the kinds of upheavals as other Arab states.

Libya is the oil rentier outlier in 2011. It demonstrates the wisdom of Gwenn Okruhlik's pithy observation that "money does not spend itself."<sup>16</sup> Like the other Arab oil authoritarians, the Qaddafi regime had plenty of revenue at its disposal since the upturn in oil prices in 2003. It does not appear to have used it to maintain its patronage networks or to mollify potential opposition. The Libya case demonstrates, once again, that oil wealth alone is not enough to guarantee regime stability. However, oil wealth (when prices are high) can provide an important cushion for authoritarians who know how to use it during times of crisis. The increasingly erratic "Brother Leader" obviously did not know how.

## New Media

A number of analysts of Middle East politics recognized that new social media and new manifestations of traditional media, particularly Arabic language satellite television channels, were having important effects on the politics of the Arab states.<sup>17</sup> They argued that Arabs were being liberated from the government media monopolies of old, that new audiences and new "public spheres" were developing around these new media, and that this information revolution would put new pressures on Arab governments. However, all hedged their analyses appropriately, given the evidence that they had at the time of publication about the overall impact of the new information environment on the stability of Arab regimes. None said that the new technologies would in short order bring down

<sup>14</sup> Bellin, "Robustness of Authoritarianism" in particular highlights access to rents – both hydrocarbon and "strategic" rents – as a major factor in allowing Arab authoritarians to avoid the kinds of fiscal crises that have created political crises for authoritarians elsewhere, pp. 147-48. I have emphasized the role of rents in the stability of the Arab monarchies of the Gulf. See "The Persistence of Monarchy in the Arabian Peninsula: A Comparative Analysis." in Joseph Kostiner (ed.), *Middle East Monarchies: The Challenge of Modernity* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> "Amid Protests, Saudi King Raises Benefits but Strengthens Security" *New York Times*, March 18, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/19/world/middleeast/19saudi.html>

<sup>16</sup> Gwenn Okruhlik, "Rentier Wealth, Unruly Law and the Rise of Opposition: The Political Economy of Oil States" *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (April 1999), p. 297.

<sup>17</sup> See for example: Jon Alterman, *New Media, New Politics? From Satellite Television to the Internet in the Arab World* (Washington: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1998); Dale Eickelman and Jon Anderson (eds.), *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003); Marc Lynch, *Voices of the New Arab Public: Iraq, Al-Jazeera, and Middle East Politics Today* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

authoritarian regimes or lead to democracy in the Arab world. Marc Lynch, one of the leaders in analyzing how the information revolution was affecting Arab politics, captured that caution in a 2007 article on Arab blogs, where he wrote that “it is highly unlikely that blogging will induce wide political change in the Middle East.”<sup>18</sup>

The skepticism with which some academic analysts (including myself) viewed the political effects of the information revolution tended to be confirmed by the failure of the “Kefaya movement” in Egypt in the mid-2000s to bring about political change in Egypt at that time. “Kefaya” in Arabic means “enough” (with emphasis, as in “I have had enough!”), and the Egyptian activists behind the movement (whose formal name was “The Egyptian Movement for Change,” but was more widely known by its slogan) meant that they had had enough of Hosni Mubarak, his plan to make his son Gamal president after him, the sclerotic political system, corruption, the entire system. The movement, largely based in Cairo and characterized by an educated, upper class and secular membership, used the Internet to gain support for its petition calling for political reforms and used social networking technologies to organize non-violent demonstrations against the regime.<sup>19</sup> It became the darling of the Western reporters in Cairo, garnering extensive coverage.<sup>20</sup> However, it was unable to prevent the Mubarak regime from pushing through constitutional amendments in 2005 meant to consolidate its rule, and from controlling the parliamentary elections of that year (even though they were the freest since the 1952 revolution). The movement fizzled out by 2007, suppressed by the regime and beset with internal rifts.

In retrospect, Kefaya set the stage for subsequent Egyptian campaigns using Facebook and other social media that escalated in the last years of the 2000s, eventually culminating in the January 25, 2011 revolt that brought down Hosni Mubarak. But it seemed at the time that the promise of social mobilization that Kefaya held out was limited to a narrow strand of elite urbanites.

Steven Heydemann, in his analysis of “upgraded authoritarianism” in 2007, emphasized the steps that Arab governments had taken to police the new information spheres: “[V]irtually every Arab regime has built up extensive systems of regulation, surveillance, oversight, and coercion that vastly limit the autonomy and privacy of users.”<sup>21</sup> The apparent failure of Kefaya could have led analysts to ignore the exponential growth in Internet penetration that occurred in Egypt between 2003, when Kefaya began, and 2011, and thus discount the effects of new media on the ability of Arab opposition movements to mobilize support.

It is still early in terms of understanding the role that social media played in the Arab mobilizations of 2011. The notion that Iranian protests in 2009 were a “Twitter revolution” has been challenged by reports that many of the “tweets” outsiders followed about the Iranian events actually originated from outside the country. We certainly know that

<sup>18</sup> Marc Lynch. “Blogging the New Arab Public,” *Arab Media and Society*. Vol. 1 (Spring 2007). <http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=10>

<sup>19</sup> For a brief account of the movement, see Sherif Mansour. “Enough is Not Enough: Achievements and Shortcomings of the Egyptian Movement for Change” in Maria J. Stephan (ed.), *Civilian Jihad: Nonviolent Struggle, Democratization, and Governance in the Middle East* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>20</sup> See for example Michael Slackman. “Anti-Mubarak Protestors Clash with Police in Cairo” *New York Times*. July 31, 2005; and the editorial “Kefaya in Egypt” *The Washington Post*. March 25, 2005.

<sup>21</sup> Heydemann. *Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World*. p. 21.

extensive Internet penetration was not a necessary condition for popular mobilization or we would not have seen Yemen follow Tunisia, Egypt, and Bahrain in the train of Arab popular revolts. But clearly the academic community, for the most part, underestimated how social media could be used to mobilize resistance to authoritarian rule.

## Contagion Effects and Arab Identity

No analyst predicted the startling contagion effect that the Arab protest movements had across state boundaries in the Arab world. While the Tunisian uprising emerged from indigenous sources, in every subsequent Arab mobilization at least some causal weight has to be given to the demonstration effect of the protests that came before. It is an object lesson in the continued relevance of a cross-border Arab identity. That fact, while widely acknowledged in the academic community, was not given much analytical focus in recent scholarship. Since the decline of the Pan-Arab movement that dominated Arab politics in the 1950s and 1960s, the academic community has tended to focus on country studies, or studies that compare Arab countries. The idea that popular movements could sweep across borders, as they did in the 1950s, seemed to be a relic of a former time, when states were less institutionalized, and Arab politics were driven more by the emotions of conflict with Israel and dreams of unity.<sup>22</sup>

These assumptions about the declining salience of Arab identity and the ability of states to fend off external ideological pressures seemed to be borne out by regional events. While the Iranian Revolution shook a number of states in the Arab world, no Arab government succumbed to an Islamist revolution in its aftermath. The two wars fought by the United States against Iraq in 1990-91 and 2003 excited opposition throughout the Arab world, but did not destabilize the Arab governments that supported Washington in those efforts. Egypt and Jordan signed peace treaties with Israel, and the regimes remained in power.

So, what made 2011 different from 1979, 1991, or 2003? This clearly is in the realm of speculation, given how close we are to these events, but perhaps both the locations and the nature of the events themselves are important. Iranian uprisings in 1978-79 and 2009 were noted by intellectuals and activists in the Arab world, but did not generate regime-shaking mobilizations there (though the contagion effects of the Iranian Revolution in Iraq and some of the Gulf states were notable). Arabs do seem to pay more attention to what other Arabs are doing. Efforts by governments, whether by the Islamic Revolutionary regime in Tehran or by Saddam Hussein, to mobilize opposition in other countries were largely unsuccessful (with the notable exception of Hizballah in Lebanon, created by Iran in the wake of the Israeli invasion of 1982). The events of 2011 were not directed by any government; rather, they were directed against Arab governments in general, which might have given them their cross-border power.

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<sup>22</sup> I wrote two articles that argued that the growing strength of the Arab state made the cross-border contagion of political movements much less likely than it was in the past. "Revolutionary Fevers and Regional Contagion: Domestic Structures and the 'Export' of Revolution in the Middle East" *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*. Vol. 14, No. 3 (Spring 1991); and "Sovereignty, Statecraft, and Stability in the Middle East" *Journal of International Affairs*. Vol. 45, No. 2 (Winter 1992).

This is where an old technology, television, comes into play. While Arabic language satellite stations are not a new phenomenon (*Al-Jazeera* was launched 15 years ago), they provided the perfect vehicle for citizens across the Arab world to watch, in real time and in their own language, uprisings against authoritarian Arab governments.<sup>23</sup> More generally, the region-wide nature of the events of 2011 indicates that Arabness, as a political identity that crosses borders, remains a very salient political factor in the Middle East. It might not challenge the existence of states themselves as it did in the 1950s (through unity plans). Arabs are focusing their demands within the borders of their own state, seeking change in their own domestic politics.<sup>24</sup> But they are watching and learning from what happens in other Arab countries.

## Other Literatures: Democracy Promotion and Subaltern Studies

Not everyone in the Middle East academic community spent the past 10 years writing about the stability of Arab authoritarianism. Other strands in the literature on Arab politics might be thought of as more likely to have noticed the decay of the ruling regimes and the likelihood of upheaval: the literature on democracy promotion in the region and the literature on “subalterns” – political actors outside the elites. Two prominent subjects of this latter academic focus are labor movements, and the “politics of everyday life” approach championed by political sociologist Asef Bayat. These two categories yielded some very interesting insights about politics in the Arab world, and provide some guidelines for how the current Arab transitions might work out. I found only one author working in the democracy promotion area, and none in the subaltern areas, who predicted the upheavals the Arab world is now seeing. Rather, in each area analysts tended to emphasize the difficulties democrats, labor activists, and the poor faced in dealing with oppressive and seemingly omnipresent states.

### Democracy Promotion

If there was one community of scholars that should have been alive to the possibilities of political change in the Arab world, it was those who focused on democratization and on Western policies of democracy promotion. While chronicling the hesitant and reversible political openings in Arab states over the past two decades and encouraging Washington and other Western capitals to promote democratic change more effectively, almost all of these analysts were as convinced as those writing about the stability of authoritarianism that major political change was unlikely to come about in the near future. In the conclusion to an edited volume on the topic published just last year, Nathan Brown and Emad El-Din Shahin wrote: “[T]here is no dissent in this volume from the view that the existing regimes

<sup>23</sup> Jon Alterman recently has observed that “good old-fashioned television is probably more important [than the Internet] in turning political protests into mass movements.” “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” *Middle East Notes and Comments*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. March 2011. [http://csis.org/files/publication/0311\\_MENC2.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/0311_MENC2.pdf). This also is the assumption underlying Marc Lynch’s contention that *Al-Jazeera* and other pan-Arab media have created a new Arab “public sphere.” *Voices of the New Arab Public*.

<sup>24</sup> With one notable exception during the upheaval of 2011: The crushing of the Bahraini uprising led to demonstrations in support of the Bahraini opposition among Shia communities in Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

are deeply entrenched and that tentative steps toward liberalization hardly amount to a move toward democratization.”

While their authors noted some “pockets of liberalization” in more critical local media, a young generation of Internet activists, increasingly experienced NGOs, and a few protest movements in general saw a “weak, fragmented, and passive civil society” and “very low political participation and public apathy” as major obstacles to democratic change.<sup>25</sup> Nicola Pratt argued that many civil society organizations in the Arab world, while advocating democracy as a goal, are often willing to accommodate what she calls the “hegemonic consensus” underpinning Arab authoritarianism: hierarchical notions of social relations based on gender, class, sect, and ethnicity, and a willingness to work within corporatist structures created by the authoritarian regimes themselves.<sup>26</sup>

Neither Pratt nor the authors in the Brown and Shahin volume thought that the cause was hopeless. They all wrote from a position of encouraging change and promoting democracy. Their policy preference was clear,<sup>27</sup> and they did detect elements of change bubbling beneath the surface of seemingly placid Arab authoritarian regimes. But they did not see the explosion coming anytime soon. One of the few scholars who did was Tamara Cofman Wittes, who identified a “real and growing crisis in Middle East governance.” She attributed that crisis to the declining efficacy of what she called the “three R’s” underpinning Arab authoritarianism – rents, repression, and ideological rhetoric – and the growing demand for democracy in the region.<sup>28</sup> She, among the democracy-promotion advocates, was the most insistent that the United States had to get out in front in terms of democracy promotion to prevent looming regional upheaval. She was critical of some Bush Administration democracy-promotion initiatives (and can put her ideas into practice now as deputy assistant secretary of state for Near East affairs in the Obama Administration), but forthright in asserting that a crisis was coming and only democratic reform could stave it off.

Wittes was right when many others were wrong, but it is difficult to see from her analysis why she was right. She identified the same problems that many others, who were much more sanguine about authoritarian stability, also identified. It was not that she located indicators that others had missed. It appears that she overemphasized the issue of rents in her analysis, given that the uprising occurred at a time of historically high oil prices in which only one major oil exporter, Libya, has experienced regime crisis. Her prescience seems more a result of judgment rather than a unique analytical framework.

<sup>25</sup> Nathan J. Brown and Emad El-Din Shahin. “Conclusion” in Brown and Shahin (eds.), *The Struggle Over Democracy in the Middle East* (New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 186-87.

<sup>26</sup> Nicola Pratt. *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Arab World* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2007). See Ch. 5 and pp. 191-93.

<sup>27</sup> Very few Middle East scholars argued that the United States should not promote democracy in the Arab world, as critical as they might have been of specific American policies. I was one of the few dissenters on this score. I contended that the United States should rely on friendly Arab autocrats to advance its interests, because they were stable (a spectacularly wrong judgment) and because Arab democracies would produce governments unwilling to cooperate with American strategic policies (still an open question). See my “Can Democracy Stop Terrorism?” *Foreign Affairs*. Vol. 84, No. 5 (September/October 2005).

<sup>28</sup> Tamara Cofman Wittes. *Freedom’s Unsteady March: America’s Role in Building Arab Democracy* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2007). Quote from p. 5; see Ch.3 for her argument that the status quo was unsustainable.

Did the democracy promotion efforts of the United States and European countries contribute to the changes we are witnessing in the Arab world now? It is far too early to tell, of course. In the debate in the literature before the events of 2011, Wittes was the most direct in her belief that the United States could and should make democracy promotion a priority, and that it could achieve real progress toward democratization. Others were much more critical of American democracy promotion policies in the Arab world. (One could argue that the Iraq War was a major democracy promotion initiative, explicitly intended by its proponents to exercise a “demonstration effect.” Yet the academic community was almost unanimously opposed to it, and in any case, neither accepted this “spill-over” theory nor saw any empirical evidence to support it.) Sheila Carapico detailed the development of what she saw as a “democracy-brokers” industry in the West, which created as many problems as it solved for Arab democracy advocates and whose efforts were relatively easily co-opted, subsumed, or repressed by the authoritarian states.<sup>29</sup> Mustapha Kemal Sayyid saw Western democracy promotion efforts in the Arab world as “halfhearted and disorganized,” easily deflected by Arab autocrats.<sup>30</sup> Eberhard Kienle went even further in the same volume, saying that “the only conclusion that can safely be drawn is that standard recipes for democracy engineering contribute to the reconfiguration of authoritarian rule rather than to democratization.”<sup>31</sup>

### “Subalterns”: Labor Movements and “Everyday Life as Politics”

The Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP), which publishes the journal *Middle East Report* and online articles, provides analysis by academics, journalists, and other researchers of current Middle Eastern events. MERIP takes a self-consciously “oppositional” view of the region – in opposition to authoritarian regimes, neo-liberal economic policies, American policy, the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Its leftist origins makes MERIP the natural place to look for news of labor movements in the region, and for coverage of women’s issues and powerless minorities, such as migrant workers, and sectarian and ethnic minorities.

MERIP did not disappoint in its coverage of Egypt. It provided excellent accounts of the growing labor unrest in the country in the lead-up to the events of 2011.<sup>32</sup> Its coverage of growing sectarian tensions between Copts and Muslims, and of the interesting parliamentary elections of 2005 and the sham parliamentary elections of 2010 were ahead of the curve, providing a depth of analysis unavailable in the press, but with the immediacy, if not of a daily newspaper, at least of a news weekly or monthly.<sup>33</sup> Those following MERIP were not

<sup>29</sup> Sheila Carapico. “Foreign Aid for Promoting Democracy in the Arab World” *Middle East Journal*. Vol. 56, No. 3 (Summer 2002).

<sup>30</sup> Mustapha K. Sayyid. “International Dimensions of Middle Eastern Authoritarianism” in Schlumberger (ed.), *Debating Arab Authoritarianism*. Quote from p. 228.

<sup>31</sup> Eberhard Kienle. “Democracy Promotion and the Renewal of Authoritarian Rule” in Schlumberger (ed.), *Debating Arab Authoritarianism*. Quote from p. 247.

<sup>32</sup> See in particular the reports by Joel Benin, sometimes joined by co-author Hossam El-Hamalawy, during 2007; eg., “The Militancy of Mahalla al-Kubra” *Middle East Report*. September 29, 2007. <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero092907>

<sup>33</sup> For a representative sample, see the following: On sectarian tensions, Issander El Amrani. “The Emergence of a ‘Coptic Question’ in Egypt” *Middle East Report*. April 28, 2006. <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero042806>. On the 2005 elections, Samer Shehata and Joshua Stacher. “The Brotherhood Goes to

surprised at the anger of Egyptians toward their government. But the MERIP authors, while documenting that anger and the failures of the Mubarak regime to deal effectively with it, did not specifically predict regime crisis or collapse. Joel Benin, in his account of the Mahalla al-Kubra strike in 2007, said that Mubarak was “embattled on many fronts,” and talked about “the actual emergence [of democracy] on the ground,” but did not go so far as to predict the downfall of the regime.<sup>34</sup> I could not find other MERIP authors who made such a prediction. This should not be surprising; these authors were not trying to explain regime stability or predict its end. We should also note that MERIP accounts of Egypt stressed opposition and problems for the regime during the entire decade of the 2000s. It is hard to point to a time in this period when MERIP’s coverage of Egypt became gloomier about the regime’s prospects or more insistent upon the severity of the internal crisis.

Labor unrest in Egypt was not a missed indicator here – it was well covered by MERIP and other academics knew about it because of the MERIP coverage, as well as their own research. It was, perhaps, a neglected indicator in Egypt because academics did not think it would contribute to mass upheaval and regime downfall.

While MERIP’s coverage of Egypt was exceptionally good, the same can not be said of its treatment of Tunisia, where the Winter of Arab discontent began. While the MERIP index lists 78 articles published on Egypt since 2000, it lists only eight on Tunisia, and six of them were posted since January 2011.

This is no criticism of MERIP. Access to Tunisia for serious research was much more difficult than to Egypt, and Egypt in general attracts many more American scholars than Tunisia (or Yemen, with 14 articles in the same period, though they are a very good collection, which detail the increase in problems that the Salih regime faced). While not predicted, the Egyptian upheavals were well understood by those who followed the MERIP output. For the MERIP reader, the Tunisian upheaval would have been more surprising.

Another very useful, and in some ways prescient, perspective on Arab (and Iranian) politics is offered by Asef Bayat. Bayat makes two large arguments in his recent works that bear on the 2011 Arab upheavals. His first relates to what he calls “non-movements,” which he describes as “the collective actions of non-collective actors; they embody shared practices of large numbers of ordinary people whose fragmented but similar activities trigger much social change.”<sup>35</sup> In retrospect, it now seems clear that on a number of fronts that analysts did not recognize at the time, ordinary people were moving away from their acceptance/toleration of these regimes: in their online activities, in their non-participation in regime-sponsored activities (like fixed elections), in their efforts to make a living outside the formal economy at a time when many of the non-oil Arab states were reducing their social safety nets. It is not that Bayat predicted that these non-movements would coalesce into mass-based social action aimed at bringing down regimes. He saw the oppressive power of the authoritarian state as a considerable obstacle to political movements, but he also

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Parliament” *Middle East Report*. No. 240 (Fall 2006). On the 2010 elections, Mona El Ghobashy, “The Dynamics of Egypt’s Elections” *Middle East Report*. September 29, 2010. <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero092910>

<sup>34</sup> Benin. “The Militancy of Mahalla al-Kubra.”

<sup>35</sup> Asef Bayat. *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010). p. 14.

saw that it was full of holes and gaps and inconsistencies in which non-movements could function. Non-movements could adopt, and were adopting on the ground, a Gramscian strategy of “the art of presence,” and through such a strategy win everyday battles that over time would change politics from below. When the opportunity presents itself, such non-movements could be mobilized for larger collective action.<sup>36</sup>

That seems to be what happened across the Arab world in 2011. Commentators have noted that existing political parties and well-organized groups like the Muslim Brotherhood were not in the lead as the public protests against Arab leaders began. These were “leaderless movements,” which puzzled many, but those who had read Bayat might not have been so surprised. Bayat certainly did not predict the events of 2011, nor would reading his work on everyday life as politics provide analysts with clear indicators of mounting challenges to regimes or regime decay. But his framework does direct our attention to how – at the level of the street – people express, through their seemingly uncoordinated actions, either their acceptance or their rejection of the social, political, and economic status-quo. The second argument found in Bayat’s work is his contention that Islamist political ideologies have run their course and the region is seeing a “post-Islamist” turn.<sup>37</sup> While the Iranian case is central to Bayat’s argument here, he makes a more sweeping case that “conservative Islamism,” in which he includes the Muslim Brotherhood, is losing both its ideological *raison d’être* and its popular appeal across the Middle East as a whole. In its place he sees the development of a more democratic and inclusive set of ideas about politics.<sup>38</sup> In many ways, at least some of the sentiments that have characterized the Tunisian, Egyptian, Bahraini, and Yemeni demonstrations seem to fit into Bayat’s “post-Islamist” notion. The contention that “conservative Islamism,” whether as an organizational force or as an ideology, has run its course in the Arab world is an open question. Elections in Tunisia and Egypt (and perhaps elsewhere) will be a test. But Bayat seems to have captured the spirit animating at least elements of the “non-movements” that have brought down two Arab presidents so far.

The perspective “from below” represented by the scholars publishing in MERIP and by Asef Bayat’s work provides an extremely useful set of lenses for understanding the politics of the region. They did not predict the upheavals of 2011, nor do they propose a set of indicators that can predict when regime-threatening instability will emerge. They were not setting out to make such predictions. But they captured political dynamics whose importance was not sufficiently appreciated by those working out of more “top-down” paradigms like the stability of Arab authoritarianism authors. They capture elements of regional politics that others miss.

<sup>36</sup> Bayat. *Life as Politics*. pp. 24-25.

<sup>37</sup> Asef Bayat. *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007); see also chapters on this topic in his *Life as Politics*. A similar argument was made earlier by French scholar Olivier Roy. *The Failure of Political Islam*, translated by Carol Volk (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

<sup>38</sup> See, in particular, on Egypt, *Making Islam Democratic*, Ch.5, and more generally *Life as Politics*, Chs. 12 and 13.

## Conclusion

The literature on the stability of Arab authoritarianism missed the Winter of Arab discontent because the scholars working in that paradigm, myself included, were describing and explaining the past, and assuming that it would continue into the future. Explanation is as important for academics as prediction, and it fits better with our role. It is what we are good at. We did not assume that Arab regimes were popular or minimize the problems facing them. We just assumed that the survival strategies that had worked so well for four decades, which were being constantly updated by the authoritarian rulers, would continue to work. Because of that assumption, we did not investigate sufficiently the changing nature of ties between the regimes and the military/security establishments that had been their most important bases. We overestimated the success of strategies meant to deflect popular opinion (limited electoral openings) and build bases of support (neo-liberalism). We failed to appreciate the importance of new and not-so-new technologies for political mobilization in authoritarian regimes, and forgot that Arabs still see themselves as a political community, even if they are divided into different states.

Scholars of the Middle East working from other approaches appreciated many of these changes more accurately. However, it is hard to point to anyone in the scholarly community that predicted the upheavals of 2011 – their timing, their direction, their trans-border nature. If prediction is the test of social science, the scholarly community on Middle East politics failed. That is a very exacting standard to hold scholars to, particularly when the Arab autocrats themselves, who had the most at stake in the issue, also failed to predict it.

What the academic community can do now is to take the events of 2011 (which are hardly over) and go back to our theories, examining what we missed and what we under appreciated. The different ways the Arab militaries have reacted to the popular mobilizations against the rulers call for a new concentration by the academic community on the military's role in Arab politics. The subject begs for more research, for both academic and policy reasons. Similarly, we know that the new media were important in mobilizing protest in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere. We just do not know how important. That remains to be seen, and should be the subject of new research. Future research also will be necessary to ascertain just how vehicles, such as the images carried by *Al-Jazeera* and the other Arabic-language networks, both constituted and conveyed a sense of Arabness that facilitated the mobilization of dissent in 2011, and permitted the contagion effect of unrest to spread across the region. And, given the interest in Washington to encourage democratic development in the wake of the upheavals of 2011, a crash effort is called for in the policy and academic communities to assess just what has worked in the past (and what “worked” means) in terms of Western democracy-promotion efforts, and how might new policy initiatives effectively deal with the new Arab circumstances. Through doing honest evaluations of what we got wrong and why, academics can begin again the task of explanation that leads to understanding.

