

# Lessons Learnt

## Social Unrest in the Arab World: What did We Miss?



Timo Behr

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# Social Unrest in the Arab World:

What did We Miss?

**Report for the 'History of British Intelligence  
and Security' research project**

December 2012

**Timo Behr**



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# Background

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The 'Lessons Learnt' project was originally funded by a grant from King's College London. In May and June 2010 Robert Dover and Michael Goodman, with AHRC funding, ran a series of 5 policy seminars on *Lessons Learnt from the History of British Intelligence and Security*. These were held in partnership with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), the Cabinet Office, King's College London and The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI). Just under 180 people attended the seminar series in total, from both academia and government. The output from these has subsequently been published in a book called *Learning from the Secret Past: Cases in British Intelligence History* (Georgetown University Press, 2011). The rationale for this initiative and the current one have come from the 2004 Butler Report into the Iraq war (and the intelligence situation that contributed to it), which concluded that the historical lessons had been forgotten, and that a regular review process should be instigated.

## The Current Project

This current project aims to build upon the 2010 seminars, improving and developing the relationship between researchers and government via the production of research and briefing papers, and seminars held in Whitehall. The primary impact is on improving national security, achieved via academics contributing to the development of the government's analytical capability.

The project is split into two halves:

- Highlighting historical examples of good analysis.
- Improving understanding of regions of current interest.

Leading academics have been specially commissioned to produce research and briefing papers for a Whitehall audience. This publication series reproduces the reports.

### *Commissioned Research on the History of British Intelligence and Security*

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### Project Leads

Dr Robert Dover, Loughborough University

Dr Michael S. Goodman, King's College London

Dr Philip Pothen, Arts and Humanities Research Council



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## Executive Summary

The so-called 'Arab Spring' surprised academic and political analysts alike with the speed and turbulence of its upheaval. The Middle East North Africa (MENA) region, it is believed, had been characterized by political stability, and external actors have been surprised by the fragility of some regimes (Tunisia, Egypt) and the robustness of others (Libya, Syria, Iran). Months after the turmoil started, external observers are still left guessing about the spectrum and balance of political forces in the region (and, of course these grouping's political and social ambitions). Most forces have been long shed from public view by a "unifying" authoritarianism and are currently reinventing themselves. All of the country-specific upheavals can be said to be unique, but it is very possible to draw out the key indicators and triggers for this region wide developments, as well as the actors involved. By holding current developments against the light of the past, useful insights can be gained. This report aims to distill some of these insights in order to serve as food for thought and discussion for policy practitioners. With this goal in mind, the report focuses on three interrelated sets of questions.

1. How do the current uprisings compare to similar historical events? To what extent are we dealing with shared regional and/or country-specific factors?
2. What have been the approaches and predominant methodologies of public policy officials across Europe and the U.S.? On what assumptions have their approaches to domestic politics in MENA been based and how have these assumptions changed over time? As far as it is possible to judge, to what extent have their beliefs and regional outlooks matched reality?
3. What can be the lessons learnt of the MENA crisis for public policy professionals? Have certain factors been overlooked, underestimated or exaggerated, and if so, why?

The following report is divided in three parts:

### **1. Putting rebellions in their historical and regional context:**

This section has a concentric approach. The MENA crises is put in a larger historical context of revolutions and rebellions linked to nationalism, authoritarianism and repression, as well as in a more regional historical and political context. This section includes a short assessment of causes, triggers, developments and dominant political forces of important regional MENA popular uprisings of the past decades, including Egypt 1952, Iran 1979, Algeria 1988 and Iran 2009. It also touches upon the aftermaths of these crises, approached through several "divides": a religious divide (secular-nationalism vs. Islamic-internationalism), a generational divide, a socio-economic and an educational

divide. The current crises is dealt with in similar terms, distilling the role of new factors, such as perhaps technology and social media.

## **2. Public Policy practitioner assessments of and reactions to past and present crises:**

This section highlights and examines the approaches taken by some key Western countries towards the region – France, Britain, the U.S. and possibly Germany or Italy. What have the predominant approaches of these countries' governments been, have these been based on certain (biased) assumptions and how have policy objectives and suppositions changed over time? What regional political forces have been visible to public policy and security officials and which ones had been overlooked and why so? What role do these countries see for themselves in the region and how do they compare themselves with other external actors involved, including the U.S., France and, for example Turkey and Saudi Arabia?

## **3. Lessons learned**

In the concluding part of the report, the findings of part one and two are confronted and the strengths and weaknesses of certain policy assumptions assessed. The ultimate goal of this section is to identify factors that put countries or regimes at risk to popular revolts as well as to transmit ideas that can be useful to foreign policy practitioners when drawing up their country-risk analyses.

## **Series Editors' Notes**

Written in the spring of 2012, Dr Behr examined the assumptions behind western analyses of the Arab Spring. His analysis is still prescient in middle of 2012 (and will be for some time to come), with the continued political turmoil in Libya and the election of Dr Mursi as the first Muslim Brotherhood President of Egypt in June. His study highlights the role that assumptions and bias can play in the foundational analysis that supports foreign and security policy in the west. One of the valuable elements of this study is in illuminating the potential difficulties for policy-makers in identifying and assessing future potential political leaders in countries in transition. This seems to be particularly the case in countries transitioning from dictatorship to democracy, where opposition movements have been necessarily obscured from open view: working out what the agendas of these new actors are, and how they will interact with the west are key public policy concerns. Behr does not venture a golden bullet solution for the challenge of unpicking what is commonly known as 'bias' in the intelligence cycle, but does make some interesting assertions about how factors should be appropriated weighted by officials.

**Robert Dover & Michael S. Goodman**



# Introduction

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The events in the Arab world of the past year are often depicted as “revolutions” and judged to be “unprecedented” in a region for long characterized by a “robust authoritarianism”.<sup>1</sup> What we witness, many assume, is a fourth wave of democratization born out of popular demands for democracy and personal freedom. But no matter how hard global broadcasters, *Facebook* and *Twitter* try to make us believe the opposite, revolutionary uprisings rarely result in systemic political change. After all, to replace one political system by another usually requires a complete reordering of socio-economic relations. Revolutionary *attempts*, however, are scattered much more generously throughout history. Most of these remain incomplete and will either be squashed, or result in less significant surface changes without affecting the structures of political order.

A year from their ignition, with the dust settling and popular enthusiasm ebbing, the developments in the Arab world are revealing their communalities as well as their idiosyncratic differences. Gradually new and old divisions are emerging amongst the protesters, as they struggle to fill their broad demands for freedom, dignity and justice with political meaning and challenge the vestiges of the old regime. At the time of writing, many questions linger. Will western-style democracy and a civic state take root, as hoped for by liberal forces? Will Islamists use their new electoral strength in order to impose their own vision of an Islamic society? Or will, in the spirit of Tomaso de Lampedusa’s *Leopard*, everything change so everything remains the same?

Predicting social developments is – and will always remain – a thorny exercise. Most policy-makers and academics alike (authors included) were left surprised by the speed and intensity of events in North Africa and the Middle East. Should we judge them therefore as the “Black Swans” in the statistics, resign ourselves to the fact that social events are too complex to predict and conclude that no amount of money spent on intelligence could have predicted the recent unrest?<sup>2</sup> Perhaps. But the developments in

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Eva Bellin, “The robustness of authoritarianism in the Middle East: exceptionalism in comparative perspective”, *Comparative Politics* 36 (2), 2004, pp. 139-157

<sup>2</sup> Nassim Nicholas Taleb and Mark Blyth, “The black swan of Cairo: How suppressing volatility makes the world less predictable and more dangerous”, *Foreign Affairs*, 90 (3), 2011, pp. 32-39

the Arab world should most certainly provide a wake-up call to the research community and induce analysts to revisit some of their assumptions and methods of analysis.

Rigged elections, the absence of a free media, the lack of reliable data and the closed nature of Arab states have long obscured the political and social dynamics at play in the Arab world. Faced with seemingly disinterested and divided publics and powerful and confident national authorities, many analysts made the assumption that there were little prospects for domestic political change. Efforts to pierce the surface of formal political structures have largely focused on Islamist parties – which often were directly linked to the oppressive nature of regimes – and the grass-root loyalties they were able to build up in the shadow of corrupt and unreliable state authorities.<sup>3</sup> But by focusing on dominant political players, such as Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, analysts might easily miss the crucial importance of less obvious political actors and trends, such as the large Salafist movement or the growing frustration amongst urban middle class youth.

The central preoccupation of this paper is the question of how to explain and minimize these rather substantial blind spots in the analyses. In order to provide food for thought, the set-up is a broad one. The first section considers the historical drivers of unrest in the Middle East. The second section assesses the role of political actors and elites in fostering political change in the region. A third part will consider the assumptions, approaches and predominant methodologies western analysts have employed when analyzing political developments in the Arab world. In a fourth section, the paper will revisit the relevance of these approaches in light of the Arab Spring. Building on these different elements, the last section tries to answer the question of whether there can be “lessons learnt” from the ongoing MENA crisis for public policy professionals.

## I. The Uprisings in Historical Perspective

History can provide some useful insights and examples on why certain countries or regimes fall victim to popular unrest.<sup>4</sup> An historical overview can reveal those traditional forces and coalitions, certain elite struggles and important ethnic and religious divides that rigid dictatorial regimes have tried hard to restrain and control. History also serves as a useful reminder that social revolutions tend to develop a dynamic of their own and

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<sup>3</sup> See for example Lise Storm, “The persistence of authoritarianism as a source of radicalization in North Africa”, *International Affairs* 85 (5), 2009, pp. 997-1014. Or in the same volume, Jonathan Githens-Mazer, “The blowback of repression and the dynamics of North African radicalization,” pp. 1015-1030

<sup>4</sup> See for some introductory reading on theories and patterns of political revolutions Charles Tilly, *From mobilization to revolution*, Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1978 or Theda Skocpol, *States and social revolution*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1979

that they may end by “devouring their own children”. Finally, history inevitably moulds our own perception of current events through our reading of historical precedents. To name but two, our perceptions of events in Syria are still inevitably shaped by the Hama massacre of 1982 and all our thinking about political change in the Middle East has for long been biased by the way we have perceived the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

Even a cursory look at Arab history indicates that there is little precedent for the “robust authoritarianism” of recent decades. Instead, throughout history, the region has been a hotbed for ethnic, social and religious conflict. The violent overthrow of regimes and their replacement by new ruling elites has been a common theme throughout Arab history, with its dynamics first theorized by the fifteenth century Tunisian scholar Ibn Khaldun, the Arab equivalent of Niccolò Machiavelli. Khaldun identified a constant rotation of rural elites overthrowing urban elites across the Arab world. Gradually, these victorious nomadic rural groups would themselves become urbanized, decadent and corrupt, to be overthrown in turn by a new set of rural forces pushing to the center.<sup>5</sup>

A bit closer to our own times, the long twentieth century still shows an uninterrupted string of upheavals against central control. These initially took the form of anti-colonial struggles, as was for example the case in the Egyptian revolt of 1919, the Syrian revolt of 1925, the uprisings in the Cyrenaican province of Libya during Italian rule, the Moroccan Rif War of the 1920s and the Algerian revolt of the 1950s. These were followed by a chain of nationalist revolutions, including the 1952 Nasserist Revolution in Egypt, the 1958 Ba’athist one in Iraq and the 1969 revolutionary coup of Mu’ammer el-Qaddafi in Libya. Throughout, various ethnic-religious civil conflicts played out, such as the Kurdish rebellions in Iraq and Turkey and the civil strife in Lebanon and in Yemen. And with Islam being increasingly politicized, Islamic uprisings and revolutions became more frequent from the late 1970s onwards to include the Islamic uprising in Syria in 1978, the more successful one in Iran a year later, the 1980 Shia Uprising in Iraq as well as the Algerian civil war of the 1990s. Next to these politically and ideologically motivated revolts, bread riots have been a common occurrence, such as the ones in Egypt in 1977, in 1981 in Morocco and in 1988 in Algeria. While driven by socio-economic deficiencies, these riots often fed into the wider political dynamics. In sum, judging from a historical perspective, the most recent round of upheavals seem hardly a historical aberration.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, Frank Rosenthal, trans.; N.J. Dawood, ed., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967, Khaldun wrote about religion or a different social cohesive – the concept of *assabiyya* – as to form a solid mass to a successful overthrow of a ruler, followed by stages of complete control, leisure and optimal rule, a succumbing to decadence and lassitude, ending with a squandering of public wealth that breeds disloyalty and hatred.

When considering these various riots, coups and revolutionary uprisings in the Arab world throughout the 20th century, it is possible to identify some general trends that can be useful to our understanding of current developments in the Arab world.

First of all, the nature and composition of regimes matter. Closed, centralized and personalized regimes such as absolute monarchies and dictatorships tend to be inherently more vulnerable to concerted popular anger than decentralized and impersonal regimes with a broader social base. Similarly, regimes based on a single ethnic group or religious minority might be more likely to become the target of popular anger, but are also likely to prove more resilient and difficult to unseat. Despite these differences, different rulers such as Zine Abedine Ben Ali, Hosni Muhammed Mubarak and Mu'ammer el-Qaddafi all shared the same fate of the Shah of Iran, the Hashemites of Iraq, the Sanussi monarchy of Libya and even as King Louis XVI in 1789. This serves as a cogent reminder that when opposing a common foe, different factions are able to bundle their animosities without needing to have an upfront dialogue about "What's next?". The removal of a person, symbolizing a wider malaise, becomes the ultimate goal, with divisions most of the time only reemerging when this is effectuated.

Next to that, social revolutions are often the consequence of rapid social change. According to a standard definition by Theda Skocpol, revolutions are "rapid, basic transformations of a society's state and class structures [...] accompanied and in part carried through by class-based revolts from below."<sup>6</sup> Since modern times, urbanization, a rising middle class, a strong influx of foreign mores and fast economic growth have tended to create winners and losers, social dislocation and normative disturbances. Iraq in the 1950s witnessed a strong urbanization destabilizing the traditional family and clan life. A similar development struck Libya in the early 1960s after the discovery of oil in commercial quantities in 1958. Rapid urbanization in Baghdad, Tripoli, Benghazi, Cairo and many other urban centers led to dislocation and radicalization and provided a large new *Lumpenproletariat* to be exploited by the nationalist leaders of the time, the likes of Gamal abd-el Nasser, Abd-el Karim Qassim and Mu'ammer el-Qaddafi. Now, just as then, the resulting class conflict led to a significant change in political structures.

Furthermore, cultural and ideological trends have often played an important role in instigating upheavals. In Iran under the Shah, the rapid increase of *nouveaux riches* left an acute sense of relative deprivation among the rest of the middle-class as it did in Mubarak's Egypt and Ben Ali's Tunisia. Advances in education were not met with

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<sup>6</sup> Theda Skocpol, op cit., p. 4

employment opportunities and instead led to heightened frustration. The Iranian revolutionaries of 1979 were largely driven by students that had moved from small towns to large city universities or by those that originated from traditional lower middle-class backgrounds.<sup>7</sup> However, when they encountered little upward social mobility and a lack of jobs, these youngsters turned to the Islamic elites. Being barred from socio-economic advancement, these groups focused on the veneration of the moral and a search for a higher absolute truth.<sup>8</sup> Political Islam provided the ideological glue for their revolutions, just as Arab Nationalism had done during the preceding decades. From this perspective, monastic orders and Islamic brotherhoods have similar roots, as have Puritanism and Salafism. Literacy and Puritanism went hand-in-hand, as did literacy and Islamic fundamentalism. Puritanism spread in Oxford and Cambridge, Islamic fundamentalism spread in Iranian and Egyptian universities.<sup>9</sup>

## II. Elite Competition and Political Change

Within revolutions and revolts the most important exercise is getting a clear image of the actors involved, their motivations and their ultimate goals. Over time, the drivers of change and their objectives can change considerably. In traditional societies – those Khaldun analyzed – social elites (tribe, clan, sect) competed for control over the levers of power, but never attempted to change the organizational structures of traditional society. In modern societies shaped by industrialization and urbanization, clan loyalties made way for other group identities and new ideas about the way the social order should be structured and power should be exercised.

During the post-colonial era, a good part of Arab politics has been shaped by the competition between various elite groups. These different elites vying for control compromised the army officers, the Islamic clergy, (various) traditional notables and families, as well as secular urban elites – the so-called *effendiyya*. In those desert countries in which tribalism remained more pronounced, such as Libya, tribal allegiances and regional differences needed to be incorporated in the balancing act of any central regime as well. Western policymakers largely have continued to view Arab politics on

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<sup>7</sup> Ahmad Ashraf and Ali Banuazizi, "State and social classes and modes of mobilization in the Iranian Revolution", *State, Culture and Society* 1 (3), 1985

<sup>8</sup> See for example Craig J. Calhoun, "The radicalism of tradition: community strength or venerable disguise and borrowed language?" *American Journal of Sociology* 88 (5), 1983, pp.886-914

<sup>9</sup> See for the analysis on Puritanism Michael Walzer, *The revolutions of the Saints: a study in the origins of radical politics*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965

the basis of this post-colonial paradigm and failed to consider the emergence of new politically relevant actors in the region.<sup>10</sup>

Within that framework of thought, analysts considered several idiosyncratic power constellations. In most Arab countries, the military established itself as a strong independent political powerhouse.<sup>11</sup> In monarchical Libya and Morocco as well as Republican Tunisia, traditional notables and secular, westernized elites had the upper hand, often supported financially and militarily by Western patrons – France in the case of Morocco and Tunisia, Britain in the case of Libya. The Islamic clergy in turn was most clearly sidelined in Egypt and Tunisia, while the Libyan monarchy itself was actually based on the Sanussiyya religious order and embraced Islamic scholars. The Moroccan King opted for the more inclusive approach: appeasing all factions by taking up the role not only of political leader, but also declaring himself military leader as well as religious “Commander of the Faithful”.

Often, to stabilize the political environment, coalitions between two or more elite groups were necessary. The more solid coalitions seemed to be those combining either the secularist or the Islamic establishment strongly with the military.<sup>12</sup> When empowered, several of the robust authoritarian regimes tried hard to eradicate the competing power houses. In the past decades, that meant roughly keeping down either the secularists or the Islamists. But in recent years, this also increasingly included keeping down activist youth groups that were less easily classifiable along secular-religious divides. At the same time, autocratic regimes depended for their legitimacy on an “authoritarian bargain” with the masses, exchanging jobs and services for obedience and keeping subjects from realigning with one or the other of the competing elites.

Repression and exclusive politics made for clear winners and losers and encouraged feelings of injustice among the less-privileged. What counts most, as demonstrated in the case of Libya, has been the perception of people’s relative place in society, both compared

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<sup>10</sup> See for an attempt Volker Perthes, ed., *Arab elites: negotiating the politics of change*, Boulder and London, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Steven Cook, *Ruling but not Governing: The military and political developments in Egypt, Algeria and Turkey*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007

<sup>12</sup> In Tunisia, the pro-western secularists allied with the army officers while in Nasser’s, Sadat’s and Mubarak’s Egypt, the army itself picked the secularist establishment as its political partner. In Iran, in 1979, the coalition with the army shifted from being with the secularists to being with the Islamists, resembling the situation as had long been present in Saudi Arabia. In Algeria, creating a lasting coalition failed, having confrontations flare up several times. There, like in Egypt, the real power lies with the army. The Algerian army’s political wing, the *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN), consistently recruited its elites from secularist and French-speaking families. But in 1988, riots over corruption and miserable living conditions forced the army to accept a multiparty system, though the “free and fair” election of 1992 were aborted by the top military after the *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS) won the first electoral round. The army allowed parties to oppose each other, but did not allow a party to oppose the system and try to remove the army officers as the ultimate decision makers.

to others as well as to previous times. When a dictator is still in place, many different constituencies that feel one way or the other underprivileged, sign up to the potent political myth of a "revolution" believed to bring better times for all. But afterwards, compromises have to be made. With hindsight, it is difficult to believe that in Iran in 1979 many middle class women joined the revolutionary movement, something soon to be proven suicidal for certain emancipating demands. Tunisia's secular women probably fear a similar loss of freedom now that the moderate Islamist party of Rachid Ghanouchi, el-Nahda, is likely to dominate politics and one can only imagine the feelings of Egyptian Copts and secularist that risked their lives but see the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists walk away with the political booty. Encouraging and conducting sincere inclusive politics might be the most difficult task ahead, also for western policy makers.

Retrospectively it is easier to understand the causes and consequences of past upheavals as well as their dominant motivating forces. When the sore points of society are brought to the surface, sprayed on banners and shouted from the rooftops, the analyst and the policy maker alike do wonder how their aggregate efforts had missed several important developments. How could they have been blind to the raging anger behind the depicted calmness? How could they not have lifted their eyes from the data on economic growth to see the impact of rising inequalities? And in light of the past as well as the present dominant youth culture of revivalist Islam, how could they have believed that demands for freedom, dignity and democracy were equivalent to demands for western-style liberalism? Much of the latter seems indeed based on chimeras and wishful thinking rather than knowledge of the political drivers of Arab society.

However, understanding the concrete causes and consequences of upheavals is much more difficult when events actually take place. Nor does hindsight hold irrefutable evidence for where current events lead. For the new leaders of 1979 Iran, the main coalition partners were initially both the new middle class as well as the traditional bourgeoisie of the bazaar. But it did not take Khomeini long to get rid of the middle class alliance.<sup>13</sup> The contrary has been the case in Egypt. Here Nasser initially engaged in a temporary coalition with the Muslim Brothers during the revolution, a group more popular and better organized than Iran's mullahs, but crushed them thereafter, effectively banning them from politics until today. Thus, while the competition of traditional elites therefore provides us with some interesting insights on the process of political change in the Arab world, it should not be considered in a deterministic fashion.

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<sup>13</sup> Said Amir Arjomand, "Iran's Islamic revolution in comparative perspective", *World Politics* 38 (3), 1986, pp. 383-414. p. 392

### III. Western (Mis-)Conceptions of Arab Politics

Historical precedents do shape our assumptions about current events. This is especially the case in the Middle East, where history looms large and historical events are subject to continuous reinterpretation. This in turn requires analysts to constantly revisit their assumptions. However, all too often, western analysts have tended to view Arab history in deterministic terms and have adopted a static view of Arab politics. Overall, they have tended to dismiss the potential and desirability of domestic bottom-up change and have highlighted the stability of Arab regimes and their ability to adjust to a changing political and socio-economic context. This static view of Arab politics derives from a number of deep-seated perceptions about the nature of Middle Eastern culture and societies, as well as a particular western vision on social and economic progress. Together, these have given rise to a number of hypotheses about the nature of political change in the Arab world that western policy-makers have applied throughout the MENA region.

One widely held assumption was that of a “robust authoritarianism” in the Middle East. Western policy-makers and analysts alike have consistently assumed that Arab regimes are both internally stable as well as flexible enough to defuse all external challenges to their legitimacy. This is partly based on the assumption that Arab political and military elites have been so deeply intertwined that neither of them has an obvious interest in changing the political status quo.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, most analysts argue that Arab regimes have developed a set of domestic institutions that have allowed them to either co-opt or repress any other domestic challenger.<sup>15</sup> Large and scrupulous security apparatus have been tasked to repress the domestic opposition, while political parties and parliaments have provided powerful tools for co-optation. Finally, Arab regimes have relied on an “authoritarian bargain”, a social contract under which they have traded freedom for prosperity.<sup>16</sup> Together, these factors made Arab regimes appear to the external observer as impregnable to domestically-generated change.

Another long-standing assumption has been that Arab publics are apathetic and politically disengaged. Analysts consistently point towards a “weak, fragmented, and passive civil society” together with “very low political participation and public apathy” as being major obstacles to domestic change in the Arab world.<sup>17</sup> This assumption of

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<sup>14</sup> Steven Cook, *Ruling but not Governing: The military and political developments in Egypt, Algeria, and Turkey*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007

<sup>15</sup> Oliver Schlumberger, ed., *Debating Arab Authoritarianism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007

<sup>16</sup> The authoritarian bargain thesis refers to an implicit agreement or contrast between Arab regimes and their population under which people renounce their political freedoms in return for certain economic benefits and public goods.

<sup>17</sup> Nathan J. Brown & 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



political apathy is based on a number of factors. Some analysts have pointed towards the central role of Islam in instilling a culture of “autocracy and passive obedience.”<sup>18</sup> Others have emphasized the deeply hierarchical nature of social relations in the Arab world when it comes to gender, class, sect and ethnicity that have favored the persistence of authoritarian regimes.<sup>19</sup> Socio-economic deficits, such as low literacy rates and a lack of human development, have been identified as further contributing factors.<sup>20</sup> Finally, regimes have used nationalistic and resistance rhetoric to deflect domestic criticism and focus public attention on external threats, such as American and Israeli imperialism – with Mu’ammer el-Qaddafi beating all others.

A third assumption has been that Arab opposition groups were too weak and divided in order to represent a real challenge to authoritarian regimes. Despite numerous attempts of opposition forces across the Arab world to form a common political front, these coalitions have always proven to be fleeting.<sup>21</sup> Their failure has been commonly attributed to the deep division of Arab societies along Islamist-Secularist lines. When forced to choose between a democratic and a secular state, liberal activists have regularly opted for the latter and have tended to arrange themselves with autocratic regimes. Analysts have also noted the failure of opposition groups to build inclusive alliances that represent more than particularistic interests. This reinforced the widespread impression that there are few credible alternatives to the autocratic, but secular, regimes.

Western policy-makers have further tended to approach the prospects for change in the Arab region through a particular development paradigm that has been shaped by a mixture of neoliberal economics and modernization theory. On the one hand, this approach assumed a causal link between economic growth and political reforms.<sup>22</sup> Open exchange and markets were seen as important tools to empower the middle class and undermine the region’s rentier state economies.<sup>23</sup> As a result, much attention has focused on promoting economic growth, free markets and human development as drivers of change. On the other hand, there has been a persistent temptation to define secularization as an essential element of modernization and development that reinforced

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<sup>18</sup> Elie Kedourie, *Democracy and Arab Culture*, Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1992, pp. 5–6

<sup>19</sup> Nicola Pratt, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Arab World*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2007

<sup>20</sup> Robert Springborg, “The Political Economy of the Arab Spring”, *Mediterranean Politics*, 16:3

<sup>21</sup> Dina Shehata, *Islamists and Secularists in Egypt Opposition, Conflict & Cooperation*, New York: Routledge, 2009

<sup>22</sup> Seymour Lipset associated high economic growth with political liberalization, but did not link this to economic fairness. Seymour Martin Lipset, “Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy,” *American Political Science Review*, 61, March 1957, pp. 1002-9

<sup>23</sup> Eberhard Kienle, *A Grand Delusion: Democracy and Economic Reform in Egypt*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2001

suspicious towards Islamist actors.<sup>24</sup> The resulting approach, defined amongst others by the Arab Human Development Report, called for top-down “western-supported projects of gradual and moderate reform aiming at liberalization in Arab countries,” rather than a process of radical bottom-up domestic change.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, the views of western policy-makers on political change in the Arab region have been significantly shaped by historical precedent. Algeria’s failed democratic transition and catastrophic civil war in the early 1990s, the Hamas victory in the 2006 Palestinian elections, and the Bush administration’s flawed attempts to export democracy to Afghanistan and Iraq served to discredit models of both internally and externally driven political change.<sup>26</sup> This led many to question the viability of modern Arab nation states and reinforced impressions about the traditional nature of Arab societies that remained divided along tribes, villages, religious sects, ethnicities and urban quarters. Rather than being fully developed modern nation states, a large number of analysts concluded that Arab societies are “tribes with flags.”<sup>27</sup> According to this argument, the removal of centralized autocratic state authorities would simply lead to an unraveling of the social matrix that would end in Iraq-like civil strife or new forms of authoritarianism.<sup>28</sup> With these overarching ideas as the point of departure, country-specific differences in institutions as well as societal structures were often cast aside.

The combined effect of these widely-held assumptions on the nature of Arab politics and societies was to instill a view amongst western policy-makers that change was not only improbable under prevailing conditions, but was also potentially dangerous and disruptive. Much of the focus, as a result, was on promoting gradual top down reforms through a policy of engagement with the aim of bring Arab states closer to Europe. While activists and academics frequently criticized this approach for legitimizing and strengthening authoritarian Arab regimes, policy-makers tended to place their faith in the transformative power of engagement. This gradualist approach was aptly summarized in a speech by Javier Solana, who noted that: “our power of attraction and transformation is

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<sup>24</sup> A classical example is David Lerner’s *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East*, New York: Free Press, 1968, which identifies modernization to consist of a unitary package that includes urbanization, industrialization, secularization, democratization, education and media participation that go hand in hand.

<sup>25</sup> Arab Human Development Review, *Towards Freedom in the Arab World*, New York: UNDP, 2004, p. 164

<sup>26</sup> Haizam Amirah-Fernández & Irene Menéndez, “Reform in Comparative Perspective: US and EU Strategies of Democracy Promotion in the MENA Region after 9/11,” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, December 2009, 17:3

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Friedman, “Tribes with Flags”, *The New York Times*, 22 March 2011

<sup>28</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, “The Middle East Crisis Has Just Begun”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 26 March 2011

enormous. We do system change, not regime change. We do it slowly, in partnership and without military force. Once they enter the EU's orbit, countries are changed forever."<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately, many Arab leaders did little more than to implement cosmetic changes, while the Arab populace turned out to be less patient than expected.

#### IV. Testing Western Assumptions in Light of the Arab Spring

By adopting an essentially static vision of Middle Eastern politics and societies, western policy-makers seem to have misjudged the importance of a number of recent developments that should have led them to question their underlying assumptions. Retrospectively, these changes have played a key role in explaining the current revolutionary wave across the Middle East. While policy-makers and analysts did note the relevance of these changes, they seemed to frequently fail to understand their broader systemic implications and dismissed them as either incidental or country-specific. Most likely, their failure to connect these various incidents and adjust their underlying assumptions has substantially contributed to their misunderstanding of the crisis.

First, assumptions about the internal cohesion of Arab regimes, as well as their ability to co-opt and repress domestic dissent have proven unwarranted in recent years. Following a number of "monarchical successions" in the mid-2000s most analysts predicted that the "republican successions" of this decade would evolve along similar lines.<sup>30</sup> However, with the life-cycle of Arab dictators coming to an end and the question of succession proving a more thorny issue to resolve, tensions between different regime factions and between these factions and the armed forces have been on the rise. The Egyptian military's dismissal of Mubarak's heir-apparent, Gamal Mubarak, was a prime example, as were the divisions within the Libyan regime on the position of Saif el-Islam.<sup>31</sup>

Second, the region has witnessed a growing tide of civic activism in recent years that refutes previous assumption about Arab apathy. Public opinion surveys since the early 2000s have shown overwhelming support for democracy across the region. Survey data also suggests that the importance Arabs attach to traditional issues such as the Arab-Israeli conflict has somewhat declined, thereby further weakening the legitimizing impact of the anti-imperial rhetoric used by Arab regimes.<sup>32</sup> Moreover the region has experienced

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<sup>29</sup> Javier Solana, Speech at the College of Europe on the Inauguration of the Academic Year 2005-2006, 19 October 2005

<sup>30</sup> Kristina Kausch, *Managed Succession and Stability in the Arab World*, FRIDE Working Paper 104, November 2010

<sup>31</sup> On the role of Arab militaries in the Arab Spring, see: Zoltan Barany, "Comparing the Arab Revolts: The Role of the Military", *Journal of Democracy*, 22:4, October 2011

<sup>32</sup> Marc Lynch, "Arab Public Opinion 2011," *Foreign Policy*, 22 November 2011; Larry Diamond, Why Are There No Arab Democracies?, *Journal of Democracy*, 21:1; January 2010

a rising tide of civic activism since the early 2000s that has seen a proliferation of NGOs, bloggers, labor unions and youth movements.<sup>33</sup> According to one estimate, 1.7 million Egyptians participated in labor action in 2004-2008.<sup>34</sup> Rather than representing just another incident of food riots, there is much that suggests that the recent wave of protests has been driven by a new generation whose expectation and value systems are fundamentally different and which rejects the hierarchical order of traditional Arab societies.<sup>35</sup> Whether they will also be the “winners” is a very different issue.

Third, a shift in the nature and strategy of the Arab opposition undermined the stabilizing function ascribed to authoritarian institutions, in the form of parliaments and ruling parties. With extra-parliamentary protest movements like *Kefaya* (Enough!) taking the limelight, these institutions increasingly lost their power to co-opt and contain.<sup>36</sup> While previously organized political parties have played a central role, since the mid-2000s much of the opposition activity has focused on extra-parliamentary opposition groups, modeled to the *Kefaya* movement in Egypt. This extra-parliamentary opposition not only proved much more difficult to contain and control by established state institutions, but also attempted to bridge some of the previous ideological differences, by involving participants from both secularist and Islamist groups. This in turn has become possible due to the moderation of many Islamist parties throughout the 2000s, as a result of their experimentation with electoral politics. This trend has been evident in many Arab countries including Egypt, Morocco and Yemen, as Islamist parties adjust their party programmes to changing social demands and expectations.<sup>37</sup>

Finally, the western development paradigm has increasingly proven dysfunctional in recent years. The link between economic growth and political freedom has shown to be at best a tenuous one in the Arab world. In many cases economic liberalization coincided with political repression and led to the establishment of “crony capitalism”.<sup>38</sup> This meant that high economic growth throughout the 2000s simply widened the income gap and ruptured the basis of the authoritarian bargain.<sup>39</sup> Western opinion seemed largely

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<sup>33</sup> Amr Hamzawy & Marina Ottaway, *Protest Movements and Political Change in the Arab World*, Carnegie Endowment, Policy Outlook, January 2011

<sup>34</sup> Joel Beinin, *Justice for All: The Struggle for Workers Rights in Egypt*, Washington Dc.: Solidarity Center, February 2010

<sup>35</sup> Rabab El-Mahdi, “Enough: Egypt’s Quest for Democracy,” *Comparative Political Studies*, 42:8, August 2009

<sup>36</sup> F. Gregory Gause III, “The Middle East Academic Community and the Winter of Arab Discontent: Why Did We Miss it?,” in Ellen Laipson, ed., *Seismic Shift: Understanding Change in the Middle East*, Washington DC.: Stimson Center, May 2011

<sup>37</sup> IDEA, *Islamist Mass Movements, External Actors and Political Change in the Arab World*, Stockholm: IDEA

<sup>38</sup> Steven Heydemann, *Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World*, Saban Center Analysis Paper 13, Washington DC.: Brookings Institution, October 2007

<sup>39</sup> Ahmed Galal, et al., *Towards a new Med Region: Achieving Fundamental Transitions*, FEMISE, 2011

impregnable to this rising feeling of inequality. Instead, the World Bank lauded Egypt as the top reformer in its 2008 “Doing Business” survey, whereas in 2010 UNDP identified Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Oman as amongst the top ten achievers in improving human development over the last 40 years.<sup>40</sup> This western image of a region on the move clearly diverged from a widespread feeling of crisis and decline by its actual inhabitants.

## V. Lessons Learnt and Recommendations

The current wave of political unrest in the Arab world has shown us once again the difficulties of predicting complex socio-political events. Knowing precisely what drives social change is clearly beyond the pale of any social scientist or intelligence analyst, no matter how large the budget at his disposal. Nonetheless, by revisiting their previous assumptions, analysts might be able to learn some valuable lesson about where, when and especially why some of their original conclusions about the region were flawed, what trends they might have overestimated and which ones they overlooked.

Such an exercise of self-reflection seems useful not only to learn from past mistakes, but also to improve their analysis of ongoing events. In particular, analysts ought to reflect on three particular issues. First, they ought to revisit their underlying assumptions about the nature of Arab politics and its adaptability to a changing social and political environment. Second, they need to reconcile the particular and country-specific drivers of popular discontent with the universal and regional character of the uprising. Finally, they ought to reconsider the way they raise and interpret social and economic data on the Arab region. By considering these issues, analysts might be able to strengthen their analytical approaches and methodologies and create a more dynamic and non-deterministic view of Arab politics that might also improve their predictive capacities.

Arab societies, like all societies, are not impregnable to change. They are not only shaped by competition and alliances between traditional social-political units defined by clans, tribes and religious sects. Increasingly, there are other drivers that influence political behavior and dictate outcomes. In the past decades, the focus on a competition between “Islamists” and “secularists” obfuscated most of these other divisions and blinded us to the inherent diversity of these different social categories. For the past decades, an implicit policy goal has been to strengthen the hand of secularist forces – often represented by incumbent regimes – as those were considered closest to Western values and most

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<sup>40</sup> UNDP, *The Real Wealth of Nations: Pathways to Human Development*, New York: UNDP, 2010; World Bank, *Doing Business in Egypt 2008*, Washington DC.: World Bank, 2008

amendable to western political and economic interests in the Middle East.<sup>41</sup> The Islamists, on the other hand, were considered a threat not only to western interests and values, but also to regional peace and stability, given their presumed illiberal and aggressive agenda.<sup>42</sup> To avoid the resulting “confirmation bias”, a more flexible and dynamic concept of Arab politics therefore seems to be required.<sup>43</sup>

The religious-secularist divide has reemerged as a dividing factor after the uprisings, but throughout the upheavals it has been of little significance. Behind the apparent binary competition between two largely static and incompatible social forces within Arab society, new social actors have emerged and are growing in importance. With some hindsight this seems to have been particularly the case for urban middle class youth, many of them disgruntled and frustrated. This growing social category has often been valued for its disruptive potential, but almost never as a possible force for positive domestic change. More than anything, they were believed to represent a challenge in terms of terrorism and illegal immigration.<sup>44</sup> In order to understand modern Arab politics, Karl Marx might therefore be more useful than Ibn Khaldun and trying to grasp the interplay of youth cultures and strong ideologies, including a dogmatized version of Islam such as Salafism, is likely to provide a fruitful future research angle.

Another difficulty that should be kept in mind is the scarcity and unreliability of data provided by authoritarian regimes and other semi-independent bodies. When dealing with closed and secretive societies in which clear and verifiable data is hard to come by, “inside information” and the ephemeral “Arab Street” – the famous chat with a cab driver – become the basis for analysis. This inevitably increases the risk of selection bias, as some studies have shown in case of counter-terrorism cooperation. According to these studies, the close ties between western intelligence services and their Arab counterparts following 9/11 have considerably reshaped the nature and focus of European counter-terrorism policies.<sup>45</sup> Arab regimes had a clear stake in exaggerating the terrorist threat when it comes to terrorism and the nature of the opposition. Similarly, throughout the revolutions, the data and information available to western analysts was heavily distorted, often misrepresenting the nature and character of the opposition.<sup>46</sup> In the absence of any

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<sup>41</sup> Eberhard Kienle, “Political Reforms through Economic Reforms?”, in Haizam Amirah Fernandez & Richard Youngs, eds., *The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership: Assessing the First Decade*, Madrid: FRIDE, 2005

<sup>42</sup> Francesco Cavatorta & Michelle Pace, “The Post-normative Turn in European Union (EU)-Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Relations: An Introduction,” *European Foreign Affairs Review* 15, December 2010

<sup>43</sup> Ziva Kunda, *Social Cognition: Making Sense of People*, Cambridge MA.: MIT Press, 1999

<sup>44</sup> Darnard Lewis, “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” *Policy*, 17:4, Summer 2001

<sup>45</sup> Hartmut Behr & Lars Berger, “The Challenge of Talking about Terrorism: The EU and the Arab Debate on the Causes of Islamist Terrorism,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 21:4

<sup>46</sup> Wolfram Lacher, “Families, Tribes and Cities in the Libyan Revolution,” *Middle East Policy*, 18:4, November 2011

firm and verifiable data, analysts therefore have to exercise extreme caution and avoid broad and unsubstantiated generalizations.

A cogent question now is also how to reengage with MENA security and intelligence services in the new political environment. As Michael Scheuer, a former senior US intelligence officer pointed out, "the Arab Spring has been a disaster for us in terms of intelligence gathering, and we now are blind [...]."<sup>47</sup> While this reengagement might become easier as Arab democracies reform their security apparatuses, selection bias and group-think will keep posing considerable problems and can only be counteracted by diversifying available sources of information. While there is a natural tendency to trust those sources that appear most similar (e.g. liberals, young protesters) while mistrusting those that are different (e.g. Islamists, regime supporters), all information ought to be subjected to the same rigorous checks and balances and greater efforts need to be made to understand the views of all relevant actors. This can be difficult when some of them display "irrational behavior" and when different beliefs and fragmented decision-making processes lead to unexpected and suboptimal outcomes.<sup>48</sup> Robert Jervis has aptly made this point in case of intelligence failure: "The fundamental cause of intelligence error is that in many if not most cases countries see the world and one another very differently, and grasping the other's worldview is difficult."<sup>49</sup>

When and where reliable statistical indicators on the region exist, the focus and derived assumptions on causal relations might also benefit from a new look. A focus on absolute numbers, unreliable empirical data and narrow indicators has provided a skewed image of the economic situation. Economic indicators have been largely positive for the Arab region and even issues like inequality and income distribution have been moderate in comparison with other regions.<sup>50</sup> None of the four major state vulnerability indexes have provided any clear indication that Egypt or Tunisia might face an impending domestic crisis.<sup>51</sup> Nonetheless, economic growth and relative deprivation have clearly contributed to a deepening of social animosities. What is crucial is the role of expectations. As James

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<sup>47</sup> Charlotte Higgins, "Arab spring has created intelligence disaster, warns former CIA boss," *The Guardian*, 28 August 2011

<sup>48</sup> Robert Jervis, "Reports, Politics, and Intelligence Failures: The Case of Iraq," *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 29:1, February 2006, pp. 40-42

<sup>49</sup> Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War*, Ithaca, NY.: Cornell University Press, 2010, p. 175

<sup>50</sup> Ahmed Galal, et al., *Towards a new Med Region: Achieving Fundamental Transitions*, FEMISE, 2011

<sup>51</sup> These index include: The Economist Intelligence Unit, Political Instability Index; The Brookings Institute, Index of State Weakness in the Developing World; The Fund for Peace, The Failed State Index; and the Center for Systemic Peace and Center for Global Policy, State Fragility Index and Matrix. See: Richard Cincotta, "Socioeconomic Studies," in Ellen Laipson, ed., *Seismic Shift: Understanding Change in the Middle East*, Washington DC.: Stimson Center, May 2011

Davies noted a long time ago, "it is the failure of conditions to meet rising expectation, rather than the conditions per se, that tend to generate unrest."<sup>52</sup> This suggests that a much greater focus on inequality and expectations is called for when analyzing economic data on the region. The role of expectations and psychology are also vital to understanding the regional dimension of events.<sup>53</sup>

Overall, the broader impact and demonstration effects of country-specific developments have often been underestimated. While internet activism and social movements were an accepted part of the political reality in Egypt, their broader regional impact and how they contributed to reshaping the context in diverse countries such as Syria and Morocco remained obscure. That within a short period of time the Arab Spring became a globalized phenomenon that even provided a new language and framing for western protest cultures in form of the Occupy Movement, was unexpected. Instead, the Arab Spring protests are still mainly assessed as isolated cases resulting from country-specific problems and deficiencies – unemployment, repression, religious rivalries. But there clearly has been an element of emotional contagion and ideological diffusion that has enabled the rapid spreading of events and facilitated "copycat" protests far beyond the Arab region.<sup>54</sup> Of course, country-specific dynamics remain key in shaping each of these events. But too narrow a focus on these particularistic factors has frequently blinded analysts to the broader regional dynamics at play.

In the final analysis, while there are certainly lessons to be learnt from the Arab Spring uprisings, the current wave of revolutionary upheavals should also serve as a timely reminder of the unpredictability of human interaction. Analysts, admittedly, have failed to predict the timing and nature of the current unrest. But the leaderless and fragmented nature of the protests meant that ultimately even the organizers themselves were unable to predict their outcome. Moreover, there is also a clear risk to over-learning the lessons of the Arab Spring. While Arab protesters might have emancipated themselves by breaking the wall of fear, the underlying social, economic and institutional conditions and dynamics of each country will continue to matter in determining the outcome of the different revolutions. Analysts should continue to pay heed to these dynamics and how they are being articulated within the current protests.

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<sup>52</sup> James Davies, "Towards a Theory of Revolution," *American Sociological Review* 27, 1962

<sup>53</sup> Timo Behr & Mika Aaltola, *The Arab Uprising, Causes, Prospects, Implications*, UPI Briefing Paper 76/2011

<sup>54</sup> In the past some articles have explicitly argued that the growing strength of the Arab state had made such cross-border contagion less likely. See: F. Gregory Gause III, "Revolutionary Fevers and Regional Contagion: Domestic Structures and the Export of Revolution in the Middle East," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, 14:3, Spring 1991



To conclude, it is worthwhile to notice that history has played a duplicitous role in the current unrests. While a too deterministic reading of Arab history seems to blind us to the potential of new actors and coalitions to emerge, it also serves as an important reminder that neither the current protests nor their regional dimension are a particularly new phenomenon. Looking at previous cases of unrest and social transformation across the Arab world therefore can carry important lesson for current developments. But history also provides another useful reminder. Time and again policy-makers and analysts have made the mistake of binding themselves too closely to what they perceived to be the progressive forces in the region, while paying scant attention to the wider social dynamics. The great risk is that by “picking winners” in the current wave of societal transformations that is being played out across the Arab world, or by focusing too narrowly on the brave and inspiring youth activists that often seem to be driving events, analysts might once again fall foul to the similar delusions.



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