THE ROOTS AND CAUSES OF THE 2011 ARAB UPRISINGS

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Abstract: This research article attempts to scrutinize the nature and causes of the Arab uprisings which took people by surprise globally throughout 2011 and into 2012. The article argues that the repressive, violent nature of the Arab regimes and their suppression of individual liberties against a backdrop of ongoing corruption and deterioration of the economy have been among the major factors leading to the Arab revolts. In addition, the article attempts to answer the query: why were the two repressive regimes of Tunisia and Egypt so quick to come undone, whereas dismantling the Libyan regime took much longer? Finally, the article tries to develop a causation analysis as to why the Arab regimes of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, the Sultanate of Oman, and Sudan have not faced major political protest.

Keywords: Arab uprisings, security apparatus, liberal democracy, NATO, Muslim Brotherhood, protests

Nature and Character of the 2011 Arab Uprisings

The Arab uprisings represent a revolutionary wave of demonstrations and protests that swept the Arab world. The Uprisings were sparked by the first protests that occurred in Tunisia on December 18, 2010 following Mohammed Bouazizi’s self-immolation in protest of police corruption and ill-treatment. Within a year, this wave left major changes in its wake: revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt that culminated in the downfall of these two regimes; a civil war in Libya resulting in the fall of its regime; civil uprisings in Syria and Yemen; major protests in Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco, Algeria, Oman, Iraq, and minor protests in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan. In all of these Arab countries, the protests have taken the form of sustained campaigns involving thousands of ordinary citizens using the same techniques of civil resistance: strikes, demonstrations, marches and rallies. Particularly pivotal to the protest process as well has been the use of social media to organize, communicate, raise awareness, and issue danger alerts among the thousands of protestors in the face of state attempts at repression, internet censorship, crowd control, and even physical attack to the point of protestors being beaten or shot point blank. Many of the demonstrations in the Arab Spring have met violent responses from authorities, as well as from pro-government militias and counter-demonstrators.

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A major slogan of the demonstrators in these uprisings has been *Ash-sha’b yurid isqat an-nizam*: “The people want to bring down the regime.” With the success of protests in Tunisia, a wave of unrest struck Algeria, Jordan, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and then spread to other countries. The largest, most organized demonstrations occurred on appointed “days of rage,” most commonly on Fridays, following afternoon prayers.5

By October 2011, the Arab uprisings which had begun eleven months earlier in Tunisia had resulted in the dramatic overthrow of three heads of state. After 24 years in power, Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia on January 14 following revolutionary protests.6 In Egypt, President Hosni Mubarak resigned7 on February 11, 2011 after 18 days of massive protests, ending his 30-year presidency. Long-standing Libyan leader Muammar al-Gaddafi was killed on October 20, 2011 after his last stronghold, Serrt was stormed by the National Transitional Council’s army.8

During this period of regional unrest several leaders dealt with demands that they depart by initially announcing their willingness to step down, not immediately, but at the end of their current term. Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir announced that he would not seek re-election in 2015,9 as did Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, whose term ends in 2014,10 although there have been increasingly violent demonstrations demanding the latter’s immediate resignation. Protests in Jordan have also caused the resignation of the government resulting in Aoun Al-Kasawneh being appointed prime minister and tasked with forming a new government by King Abdullah.11 Another leader, President Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen, announced on April 23, 2011 that he would step down in exchange for immunity, a deal the Yemeni opposition informally accepted on April 26. Saleh then reneged on the deal, prolonging the Yemeni uprising.12 The geopolitical implications of these prolonged protests have drawn global attention, including the historical decision to name the young Yemeni woman protestor Tawakkul Karman as a winner of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize.13

Extensive debate has evolved around the nature and character of the 2011 Arab uprisings. In an article entitled “The Arab Revolutions of 2011 are more like Europe in 1848 not 1989,” Anne Applebaum argues that the Arab uprisings of 2011 are reminiscent of the European revolutions of 1848—complicated and messy.14 She refers to a paragraph from the introduction to a book on the European revolutions of 1848:

“Each revolution must be assessed in its own context, each had a distinctive impact. The revolutions spread from one point to another. The drama of each revolution unfolded separately. Each had its own heroes, its own crisis. Each therefore demands its own narrative.”15
She further comments that the above could be the first paragraph from a future history of the Arab revolutions of 2011. She asserts that during the whole of January and February of 2011 several observers—including herself—have drawn parallels between the crowds in Tunis, Benghazi, Tripoli and Cairo and the crowds in Prague and Berlin two decades ago. But there is one major difference. She points out that the street revolutions which ended communism reflected similar patterns because they followed in the wake of a single political event: the abrupt withdrawal of Soviet support for the local dictator. The Arab revolutions, by contrast, she argues, are the product of multiple changes—economic, technological, demographic—and have already taken on a distinctly different flavor and meaning in each country. In that sense, they resemble 1848 far more than 1989.

Anne Applebaum concludes that though inspired very generally by the ideas of liberal nationalism and democracy, the mostly middle-class demonstrators of 1848 had, like their Arab counterparts, very different goals in different countries. For example, in Hungary they demanded independence from Hapsburg Austria. In what is now Germany, they aimed to unify the German-speaking people into a single state. In France, they wanted to overthrow the monarchy.

Mohammed Farazmand’s article entitled “The Nature of 2011 Arab Uprisings: A Comparative Analysis” offers another perspective on the recent Arab uprisings. The article examines the 2011 developments and uprisings in the Arab world in light of the increased power of Arab public opinion and the change in attitude of the masses from silent and fear-based resistance to vocal and active demands via demonstrations. In particular, this article assesses the reasons for the lack of democracy among the Arabs, differences between the respective uprisings, and protests movements over the past decade. The main argument of the article is that the change in political behavior of the Arab youth and new political elites is a result of the change in their political outlook and the redefinition of “the self and the other” in their relationship with domestic rulers and foreign powers. Using an epistemological approach, the article portrays the character of the new uprisings, arguing that they differ from other uprisings in contemporary history in their form, content, and the nature of people’s demands. In this context, Arab nationalism and Salafist Islamism, which promote transnational ideals, according to the author, are sinking below the horizon of the new uprisings. Instead, a new Arab political identity with an anti-despotic, pluralist and democracy-seeking approach is dawning.

Roots and Causes of the Arab Uprisings

There is a consensus among political analysts regarding the cocktail of major factors that, when combined, created the social explosion known as the 2011 Arab uprisings. The lethal mix of factors boils down to economic deterioration and government
corruption coupled with the repressive and violent nature of the Arab regimes and the suppression of individual liberties.¹⁹

Financial pressures top every list of catalysts and causes of the Arab Spring, especially when corruption at the hands of the ruling and social elite is added. Since the mid-1980s, the majority of the Arab economies have been exposed to tremendous pressure from international financial institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank to reform their economies based on an economic liberalization program widely known as the “Structural Adjustment Program (SAP).”²⁰ Due to the adoption of that program, government subsidies of basic essential commodities were cancelled, government jobs were substantially reduced, and taxation on consumption was increased for citizens while local and foreign investors were granted custom and taxation exemption.²¹ These trends culminated in the economic impoverishment of the majority of the people, a fact dramatically illustrated in the staggering rise in food prices in the Arab region as well as high rates of unemployment, especially among the youth below age 25 who represent approximately 65 percent of the total population of the Arab world. This is in stark contrast to the ongoing enrichment of the ruling elites who, through corruption, managed to amass an enormous amount of wealth. It is obvious that the extremely poor, frustrated, and numerous youth would eventually rebel against the extremely rich, corrupt, and few ruling elite. Thus, the Structural Adjustment Program imposed on the region by the World Bank and the IMF resulted in a sharp divide between the “haves” and “have-nots” in the Arab world, creating a recipe not for economic reform as intended, but for all-out revolution.

The repressive and violent nature of the Arab regimes also ranks high on the list of major factors culminating in the 2011 Arab uprisings. Most of the Arab regimes, with the exception of a few, are classified as highly authoritarian systems in which political power is monopolized by the few rather than shared by the many. The consensus is that, furthermore, these regimes routinely use all instruments of physical violence to remain in power.²² If the situation dictates that they need to kill their people to preserve their position, they do not hesitate to do so. These Arab regimes generally exploit declared states of emergency and laws which purport to fight terrorism to justify their major crimes against their own citizens, including abduction, involuntary disappearances, unwarranted arrest, torture and unfair trials, and even unlawful killings. In addition, most of these regimes have adopted policies that consolidate absolute rule, pave the way for succession within the family framework, and secure in a systematic way economic and social discrimination as well as political exclusion along ethnic and sectarian lines.

Finally, massive violations of human rights have also been a factor provoking the Arab popular uprisings.²³ Basic and fundamental individual liberties like freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom of organization, and freedom of
association have been totally confiscated by the majority of Arab regimes, even those which enjoy a degree of political stability. These regimes have in particular dominated and monopolized mass-media communication and allowed no individual or group to reflect views opposing those of the government. Journalists, human rights activists, politicians and trade unionists are routinely harassed by State authorities, tried on the basis of false accusations, put under constant surveillance, blackmailed, and sometimes exposed to physical abuse. Journalists in particular, after being subjected to unfair trial, have been sentenced to lengthy imprisonment in addition to loss of their jobs. This harassment of journalists has been particularly vicious under the authoritarian regimes of Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Morocco, Bahrain and Yemen.

Some political analysts, while acknowledging the above factors as prime movers of the Arab uprisings, have analyzed them from a comparative perspective. Such analysts differentiate between what they call “structural factors”: long term root causes leading to the uprisings, and other “spontaneous and direct factors” which have triggered the sudden, on the spot organization of protest. Long-term, embedded structural factors leading to the Arab Spring comprise corruption, State repression, denial of political freedoms, the failure of the traditional powers to accommodate and recognize new youth movements, the development of gaps between the various regions inside one country, the domination of economic resources by the few through the alliance of State authority and the capital of powerful private individuals, and the spread of poverty and unemployment among massive swathes of the population. These structural factors have contributed to the erosion of Arab political systems and rendered them ripe for disintegration. On the other hand, the spontaneous factors which acted as catalysts sparking the uprisings on the spot were Mohammed Bouazizi’s self-immolation in Tunisia, the torture of Khaled Said in Egypt, and the arrest of the political activist, Fathi Terbel in Libya. According to current consensus among political analysts, the mix of the long term structural factors listed above set ablaze by the spontaneous sparks arising in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya to create the waves of outrage which fueled the Arab uprisings. Combined, these long-term and spontaneous factors are viewed as the roots and causes of the Arab Spring.

A third group of political analysts likewise acknowledge the above-listed political and economic structural and spontaneous factors as root causes of the Arab uprisings. However, they argue that there are other additional factors. One such analyst, the prominent American writer Thomas Friedman, argued intriguingly in an article published in the New York Times entitled, “It is just the beginning” that the election of the first black American president, Barack Obama, as well as the resignation of the former Israeli prime minister, Ehud Olmert on allegations of corruption are also among the major factors that led to the popular uprisings in the Arab world. Friedman states that when the American president Barack Obama visited Egypt in 2009 to deliver a speech to the Egyptian nation, the Egyptian youth realized
the ideological gulf that separated them from the Western world where liberal democracy could facilitate the election of a black man to lead the most powerful nation on earth—one with a history of racism against blacks. Frustrated young Egyptians compared this state of affairs to their own: the powerless but populous youth of Egypt were utterly unable to influence the decision-making mechanism of their country, let alone join the elite circles in positions of leadership. On top of that they were shouldering unbearable economic misery.

In his Arab Spring factor analysis, Friedman also highlighted the resignation of the former Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert following allegations of corruption leading to a lawsuit against him. According to Friedman, this caused alienation among the Egyptian youth who drew a disturbing comparison between the Israeli democratic system which punishes severely corrupt politicians, and the Egyptian authoritarian political system which failed to enforce any restrictions on corrupt politicians. According to Friedman, this realization outraged the Egyptian youth and ignited their demand for regime change.

Friedman’s analysis can be perceived as an oversimplification which is naive and shallow, perhaps born of unfamiliarity with the Arab world. The election of Barack Obama would not be categorized as one of the major factors that inspired the Egyptian youth to rebel against their regime. This political event could, however, be cited as a tangential factor agitating a minority of the youth. As regards the resignation of the former Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert, this is totally dismissed as a major factor pushing the Egyptian youth to revolt. The Arab people would not forget the vicious attacks sanctioned by Olmert on the Gaza strip in 2008 in which thousands of Palestinians perished. A person who has committed this atrocity against Arabs would hardly serve as an inspiration for Arabs, categorically.

**Speed of Arab Regime Collapse**

In this section of the article our major objective is to explain why the two repressive regimes of Tunisia and Egypt were dismantled quickly, whereas it took a long time to uproot the regime in Libya. In addition, we examine why the popular uprising is facing stiff resistance from the regimes in Syria and Yemen. Finally, we turn our attention to the fact that the regimes in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman, and Sudan have not faced major popular protests and attempt to analyze why.

**The role played by the army in dismantling the two repressive regimes of Tunisia and Egypt**

The military institution played a vital role in the success of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions when it recognized the legitimate political rights of the demonstrators,
thereby endorsing their demands. At the same time, the military systems of these two countries disassociated themselves from the brutal killings committed by the police and security forces, hence denying the support needed by the two regimes in their effort to quell the demonstrations. These actions by the military facilitated the immediate collapse of the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes.²⁵

Ultimately the question is raised as to why the armies of Egypt and Tunisia backed the demands for change in the first place. It is generally observed that the majority of Arab rulers acknowledged the historical role played by the army in building the nation-state after independence and apparently sensed the potential danger of military power to their regimes. Subsequently these rulers, in particular Hosni Mubarak and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, adopted policies aimed at the marginalization and neutralization of the army, demonstrated for example by granting the latter enormous economic and financial concessions. At the same time these State leaders developed a highly complex and sophisticated security system under the leadership of highly ranked officers whose mission was to protect the regime, not the State. This security apparatus accomplished its mission of gathering intelligence and protecting the regime by putting all citizens under constant surveillance. This security apparatus employed large numbers of personnel. For instance, in Egypt members of the security apparatus outnumbered the army three to one: 1.5 million agents in comparison to 500,000 soldiers. This security force dominated the political scene, for on behalf of the regime it was entrusted with the mission of negotiating with striking workers, the unemployed, and even with the demonstrators who were calling for guaranteed housing or the right to own the plots they tilled. In these ways, the security apparatus functioned as the protection force for the State leaders.

Subsequently the Tunisian army was so frustrated due to the policy of marginalization and neutralization pursued by former president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali against the army in favor of the other branches of the security apparatus.²⁶ It was stated that since he came to power in 1987, Zine El Abidine substantially reduced both army personnel and resources in addition to purging a great number of its leaders. Furthermore, the death of several senior army officers including army General Abdel Aziz Sikik in the 2002 explosion of an army helicopter led to an uptick in animosity and friction between the military establishment and the Gortage presidential palace. This ongoing ill will between the Tunisian military and the former president explains why the army took the brave step of allying with the revolutionary forces and, in particular, why it ordered its troops to besiege Gortage presidential palace. The siege of the palace eventually forced former president Zine El Abidine to abdicate and leave the country.

In contrast to the Tunisian army which was screened from having any impact on the political decision-making mechanism going back as far as the period of president Borgeba (1957-87), we find that the Egyptian army has been closely
associated with political power since the 1952 revolution; all the presidents who ruled Egypt from that year onwards were the offspring of the military establishment. Two unique features of the Egyptian army affect its power vis-à-vis the government and society. First, the role of the army in civil life is not constitutionally or legally stipulated. Second, the Egyptian army is not based on a particular ideology. In fact, it has its own national culture. In addition to this it is neither a partisan force nor a class-formation party; both the leadership and the recruits are drawn from all strata of Egyptian society.

In the mid-1950s, following the dissolution of the High Military Revolutionary Council in July 1952 and the engagement of the Council’s members in civil life, the Egyptian army played a major political role in different ways ranging from governing the entire country initially to later sharing power with civilians. However, defeat in the June 1967 war made it possible for the political leadership to exploit a chance to reframe the military-civilian relationship as a result of which the army would withdraw from politics and focus on its main job: defending the nation. On that basis the army was subjugated to the civilian leadership, and the military background of the country’s president facilitated the smooth decoupling of the army and national politics; during this period the army’s motto was “refrain from politics.” However, if the military sensed that there was a menace to national security it would still step in at the request of State leadership. The case of the 1977 political unrest illustrates this point.

In the ten years prior to the Egyptian revolution of 2011, significant friction developed between President Mubarak and the military establishment. The army blamed President Mubarak for not appointing a vice-president. It was generally suspected that President Mubarak was adopting measures to secure the succession of his son, Jamal, to the executive office. The army questioned the legitimacy of that policy since the succession of Jamal Mubarak as president would deprive the military of its role as president-maker. The army was furthermore outraged because President Mubarak had paved the way for a small clique of businessmen to dominate and control the whole economy. This build-up of impatience and exasperation in army circles with the performance of the president explains the reason why, in the last 24 hours of Mubarak’s rule on February 10 and 11, 2011, the military facilitated the movement of the demonstrators to the parliament building and the republican palace, the siege of these locations, and the subsequent collapse of the regime.

Resistance to the popular uprising from the regimes in Libya and Yemen

In Libya and Yemen the popular uprising faced stiff opposition from the ruling regimes. This resulted in a more protracted confrontation between the government and the protesting masses, unlike the rapid-fire dismantling of the regimes which took place in Tunisia and Egypt. In Libya, Muammar al-Gaddafi was killed and
his regime disintegrated in October 2011, but it took about nine months to realize that objective. A number of combined factors explain why the Gaddafi forces were able to survive for a longer period despite massive air attacks by NATO forces targeting the regime’s military and administrative infrastructure over the last eight months of Gaddafi’s rule (March-October 2011), as well as simultaneous attacks orchestrated by the Libyan rebels.

The first factor allowing the Libyan regime to resist revolution longer was the superior military striking capability of the Gaddafi forces, mainly dominated and controlled by Gaddafi’s family and the members of his tribe, as well as their higher fighting abilities. This military prowess is illustrated in a comment by the commander of NATO’s campaign in Libya, Lt. General Ralph J. Jodice: “...Gaddafi loyalist troops have successfully sustained command-and-control and supply lines in staunch defense of the cities, despite a NATO air campaign that is now in its seventh month and a multi-pronged ground assault in Sur by anti-Gaddafi fighters... It has really been quite interesting how resilient and fierce they have been... We are all surprised by the tenacity of the Gaddafi forces. At this point, they might not see a way out.”

The second factor which slowed down the march of regime change in Libya is related to the fear engendered by the viciousness and brutality of the Gaddafi regime and the intelligence techniques used to intimidate ordinary citizens. Furthermore, the regime devised tricks which allowed it to infiltrate rebel lines. For instance, the regime directed some of its supporters to contact rebel forces to sell them armaments. After gaining their confidence, the position of the rebel forces would be located and later bombarded. Moreover, in an attempt to disperse opposition elements and stymie communication and co-ordination between them, the Libyan regime set about isolating the various regions of the country from each other.

In another crucial strategy, Gaddafi recruited African mercenaries to defend his regime. These mercenaries attacked Libyan citizens and committed countless atrocities. Israeli media sources have disclosed that an Israeli security corporation, authorized by the Israeli government, dispatched African mercenaries to Libya to fight the Libyan rebels. According to these sources, the State of Israel perceived the Libyan revolution from a strategic security perspective and believed that the downfall of the Gaddafi regime would open the door for an Islamic regime in Libya. If this were to happen, Israeli officials reasoned, Libya could serve as a strategic base for the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Egypt, Jordan, and Sudan. The same sources also revealed that the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Defense Minister Ehud Barak, and Foreign Minister A. Liberman in a security meeting on February 18, 2011 made the strategic decision to hire African mercenaries to defend the Gaddafi regime. This meeting endorsed the report of Israeli General Yasrael Zif, director of security consultation corporation Global CST, which administered
numerous operations in African countries. Global CST requested the deployment of African mercenaries to Libya. They were to be drawn from Guinea, Nigeria, Chad, Central African Republic, Mali, Senegal and the rebel forces in Darfur (Western Sudan), transported to Libya, placed under the command of Libyan Intelligence Director Abdullah Al Sanosi. According to the same sources, the number of mercenaries recruited was approximately 50,000, and all were well-equipped with modern, sophisticated armaments manufactured in the USA, Russia, Britain, and Israel. These mercenaries were well-trained, especially for combat in civil wars. According to a contract allegedly drawn up, the Libyan regime would pay US$5 billion to an Israeli security corporation, with the stipulation that this amount would increase if the mercenaries proved their effectiveness in fighting. The involvement of these mercenaries is thus another major reason why the Libyan regime forestalled defeat for a period of months.

Furthermore, it has been argued that Libya is a tribal society, and not all or even the majority of the tribes supported the Libyan revolution in the first place.36 It has been acknowledged that many tribes instead supported Gaddafi because they had common interests or because of blood relationships due to intermarriage. These pro-Gaddafi tribes were equipped with very sophisticated armaments and were able to drag out the revolution into an armed conflict that persisted for months.

Finally, it has been asserted that the lack of military experience among the Libyan rebels combined with their lack of effective armaments also played a major role in the protraction of the armed conflict. The rebel forces were in fact predominantly university students with no fighting experience, and this naturally slowed down the effort to unseat the regime. Some of the rebels were accused of being closely associated with radical Islamic groups,37 and due to these suspicions, Western countries, namely the USA, Britain, and France, were reluctant to provide them with sophisticated armaments. Had the rebels been trained and armed, they would likely have succeeded in toppling Gaddafi sooner.

As regards Yemen, the popular uprising burst onto the scene the very day after the collapse of the Egyptian regime (February 12, 2011). Even though it had all the means to achieve quick success, the Yemeni uprising wasn't able to bring down Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime quickly.38 According to Yemeni political analyst Dr. Amar Ali Hassan, "The rebels in Yemen have enjoyed from the beginning the element of free movement and mobilization and their protests were not violently confronted. However, when the regime became impatient and started to use violence against protestors, this led to divisions within its ranks much apparent in the defection and resignation of some of its leaders as well as the joining of defectors from the Yemeni army divisions in the revolution..."39 Dr. Hassan has attributed the inability of the Yemeni revolution to achieve quick success to a number of other factors as well, from which he mentioned the failure of the rebels to develop their revolution; they
limited their occupation to the capital center square and never marched towards the presidential palace. Adding to this, Dr. Hassan highlighted the fact that the rebels in Yemen entrusted the opposition political parties with the business of negotiating with the government. This was exploited by President Ali Abdullah Saleh who played for time by creating divisions within the opposition elements while simultaneously recruiting supporters who took to the street calling for the continuity of his regime. Hence the Yemeni street was divided between those who called for the downfall of the regime and those who wished to preserve it. A stalemate situation ensued between the two groups, dragging out the uprising for months.

Apart from the factors enumerated above by Dr. Amar Hassan, there are additional reasons that made it difficult for the Yemeni revolution to achieve its objectives quickly. These are referred to by Dr. Gihad Uda, professor of International Relations in Halwan University, Egypt, who states that the Yemeni regime benefited from the mistakes committed by the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes prior to their downfall. As a result, the Yemeni regime adopted bluffing and maneuvering techniques which they were able to deploy with the opposition. At the same time, the regime capitalized on the inability of the Yemeni people to continue their protest for long because of their poverty. Bluffing and maneuvering by the Yemeni regime succeeded in creating divisions among the protestors. Even though the regime did not ultimately succeed in its attempts to outmaneuver the opposition, Dr. Gihad argues, it did succeed in gaining time.

Dr. Gihad also points out that the international community did not put undue pressure on the Yemeni regime to concede to the demands of the protestors, and that, on the contrary, the international community was actually supporting the regime. This was due to their fear of creating a political vacuum in which Al-Qaeda, which has a strong presence in Yemen, would expand and dominate the political scene in a way that would threaten the interests of the Americans as well as the Europeans. Moreover, Dr. Gihad maintains, Yemen represents a country of great strategic importance to Western powers, who put their own interests first, ahead of the needs of the Yemeni protestors, in their reaction to the Yemeni uprising. And it was in their interest for the regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh to continue. The international community thus did not support the Yemeni protestors, and without such foreign assistance the Yemeni uprising could not unseat Ali Abdullah Saleh overnight.

With a different perspective on Yemen, Dr. Farouq Abdel Hamid, professor of political science in the College of Economics and Political Science at Cairo University in Egypt, believes that the intervention in the Yemeni affair by the Gulf Cooperation Council countries was another factor contributing to the continuity of Ali Abdullah Saleh’s regime. In the view of Dr. Farouq, the Arab Gulf countries had a vested interest in preserving Saleh’s regime: they wished to stem the spillover of the Yemeni revolution to the rest of the Arabian Peninsula. Dr. Farouq further
points out that the domination and control of the army and security apparatus by Salih’s family was an additional factor which helped the regime resist disintegration.

Arab Countries Immune to Major Protests: Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Sudan

Some Arab regimes have not witnessed major protests. These include the five Arab Gulf regimes of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Oman as well as the African country, Sudan. The five Arab Gulf countries in particular, each with its own unique political system, and each with enormous wealth, have so far been immune to significant popular uprising. The following is a brief discussion of the major characteristic features of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Sudan by way of examples.

Kuwait

This small maritime emirate located at the northern point of the Arabian Gulf has its own political uniqueness among Gulf countries. Since its establishment in the middle of the eighteenth century (1750), the political system of Kuwait has been based on the concept of power-sharing and public consultations. The power was vested in an autocratic ruler who was selected from among members of the Al-Sabah family for superior personal qualities. The rulers of Kuwait never display signs of autocratic disposition, and their powers are balanced by the influence of the heads of leading families, called sheikhs. After Kuwait gained its independence from Britain in 1961, the Amir, Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salim, called for the election of a constituent assembly to draft a constitution and to act as a temporary parliament for the emirate. Subsequently, a draft constitution was promulgated in November 1962 by the Amir.

The democratic nature of the Kuwaiti constitution is apparent in articles 36, 37, 43, 44, and 45 (chapter three) which guarantee the enjoyment of basic fundamental liberties including freedom of speech, press freedom, and freedom to organize and associate. These individual liberties have been well-preserved and there has been no attempt on the part of the regime to confiscate them. This explains why, when the Kuwaiti press published harsh criticism against the government, the latter did not undertake any reprisals. Kuwait’s political groups also have the right to organize their own rallies and demonstrate against the government. Furthermore, economic interest groups, such as the Kuwait Oil Industry Workers Trade Union, are free to engage in industrial action that might culminate in strike. Since 1963, following ratification of the constitution, the Kuwaiti people have continued to enjoy these individual liberties, and there has been no attempt on the part of the government to encroach upon these rights. This is in contrast to the majority of
Arab regimes—with the exception of Lebanon and Sudan—which have denied these individual liberties.

The Kuwait National Assembly has been dissolved seven times in its political history: twice prior to the Iraqi invasion in the years 1976 and 1986, and five times after the invasion in 1999, 2006, 2008, 2009 and 2011.

The friction, conflict and confrontation between the Kuwaiti parliament and the cabinet are viewed as inevitable developments in a country undergoing the process of democratic transformation. Hence, the massive demonstration by parliamentarians in front of the National Assembly building and their later action storming the building are seen as a natural outcome of the exercise of the individual liberties stipulated in the constitution. During these demonstrations the protestors never chanted the traditional Arab Spring slogan “the people want to bring down the regime.” They called instead for the resignation of the prime minister. This political action is not new to Kuwaiti citizens. They have had the freedom to pursue such political action since the ratification of the constitution in 1963. Thus, political analysts contend that Kuwait is not much affected by the Arab Spring and so far appears to have immunity against the outrage which swept Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and other points in the Arab region aiming for regime change.

**Saudi Arabia**

The Saudi political system, unlike its counterpart in Kuwait, has been characterized by centralization of political power and authority as well as autocracy.47

King Abdel Aziz Ibn Saud, established a State in 1932 under the name of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that represented a turning-point in the history of the region since it reunified most of the Arabian Peninsula, in addition to achieving unprecedented economic development. The political system became predominantly an absolute monarchy wherein the Koran served as the constitution of the country and Sharia law represented the only source of legislation. Article 1 of the constitution states that “the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is an Arab Muslim State where Islam is the sole religion and its constitution is the Koran and the deeds of Prophet Mohammed.”48

In 1953, it was generally observed that the Saudi political system was heading towards centralization; the Council of Ministers was shouldering the responsibility of framing State policy as well as monitoring its execution. The Council of Ministers, usually headed by the King, is composed of two deputies and 20 ministers. In 1992 a Shura Council (consultative body) was instituted by royal decree and its approximately 150 members were all appointed by the King. According to this royal decree the role of this Council was and remains mainly advisory in matters of legislation, finance and national budget.

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Scrolling forward to modern times, Saudi Arabia, unlike Kuwait, has been seriously affected by the Arab uprisings, revolts, and revolutions which have swamped the Arab region throughout 2011 and into 2013. In Saudi Arabia hundreds of people protested on January 29, 2011 over the poor infrastructure in Jeddah following severe flooding. At the same time, an online campaign began calling for major political and economic changes, and protests continued. On February 5, 2011, forty women demonstrated for the release of prisoners held without trial. In late February and early March, several protests of a few hundred demonstrators each took place in the north-east of Saudi Arabia, mostly in the predominantly Shi’ite areas of Qatif, Hofuf, and al-Awamiyah, as well as in Riyadh. Security in the north-east was tightened on March 5, and a significant police presence in Riyadh and Jeddah prevented protests from occurring on March 11. A day earlier, three protestors had been injured by police gunfire in Qatif. Nonetheless, protests calling for the release of prisoners were staged outside the Ministry of Interior in Riyadh on March 12. Following the crackdown during the 2011 Bahrain uprising, frequent demonstrations of a few hundred to a few thousand people occurred in and around Qatif from 15 to 25 March, demanding the release of prisoners and the withdrawal of the Peninsula Shield Force from Bahrain.

On February 27, 2011, a group of Saudi intellectuals—about 123 in number—submitted a memorandum to King Abdullah via facebook, calling for immediate political reform of the Saudi political system whereby the absolute monarchy would be transformed into a constitutional monarchy. In this memorandum, entitled “A national gesture for political reform,” these Saudi intellectuals stated that there was unnecessary delay in executing the political reform which the Saudi monarch King Abdullah had promised to implement in 2003. The memorandum pointed to the uprisings and revolutions underway in the Arab world and urgently called for a drastic review of the political conditions in Saudi Arabia, seeking reform before it was too late. The intellectuals demanded basic political reforms which would incorporate the framing of a new constitution stipulating that power is vested in the people, and ensuring separation of power between the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government. The new constitution also called for the direct election of the Municipal and Regional Councils, as well as an Advisory Council. The preservation of civil, individual and legal rights of Saudi citizens, including the freedom of the press, expression, organization and association were enshrined in the new document. Women’s rights were also addressed, especially as regards education, ownership, work and political participation. The new constitution prohibited discrimination against citizens and the incrimination of any act based on sectarianism, tribalism or regionalism.

Meanwhile, a number of Saudi youth submitted their own memorandum to the government authorities asking for the endorsement of certain demands, some of
which dovetailed with those listed by the intellectuals. Concerns of the Saudi youth included the following:56

1. The adoption of drastic measures to contain the problem of unemployment through the creation of new jobs for all youth—both males and females—in all fields of specialization, with adequate salaries as well as housing and medical care.

2. The eradication of the poverty from which a significant sector of the Saudi society ironically suffered in a country recognized as one of the richest oil-producing nations in the world.

3. The establishment of serious measures to subsidize prices of basic commodities, such as meat, sugar, flour, water, electricity, gas, and cooking oil, as well as the reduction in the price of building materials, rent, and real estate.

4. The curtailment of all forms of corruption—whether financial or administrative—and the prosecution in court of implicated parties; the enforcement of transparency, supervision, and accountability in dealing with public funds; the equitable distribution of national wealth among the people in a manner promoting social justice.

5. The inculcation of all forms of nepotism as well as regional, sectarian, and tribal discrimination, especially as regards the distribution of national wealth.

6. The cessation of all forms of discrimination against women and the guarantee of their full political, economic, social and cultural rights, as well as their right to represent themselves legally without any form of sponsorship. The guarantee of proper education for women in all fields and the facilitation of their employment in both the government and the private sector.

7. The abolishment of the religious organization known as the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, accused of being too strict in the application of certain Islamic behavioral codes. (From the perspective of the Saudi youth, this religious organization has been responsible for creating an atmosphere of terror, fear, outrage and violence from within Saudi society over the last two decades.)

The Saudi monarch, King Abdullah, demonstrated flexibility in his reaction to the requests of both the Saudi intellectuals and the Saudi youth. He stated in an address to the Saudi people, “If the Arab rulers did not listen carefully to the voice of their youth as well as respond positively to their demands, this would lead to anarchy and turmoil.”57 Eventually he offered a package of reforms which incorporated the following:

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1. The allocation of 110 billion Saudi riyals (about US$29 billion) to aid the unemployed.
2. The approval of 25,000 loans for the construction of 30,000 housing units at a cost of 75 billion Saudi riyals (about US$2 billion).
3. A 15 percent increase in salaries of government officials.
4. The establishment of a corruption bureau to fight the embezzlement of public funds.
5. The organization of elections for municipal councils nationwide.

The Saudi monarchy's implementation of the above socio-economic and political reform measures reduced substantially the magnitude of political turmoil in the nation; in the wake of their announcement, the number of protests in the Kingdom decreased significantly. It is interesting to note that the majority of these protests took place in the eastern region of Saudi Arabia, a predominately Shi’ite Muslim area. This means that the majority of the protestors were Shi’ites calling for internal reform as well as support of the Shi’ite uprising in neighboring Bahrain. Furthermore, the religious establishment played a crucial role in discouraging participation in these protests, admonishing the people in Friday prayer not to join the protestors because it is considered a major sin to stand against wali al-umr (the ruler), from an Islamic point of view. This explains why the majority of the Saudi people, who are Sunnis, were never associated with these demonstrations.

Some Saudi scholars assert that the Saudi monarch King Abdullah has instituted significant reforms over the past six years, a fact illustrated by the enactment of laws pertaining to the judiciary, politics, economics, the curbing of corruption and the encouragement of dialogue and human rights. One of these scholars, Dr. Bander Ibn Mohammed Al-Iban, the Chairman of the Human Rights Commission, has stated that these reforms are consistent with the needs of Saudi society and have achieved enormous success in meeting the requirements of the people. At the same time, he asserts, the new measures conserve the basic fundamentals of Saudi society.

Indeed, the Saudi regime has made great progress in the arenas of freedom of expression and women's rights. It has also generally been observed that there was a great improvement with regard to freedom of expression. This is apparent in the stern criticism launched by the Saudi press against the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. These criticisms forced this organization to adopt several measures aimed at curbing its excesses, especially the use of its authority to arrest and detain citizens on charges of unethical and immoral behavior. As regards women's rights, the Saudi monarch King Abdullah took a bold and brave initiative at the end of 2012 when he issued a royal decree by virtue of which Saudi women were granted the political rights of voting and standing as candidates in both the Municipal Council as well as the Advisory Council elections. These reforms have
apparently accommodated the wishes of the Saudi people, thereby safeguarding the Saudi regime from removal via popular uprising like the ones which raged against the regimes in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya.

**Sudan**

Sudan is an exceptional political case when analyzed from the perspective of the profound political changes now sweeping the Arab world. In the post-World War II era, Sudan was the first Arab country to ignite a popular revolution calling for liberal democracy. This happened twice: in 1964 and in 1985. Through a popular revolution in 1964, the Sudanese masses managed to dismantle the military autocracy of General Ibrahim Abboud and replace it with a Western-style parliamentary democracy. The same scenario was repeated two decades later in 1985 when a popular uprising succeeded in toppling the authoritarian military regime of General Gafar Nimeri. This illustrates the fact that the vocabularies of “revolution” and “popular uprising” are not new to the Sudanese people; they became well-acquainted with such concepts decades ago. This explains why the Sudanese people did not follow in the footsteps of the marching Arab masses in 2011 and into 2012. For despite the repeated pleas raised in January and February 2011 by opposition parties to organize major protests against the Sudanese government, the reaction of the people was negative; only a few hundred people responded.

A number of other compelling reasons have fueled the Sudanese people’s resistance to any attempts aimed at dismantling Al-Bashir’s regime, in the view of various political analysts. The first of these is related to the issue of national security. After the organization of a referendum in southern Sudan in January 2011 in which an overwhelming 98 percent of the people opted for separation, and hence the creation of a new State in July 2011, the Sudanese people became adamant about the idea of preserving the territorial integrity of what remained of their country. This explains reasons why the Sudanese government’s move to crush the rebellions instigated in southern Kordofan and the Blue Nile States during August-September 2011 received wider popular support throughout the country. The Sudanese people realized that if they responded positively to the request of the opposition parties to organize major protests and call for the dismantling of the regime, this would create anarchy and turmoil especially in areas which have witnessed rebellion in early 2012, such as southern Kordofan and the Blue Nile area. This chaotic state of affairs, if allowed to arise, could pave the way for the disintegration of the country. For that major reason, the people of Sudan opted for security and resisted any temptation to destabilize the government of Al-Bashir.

Secondly, political analysts assert that the Sudanese people are content with the political reforms which the Al-Bashir regime undertook for pre-emptive purposes to keep the sparks of the Arab Spring from igniting protest in Sudan. In an overview of

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Sudan’s political history, the Al-Bashir regime stands out as unique when compared with the two previous military autocracies of General Ibrahim Abboud and General Gafar Nimeri. In the decades prior to the outbreak of regional turbulence in 2011, the Al-Bashir regime had the foresight to experiment with political reforms of its own initiative, without any internal or external pressure to do so. Four years after seizing political power in 1989, the autocratic military regime of Sudan transformed in accordance with a military-civilian formula. Two years later in 1996 the regime became a limited democracy. A fully-fledged democracy was realized finally in 2005 after the signing of a comprehensive peace agreement between the Sudanese government and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement. In 2010, elections were organized both for the presidency and for parliament, and despite some criticism waged against them, these elections have been recognized as a crucial step toward further securing democracy for Sudan. About 60 percent of registered voters (16 million) cast their ballots. This has been taken as an indication that the Sudanese masses have rallied behind the package of political reform underway in the country.

However, the Sudanese government is currently facing a major economic challenge: it has forfeited its share of national oil revenue due to the separation of southern Sudan, and this amount is generally estimated to be US$4 billion. This represents about 36 percent of the national budget. As a result, the Sudanese government’s foreign currency reserves have been reduced substantially. In addition, the Sudanese pound has consequently lost most of its value vis-à-vis the US dollar, leading to soaring prices of commodities. These economic realities have contributed to a serious deterioration in the living conditions of the majority of the Sudanese in the past two years. If the Sudanese government fails to rectify this economic situation, major political protest will arise without doubt.

Conclusion

The 2011 Arab uprisings which swept the entire Arab region took people by surprise; for it had never been apprehended that such phenomena would take place. This in particular was the assertion of some Arab political analysts who had been arguing for quite some time that political stability and economic prosperity could only be promoted by autocratic authoritarian regimes. These political analysts strongly believed in the preponderant power of those authoritarian regimes and that no political forces should dare to challenge them. But such assertions proved to be wrong, as the Arab people and in particular the young took to the streets and demonstrated against these autocratic regimes. This is an indication that Arab citizens managed to overcome their fear vis-à-vis the repressive state and hence restore their dignity. This in turn has necessitated the reassessment of our political
methodology which for quite some time ignored and underestimated the role that could be played by the unorganized radical political movements in Arab societies.

In the preceding analysis we have shown how structural factors such as deteriorating economies, the uneven distribution of economic resources, the spread of poverty and unemployment, the repressive violent nature of the Arab regimes and corruption coupled with catalytic factors such as the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi (Tunisia) and the arrest and torture of Khaled Said in Egypt and Fathi Tirbal in Libya have been the major causes for the popular uprisings that swept the entire Arab region in 2011. In addition we have revealed how some Arab regimes—like Tunisia and Egypt—have immediately collapsed, while others have shown fierce resistance such as Libya and Yemen. Also we have developed a causation analysis as to why some Arab regimes like Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman Sultanate and Sudan have been relatively immune to popular uprisings. We have also pointed out that the Arab regimes of Jordan, Bahrain, Iraq, Morocco, Algeria and Lebanon, even though they have faced continuous major protests, have thus far survived. However the most illuminating and challenging question remains: what are the major impacts and direct consequences of these uprisings and revolutions? No doubt the Arab revolutions have inspired other nations around the world to follow the same motto; a fact much illustrated in the organization of popular protest against the wall-street capitalist economy in the USA as well as the massive demonstrations that swept many European countries—mainly Spain, Greece, Ireland, Britain, France and Belgium—due to the current European financial crisis. From a more regional point of view, the Arab revolutions have induced some Arab regimes to contemplate the idea of “political unity.” This is closely associated with monarchial regimes. At the summit conference of the Arab Gulf Cooperation Council countries (GCC) in Riyadh in December 2011, the Saudi monarch, King Abdalla Ibn Abdel Aziz proposed the idea of political unity among member countries. The conference invited the two remaining Arab monarchial regimes, Jordan and Morocco, to join the GCC. It seems the monarchial Arab regimes believe that only through strong political, military and economic union would they be able to preserve their political systems and hence evade an eminent collapse in the future.

The most major impact of the Arab revolutions is the organization of a viable, genuine democratic political system. The first step in that direction is the organization of fair and free elections. The three elections organized in the aftermath of these revolutions in Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt, have paved the way for a landslide victory of the Islamists. The high degree of coercion used by the former autocratic regimes against the Islamists—much illustrated in the arrest, detention, torture and long imprisonment—in addition to the higher organizational capabilities of this group have facilitated their domination of these elections. Earlier it was speculated
that, should the Arab autocratic regimes collapse, the Islamists would take over and that this would apparently culminate in religious tyranny, political turmoil and unrest and hence the undermining of Western countries' interests. But has that been the case so far? In fact, it seems that the Islamists have been very cautious in the way they orchestrate their policies after they assumed political power in these three countries. For instance they have called for the institution of a secular political system where all political groupings will be accommodated rather than the adoption of the Islamization program which could exclude other groups. As regards the thorny Arab Israeli issue, the Muslim Brothers in Egypt, in particular, have made it very clear that now they will honor the “Camp David Agreement” but later they will gauge the opinion of the Egyptian people through a referendum. The major challenge the Islamists will face is the current deteriorating economy. If they manage to pursue sound economic policies that lead to substantial improvement of living conditions, they are guaranteed to stay in office for some time.

Notes


15. Ibid.


17. Ibid.


24. “Arab revolutions: The immediate collapse of Arab regime,” http://www.siyassa.org.eg/Newscontent/12/116/1621/%D9%86%D9%84%D9%81%D8... 


32. “Why Gaddafi’s regime was able to survive much longer,” http://www.almushaidassiyasi.com/home/detail/NZUSMQ


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35. http://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D8%AB%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A9_17_%D9%81%D8%A8% D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%B1
38. See: Al-Shuraq (Qatar daily newspaper), March 26, 2011; Al-Nayan (United Arab Emirates daily newspaper), March 28, 2011.
45. See articles 36, 37, 43, 44, 45 (Chapter Three) of the Kuwait Constitution, issued on November 11, 1962.
47. Al-Qabas (Kuwaiti daily newspaper), December 1, 2011.
54. http://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%AA_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9_2011
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