

# Lessons Learnt

Understanding instability:  
Lessons from the 'Arab Spring'



Florence Gaub

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# Understanding instability:

Lessons from the 'Arab Spring'

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

December 2012

**Florence Gaub**



Arts & Humanities  
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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.

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University



## Executive Summary

As the 'Arab Spring' was not anticipated by analysts, the prediction of instability has experienced scrutiny – how was it possible not to see the factors that eventually led to the massive uprising, and is there any way to anticipate them? This report argues that the analytical failure does not reside in the overlooking of root causes such as poverty, unemployment or young population, but the failed grasp of their interplay. Rather than stacking causes on top of each other, analysts have to develop a three-dimensional approach recognising their interplay.

To begin with, conditions of instability or root causes do not stand-alone but can interact with each other, hence having either a reinforcing or levelling impact on their weakness or strength in mobilising popular unrest. Secondly, a difference has to be made between root causes as such and catalysts, which are the elements that add frustration dynamic to the root causes. Thirdly, the existence of root causes and catalysts does not in itself imply explosive potential; rather, the state's capacity to manage these frustrations plays a decisive role in keeping them in check. Lastly, even a considerable amount of critical conditions and respective catalysts will require triggers animating the actual social dislocation.

Hence, four lines of analysis are required in the assessment of a country's vulnerability to risk and conflict: conditions, catalysts, triggers on the side of society, as well as the state's capacity to handle these on the other side. Confusing these four elements and their interplay ultimately leads to a bodged understanding of any crisis.

Conditions are the underlying root causes for instability. These are long-term dynamics that can be static, or change only gradually over time. Root causes can be as diverse as evolution of the state, historical experiences, politicisation of regional, ethnic or religious identities, social stratification, growth of population and economy, rates of urbanization, distribution of wealth and income, access to education and opportunity, scarcity of resources, unemployment rates and so forth. Yet root causes themselves do not cause instability by merely existing; all states face potential conditions of instability without a crisis emerging. Rather, catalysts of instability become the decisive factor in the determination of actual conflict potential.

Once a condition has reached instability potential via the addition of a catalyst, it still requires a 'trigger', a one-time event capable of animating the actual social dislocation, conflict and instability. Triggers can be elections, natural disasters, an economic shock, death of a leader or, as seen in the case of the 'Arab Spring', a dramatic gesture of an individual, or mass demonstrations.

In addition to the three elements mentioned above, the actual strength or weakness of the state to handle either the conditions before they can develop actual instability potential, or manage the unrest once it breaks out, is a decisive factor. This is where Middle Eastern studies focused their interest in the past as it was here that the main explanation for continuing authoritarianism seemed to lie. However, the actual assessment of the states' strength, in particular the role of the security sector, proved wrong – or rather, non-existent, as study of Arab armed forces had ceased in the 1970s and was replaced by mere assumptions.

Actual vulnerability to instability has to be explained by the actual interaction of these four elements. A country may very well present a large number of underlying conditions which could cause instability without it spilling into conflict or unrest, as catalysts and triggers are missing that will give them disruptive properties. Likewise, destabilizing one-off events will be lessened if they do not tap into pre-existing conditions.

In the context of the Arab Spring, this report posits that while analysts correctly identified the root causes eventually leading to the unrest, they failed to identify the catalysts, which differed considerably from case to case. As the catalysts are the determining factor in timing social dislocation, their overlooking is what ultimately led to the degree of surprise. A thorough analysis throughout 2010 would have shown that Syria and Egypt experienced massive increases in food prices, Bahrain and Yemen very rapid increases in demography and Tunisia a considerable yet rather recent mismatch between university output and labour market absorption. As the international and/or regional system underwent changes as well, all that was missing was a trigger, which eventually took place in Tunisia.

As catalysts are, simply put, any form of change in existing structures, they can be overlooked if they are as mundane as food prices or educational policy. Yet catalysts can be found elsewhere: any form of change will jeopardise stability. The challenge for analysts is then to detect change and anticipate its impact on existing social structures. In this, they have failed in 2010 and 2011.

## **Series Editor's Notes**

Dr Florence Gaub's contribution to the Lessons Learnt series is to examine – via the upheavals known as 'the Arab Spring' – the role of complexity in intelligence analysis. Gaub posits that there were a significant number of social and economic factors that contributed to the upheavals in the Middle East and North Africa, and furthermore that it is not the misunderstanding of these particular factors that caused western analysts to



miss the triggers for the Spring, but more the complex interplay between the factors. In a radical departure from the extant literature on strategic warnings Gaub's analysis is that a more focussed understanding of what we would describe as underlying factors and how in particular, context specific situations they can contribute to the sort of strategic surprises we saw in 2011.

**Robert Dover and Michael S. Goodman**

# Introduction

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In December, 2010, a single event sparked a series of uprisings and protests that led to significant and ongoing change in the Middle East and North Africa now called the 'Arab Spring': a young Tunisian vegetable seller named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in order to protest against the security forces that had seized his cart, dying from his injuries. What followed was an unprecedented wave of protests and riots all over the Arab world, eventually leading to the stepping down of two dictators (President Ben Ali in Tunisia, President Mubarak in Egypt), an international operation against the Libyan Qaddafi-regime resulting in his downfall, and more unrest in Syria, Bahrain and Yemen jeopardizing the respective current government one way or the other.<sup>1</sup>

At the time of writing, the period of unrest and change in the Arab world is still ongoing; as countries emerge from decades of authoritarianism and first elections are held in Egypt and Tunisia, the period of transition remains a delicate one. More unrest flanked the period of transition in Egypt, and protests were to be seen in Jordan, Algeria and Morocco, yet not resulting in regime-change.

The year of riots, conflicts and instability, has cost the affected countries so far 35.050 human lives and 35 billion pounds, and countless refugees have left their country of origin.<sup>2</sup> As stability has not set in yet, more challenges are on the way. The economic situation will continue to remain dire due to unpredictable political circumstances, whereas the implosion of Libya's security sector is likely to affect all of North Africa in terms of uncontrolled flow of weapons, terrorism and organized crime. Depending on Syria's fate, the whole of the Middle East could also be affected both in terms of security and economy. Put simply: a single event in Tunisia had triggered a series of unrest and instability of unprecedented extent. Worse: in spite of significant international interest

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the events, see 'The Path of Protest', an interactive timeline of the Middle East protests that is regularly updated. Available at [www.guardian.co.uk/world/interactive/2011/mar/22/middle-east-protest-interactive-timeline](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/interactive/2011/mar/22/middle-east-protest-interactive-timeline)

<sup>2</sup> *BBC News*, "Report: Arab Spring upheaval cost \$55bn", October 14, 2011, [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15303413](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15303413); for the death toll of the events, see *US News*, "Death toll of 'Arab Spring'", available at [www.usnews.com/news/slideshows/death-toll-of-arab-spring](http://www.usnews.com/news/slideshows/death-toll-of-arab-spring); according to this source, the numbers break down in the following way: Syria: 3.500; Yemen: 250; Libya: 30.000; Bahrain: 100; Tunisia: 300; Egypt: 900

for the region, nobody saw this coming.<sup>3</sup> The failure of academia and policy-making alike to predict such a large-scale period of instability has caused distress; rather than focusing on possible catalysts of change, most analysts centred on explanations for surprisingly stable authoritarianism in Arab states and dismissed elements that ultimately proved the determining factors in the events of 2011. Understanding these elements that led to the sudden outburst is crucial not only in predicting similar events later on and thus plan contingency in a more appropriate fashion, but also in order to identify the shortcomings of existing analytical approaches.

The key question then is: what are factors that cause instability, and how can they be framed in an appropriate way?

## Methodology

Political instability, while occurring regularly, remains a volatile phenomenon to study. Major revolts and revolutions, such as the French Revolution of 1789, or the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, were not predicted nor anticipated. Yet instability is anathema to the very notion of statehood; states seek security through stability and attempt to maximize stabilizing elements in areas of geographic proximity. Globalization has extended these areas considerably, and thus includes regions that were considered remote, and hence not of strategic interest, half a century ago. Instability in one state affects never just the state itself, but has far-reaching consequences: it distorts regional security balances, creates security vacuums that are then filled with non-state actors (terrorists, criminal gangs, militias), refugee flows and ultimately leads to the crumbling of regional economy. Yet while instability is the natural enemy of state security, its understanding, and as a consequence its prevention is a difficult endeavour, as mere presence of root causes do not lead automatically to instability.

The Arab region is a case in point here: most causes eventually cited as driving forces in the 'Arab Spring' had simmered for decades, yet only in 2011 had they developed the explosive force witnessed. Likewise, significant riots and demonstrations had taken place before in these countries without developing the same centrifugal power of the 2011 events:

Riots over bread prices in Egypt in 1977 involved several hundreds of thousands of people; in 1986, 20,000 people rioted over prolonging military conscription; in 2004 and 2005, the political movement *Kefaya* ('Enough') took to the streets to protest first against

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<sup>3</sup> Gause, F. Gregory, "Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring: The Myth of Authoritarian Stability", *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2011, pp.81 – 90; *Foreign Policy*, "Dark Crystal: Why didn't anyone predict the Arab revolutions?" July/August 2011, available at [www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/06/20/dark\\_crystal](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/06/20/dark_crystal)

the war in Iraq and subsequently against the government and for democracy; and the general strike of 2008 in protest against low wages and rising food prices paralysed Egypt significantly. Bahrain saw substantial civil unrest in the early 1990s, killing 40 people. Similarly, other Arab countries had seen regular outbursts of popular anger against the government, food prices and poverty. So while the general assumption posited Arab civil society as weak and large-scale protest as unlikely, there indeed were demonstrations and riots, though they failed to act as the trigger in the way some of the 2011 events did. In other words, most of the elements causing the 'Arab Spring' had persisted for a considerable amount of time, and potentially triggering events had occurred as well.

The analytical failure was hence not the overlooking of these causes or even single events, but the oversight of the inter-connectivity of these. Piling causes on top of each other and attributing them a certain weight in the actual probability of instability, as some analyses have done, does not grasp the interrelatedness of the different elements as it remains two-dimensional.<sup>4</sup> The Failed State Index, for instance, collects 12 indicators ranging from demographic pressures to economic decline, but its 2011 ranking did not indicate danger for Tunisia, Libya or Bahrain.<sup>5</sup> Although mono-causal explanations are tempting, simple stacking of root causes does not explain the threshold beyond which crises ultimately erupt.

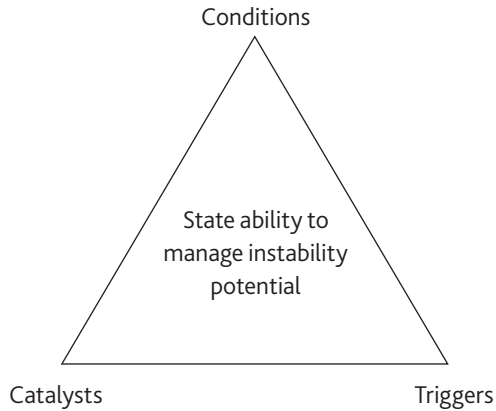
Rather, understanding instability and its drivers requires a three-dimensional approach; firstly, conditions of instability or root causes do not stand alone but can interact with each other, hence having either a reinforcing or levelling impact on their weakness or strength in mobilising popular unrest. Secondly, a difference has to be made between root causes as such and catalysts, which are the elements that add frustration dynamic to the root causes. Thirdly, the existence of root causes and catalysts does not in itself imply explosive potential; rather, the state's capacity to manage these frustrations plays a decisive role in keeping them in check. Lastly, even a considerable amount of critical conditions and respective catalysts will require triggers animating the actual social dislocation.

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<sup>4</sup> See for instance the *Economist's* 'Show-Thrower Index' combining statistics on a number of factors, calculating the likelihood of revolutions. Available at [www.economist.com/blogs/dailychart/2011/03/arab\\_unrest\\_0](http://www.economist.com/blogs/dailychart/2011/03/arab_unrest_0)

<sup>5</sup> *Foreign Policy*, "The Failed State Index 2010", available at [www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/06/17/2011\\_failed\\_states\\_index\\_interactive\\_map\\_and\\_rankings](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/06/17/2011_failed_states_index_interactive_map_and_rankings)



Conditions are the underlying root causes for instability. These are long-term dynamics that can be static, or change only gradually over time. Root causes can be as diverse as evolution of the state, historical experiences, politicisation of regional, ethnic or religious identities, social stratification, growth of population and economy, rates of urbanization, distribution of wealth and income, access to education and opportunity, scarcity of resources, unemployment rates and so forth. Yet root causes themselves do not cause instability by merely existing; all states face potential conditions of instability without a crisis emerging. Rather, catalysts of instability become the decisive factor in the determination of actual conflict potential.

Catalysis is, chemically speaking, the change in a reaction due to the addition of an agent, called a catalyst. Catalysts are thus fundamentally agents of change, speeding or slowing other processes down. Their key characteristic is modification or alteration. In our context, catalysts are emerging dynamics or trends that, attached to the conditions or root causes mentioned above, will multiply tensions. In contrast to the root causes, catalysts are not static but rather novel developments. As such, they are more dynamic, and add a sense of urgency to conditions that have been established for a while. Examples can be a narrowing, or closing of political expression, effects of climate change on livelihood, a worsening of the economic situation, erosion of existing management tools, discovery of natural resources, growth of criminal networks or manipulation of existing social grievances – anything that indicates substantial change in given circumstances can act as a catalyst.

Once a condition has reached instability potential via the addition of a catalyst, it still requires a 'trigger', a one-time event capable of animating the actual social dislocation,

conflict and instability. Triggers can be elections, natural disasters, an economic shock, death of a leader or, as seen in the case of the 'Arab Spring', a dramatic gesture of an individual, or mass demonstrations.

In addition to these three elements, the actual strength or weakness of the state to handle either the conditions before they can develop actual instability potential, or manage the unrest once it breaks out, is a decisive factor. This is where Middle Eastern studies focused their interest in the past as it was here that the main explanation for continuing authoritarianism seemed to lie. However, the actual assessment of the states' strength, in particular the role of the security sector, proved wrong – or rather, non-existent, as study of Arab armed forces had ceased in the 1970s and was replaced by mere assumptions.

Actual vulnerability to instability has to be explained by the actual interaction of these four elements. A country may very well present a large number of underlying conditions which could cause instability without it spilling into conflict or unrest, as catalysts and triggers are missing that will give them disruptive properties. Likewise, destabilizing one-off events will be lessened if they do not tap into pre-existing conditions.

This framework of analysis conceptualizes the interconnectivity of simple causes; by creating sub-groups of 'causes' and hence understanding their different impact on social unrest, it allows for identifying potential for frustration early on. A thorough analysis of conditions and catalysts will provide analysts with an accurate understanding of a society's state and thus enable them to anticipate large-scale unrest. Although triggers, as single events, are rather difficult to predict, a solid analysis of conditions and catalysts will provide a clear assessment with regards to a country's actual vulnerability to instability.

## **Instability in North Africa and the Middle East: an Overview**

The instability witnessed in 2011 in the Arab world has triggered interest in its actual causes, as the region seemed, mistakenly, stable in its consistent authoritarian structures. The series of crises has consequently raised questions about the predictability of large-scale unrest, as the correct identification of the root causes did not provide explanations for the eruption of protests at precisely this point in time. Applying the structural framework elaborated above will offer insight into the processes inside the actual crises, highlighting the interplay between the different factors, and ultimately explaining not only why the events took place, but also how they could have been anticipated.

Before moving to an analysis of the factors eventually leading to the 'Arab Spring', it is important to understand which of the states are actually part of it, i.e. have transitioned from a state of stability into a state of considerable instability in 2011, and those that have

lingered in stable instability for an extended period and can thus not be considered part of the phenomenon. Instability does not equal instability; the relativity of the term indicates an analytical fluidity, which hastened analysts into sweeping the whole region into one basket, predicting regime change in all 22 members of the League of Arab States.

Yet one would be mistaken to include the fragile yet constant state of countries such as Lebanon or the Palestinian territories as being part of the same phenomenon as the events that affected Egypt; likewise, vulnerability to instability in Iraq and Sudan is conceptually very different from the one seen in Tunisia. As the whole region ranging from Mauritania to Iran is one marked by latent instability with pockets of authoritarianism guaranteeing a certain level of stability, it is even more difficult to distinguish between the different occurrences and their causes.

For the sake of the analysis, only those states are being considered here that have seen large-scale unrest calling for (and partly achieving) democratic change, including civilian casualties, since the beginning of 2011, resulting in considerable economic loss as well as spill-over effects on the regional and international level. Thus, cases such as Algeria, Morocco or Jordan are not included although they witnessed demonstrations and moderate reform attempts. The six states that correspond to the criteria defined here are Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen.

It is important to point out that while the six cases analysed here fall into the category defined above, the analysis clearly shows that while some of those states having experienced unrest present similarities in conditions and catalysts, others do not. It is for precisely this reason that the notion of 'Arab Spring' can be misleading as it suggests a cohesion, a coherence and an interconnectedness that is effectively either absent, or more nuanced.

In order to draw lessons from the crisis in North Africa and the Middle East, an analysis of the conditions, catalysts, triggers and state strength, a sequential analysis of the six cases mentioned is necessary. As the uprisings affected each other, we will proceed in chronological order here.

### *Tunisia*

The fact that the 'Arab Spring' originated in this state seemed anathema to many analysts at first; in comparison to other states in the region, Tunisia enjoyed continuous though modest economic growth, a relatively secular society and free education for everyone. Its birth rates have been declining since the early 2000s, approaching European levels. Tunisia's successful transformation into a tourism hub for Europe, and comparatively

well structured economic sector gained it the title of 'most competitive state in Africa' by the World Economic Forum in 2010. In contrast to other Arab states its economy did not experience a downturn as a result of the global economic crisis.<sup>6</sup> In the 23 years he was in power, President Ben Ali managed to reduce the percentage of Tunisians living below the poverty line (living of less than 1\$ a day) from 11% to 2% of the population in 2011 (10% of the population live off less than 2\$ a day).<sup>7</sup>

In spite of these positive developments on paper, conditions for instability kept growing; poverty remained clustered in rural and uneducated parts of society, and economic growth generated jobs mainly for unskilled and temporary activities, such as in the textile and tourism sector. In addition, distribution of income was decidedly unequal: The top 20% of Tunisian society earn 47.9% of the country's total income, while the 20% at the bottom earn 5.7% of the income.

The state's institutions, while considered "efficient"<sup>8</sup> and strong by Western observers and thus providing a high level of security conducive to economic development, proved to also suppress the population, particularly organisations which could challenge state authority, such as labour unions, students' associations and journalists.<sup>9</sup> Only two months before the outbreak of the unrest, a number of imprisoned journalists went on a hunger strike in order to protest against their detention and its conditions.<sup>10</sup> The elections bringing President Ben Ali to power with 94% of the votes in 2004 were widely recognised as rigged; physical abuse by security forces, including torture and arbitral arrest continued unsanctioned, and political freedoms were systematically curtailed.

However, all of these features had existed for decades; the catalysts that eventually turned them into explosive elements were, ironically, of the government's own making. In the process of educational reform initiated in the early 1990s, Tunisia rapidly expanded the number of students, tripling their rates in just 10 years to 365.000 in 2005. At a gross enrolment of 31%, Tunisia reached German levels. As the government devoted 20% of its budget to education, it continued to create, and expand, an expectation gap as the labour market was not capable of absorbing these large numbers of highly educated people.

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<sup>6</sup> Klaus Schwab, *The Global Competitiveness Report 2010 – 2011* (World Economic Forum: Geneva, 2010), p.38

<sup>7</sup> The World Bank, "Poverty Analysis: Tunisia: Poverty Alleviation: Preserving Progress while Preparing for the Future", Available at <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTPOVERTY/EXTPA/0,,contentMDK:20208640~menuPK:435735~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:430367~isCURL:Y~isCURL:Y,00.html>

<sup>8</sup> Klaus Schwab, *The Global Competitiveness Report 2010 – 2011* (World Economic Forum: Geneva, 2010), p.38

<sup>9</sup> Human Rights Watch, "The Price of Independence: Silencing Labor and Student Unions in Tunisia", October 21, 2010, available at [www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/tunisia1010w.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/tunisia1010w.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Amnesty International, "Ongoing hunger strikes spotlights rights abuses in Tunisia", October 29, 2010, available at [www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE30/020/2010/en/3a9fed17-d4c6-4eb0-ac21-ab21ae25372d/mde300202010en.pdf](http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE30/020/2010/en/3a9fed17-d4c6-4eb0-ac21-ab21ae25372d/mde300202010en.pdf)



As the number of graduates tripled, so did the number of unemployed graduates. As 50% of graduates were unemployed – in total the same number of the yearly university output – unemployment rates grew even higher with the level of education, reaching 68% for graduates of Master programmes in legal studies.<sup>11</sup> International organisations such as the World Bank, the World Economic Forum and the United Nations Development Programme recognised the problem; as late as 2010, a report clearly showed the overproduction of graduates in Tunisia in comparison to other efficiency-driven economies<sup>12</sup>; however, the disruptive potential of the growing gap between expectation and actual delivery was not anticipated. As a silently but rapidly growing catalyst, the explosive dynamic between education and labour market proved decisive in 2011. In addition, although widely overrated in terms of effect, Tunisia's access to internet ranked rather high by regional standards with 33.9% of the population (in comparison United Kingdom: 82%), and 24.5% Facebook users, facilitating communication.<sup>13</sup>

In this context, two events eventually triggered the popular outburst: the self-immolation of a young vegetable seller named Mohamed Bouazizi in protest of the confiscation of his wares, and the display of corruption in the Presidential family via Wikileaks. Although corruption was widely mentioned as a motivation for the unrest, Tunisia ranks higher than Italy, Greece or most Balkan countries in Transparency International's corruption index; what matters more than the actual corruption level was the perception that it had grown worse over the last years, hence acting as a catalyst as well.<sup>14</sup>

Interestingly, Bouazizi was quickly portrayed as a university graduate who failed to find a job, although he left high school before earning a degree. It is also of importance that his self-immolation, and the first protests, sparked in a small town in the centre of Tunisia named Sidi Bouzid, relying largely on agriculture and suffering from 36% unemployment (13.3% nation-wide).<sup>15</sup>

Although described as strong, the Tunisian state institutions were ultimately incapable of closing the expectation gap that educational reform had produced; as demonstrations

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<sup>11</sup> The World Bank, "For a better integration into the labor market in Tunisia", March 2008, available at <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/MENAEXT/TUNISIAEXTN/0,,contentMDK:21671683~pagePK:1497618~piPK:217854~theSitePK:310015,00.html>

<sup>12</sup> Klaus Schwab, *The Global Competitiveness Report 2010 – 2011* (World Economic Forum: Geneva, 2010), p. 328

<sup>13</sup> Internet World Stats, "Usage and Population Statistics: Tunisia", available at [www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm#tz](http://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm#tz)

<sup>14</sup> Transparency International, « Corruption Perception Index 2001 – 2010 », available at [www.transparency.org/policy\\_research/surveys\\_indices/cpi/2010/results](http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2010/results)

<sup>15</sup> Institut National de Statistiques – Tunisie, *Caractéristiques économiques de la population*, available at [www.ins.nat.tn/fr/rgrp2.6ens.php?Code\\_indicateur=0306017](http://www.ins.nat.tn/fr/rgrp2.6ens.php?Code_indicateur=0306017)

ensued, the Tunisian military, small, comparatively professional and not very politicised, took the sides of the protesters, leading to the regime's ouster after only 28 days of protest.

## *Egypt*

Underlying conditions in Egypt resembled the Tunisians to some extent. 34% of the population are illiterate, and unequal distribution of wealth was significant but not to the same extent as Tunisia: the richest 20% of society hold 41.5% of the national income, whereas the lowest 20% earn 9%. It is important to note here, again, that unequal distribution of income is much more pronounced in most Latin American and a number of African states; the mere existence of such inequality is not by itself a cause of unrest. 22% of Egyptians are considered poor, with 7.4% living of less than one dollar a day. 25% are considered moderately poor, which means that half of Egyptian society lives of a maximum of two dollars a day. Contrasts between urban and rural areas were not very pronounced. As in Tunisia, unemployment rates amongst college graduates are almost ten times the rate for people who have gone through elementary school, but their numbers have not changed as rapidly as in Tunisia. 25% of the population under 25 is unemployed. Human rights abuses and political repression were prevalent throughout in a military-dominated, authoritarian system established since the 1950s. Overall, Egypt differs from Tunisia insofar as its income was decidedly lower, its poverty rates higher, and it had seen a number of unrest over the last decades, as over the price of food in 2008.

The catalysts which eventually led to the events in early 2011 had a component absent in the Tunisian case, namely the price of food. Egyptian food inflation was at 19% in 2010, whereas it was at 4% in Tunisia; the prices of food groups such as dairy, fats and oils, and fruits went from declining by 9%, 3%, and 1%, respectively, in January 2010 to increasing by 27%, 28%, and 14% in January 2011.<sup>16</sup> In addition, poverty rates had fallen to 16.7% in 2000, only to return to current rates since 2005. In other words: Egyptians had experienced, in a very short time, a significant improvement, and subsequent worsening, of poverty rates which then acted as the catalyst acting on the existing conditions. Lastly, the Egyptian media had experienced a period of relative freedom since 2005, where criticism of the government was permissible to a considerable extent. Internet access is low in Egypt with 21% of the population online; the strong focus of the media on the 'Facebook factor' can thus be considered exaggerated.

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<sup>16</sup> The World Bank, "Food Price Watch", April 2011, available at [www.worldbank.org/foodcrisis/foodpricewatch/april\\_2011.html](http://www.worldbank.org/foodcrisis/foodpricewatch/april_2011.html)

The actual crisis was then triggered by the Tunisian uprising which had successfully removed its President from power. 11 days after the event, a national day of revolt was organised by several opposition groups and the state's labour union (representing 2.3 Million workers), which then led to a chain of protests, eventually leading to President Mubarak's stepping down after 17 days of demonstrations.

A determining factor in the Egyptian uprising was the role of the armed forces, which sided with the protesters and facilitated the transition of power. Its comparatively high professionalism, and certain distance from politics allowed it to do so.

### *Bahrain*

Although the Bahraini uprising immediately followed the removal of President Mubarak, the conditions leading to it differ vastly from the Tunisian and the Egyptian case. Although Bahrain has a high GDP, literacy rate (91%) and low unemployment (5.5%)<sup>17</sup>, grievances existing in Bahrain for decades centred on social stratification. Although often represented as a Shia – Sunni antagonism, the conditions underlying the tensions are of socio-economic and political nature. But because Bahrain is a ranked society, where religious affiliation coincides with a number of socio-economic factors, the religious dimension plays a prominent but not determining factor in the development of the grievances.<sup>18</sup>

Conditions in Bahrain revolve around the fact that a Shia majority (no exact numbers are available, but it is estimated to range between 60 and 70% of the total amount of Bahraini Muslims) is ruled by a Sunni minority of Saudi origin. While this in itself is not the crux, it effectively means unequal access to government positions (it is estimated that Shia hold 18% of government jobs)<sup>19</sup>, education opportunities and employment. Unemployment is concentrated in the Shia population, as are pockets of poverty.<sup>20</sup> Shia experience discrimination in terms of religious practice (e.g. permission for building mosques), and repression by the security services which are, likewise, dominated by followers of Sunni Islam.<sup>21</sup> As a result, demonstrations and unrest were frequent in Bahrain in the 1980s and 1990s.

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<sup>17</sup> The World Bank, "Data Bahrain", available at <http://data.worldbank.org/country/bahrain>

<sup>18</sup> Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1985) p.36

<sup>19</sup> Bahrain Center for Human Rights, "Discrimination in Bahrain: The Unwritten Law", September 2003, p.4 available at [www.bahrainrights.org/files/BCHRreportonDiscrimination.pdf](http://www.bahrainrights.org/files/BCHRreportonDiscrimination.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> Louay Bahry, "The Socioeconomic Foundations of the Shiite Opposition in Bahrain", *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Summer 2000, pp. 129 – 143

<sup>21</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Bahrain: End Torture of Security Suspects", February 8, 2010, available at [www.hrw.org/en/news/2010/02/05/bahrain-end-torture-security-suspects](http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2010/02/05/bahrain-end-torture-security-suspects)

In addition, Bahrain represents some features Tunisia and Egypt are missing; the tensions are embedded into a wider regional power game between a predominantly Shia Iran and its Sunni neighbourhood. As Iran declared Bahrain its 14th province in 1957, Bahraini Shia were suspected both by the British coloniser as well as the Sunni population to represent a fifth column; measures were taken to de-iranise the population by importing Sunni Arabs from other states. Iran's claim came to an end after a poll organised by the United Nations in 1970, which showed overwhelming Bahraini support for independence from both Iran and Great Britain. The regional power struggle was further exacerbated after the Islamic revolution of 1979, when Iran called for Shia uprisings in the region, leading in 1981 into a Shia coup attempt in Bahrain. Although it was aborted, it contributed to the ongoing ethnic security mapping of the ruling Sunni, i.e. relying on groups deemed loyal particularly in the security services, and alienating those that are not considered trustworthy in terms of state security.<sup>22</sup>

The catalyst that eventually added the spark to the latest crisis was both demographic and regionally driven. Shia and Sunni were almost equal in size in the 1950s, they have shown very different growth patterns. While the overall population grew by on average 2.5% over a period of five years, this increased dramatically in the years between 2005 and 2010, when it grew by 11.84%.<sup>23</sup> Although there are no statistics available, birth rates in the Shia community are much higher than in the Sunni community; demography thus added to existing grievances.

In addition, the change in regional politics with the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003 and subsequent weakening of Iraq in the regional power structure created a vacuum filled by Iran, which behaves more and more assertive as it is pursuing the development of nuclear weapons. Concerns over Iranian behaviour have heightened suspicion towards Shia population in all states in the region, particularly in the Gulf.

In the case of Bahrain, the successful toppling of Egypt's government proved to be the trigger. The proven feasibility of regime change via demonstrations encouraged

The state's capacity to repress the uprising proved to be strong; as a politicised force, the Bahraini security sector, with assistance of the Saudi Arabian Peninsula Shield Force, crushed the demonstrations violently.

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<sup>22</sup> Cynthia H. Enloe, *Ethnic soldiers, state security in divided societies* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1980) p.220

<sup>23</sup> Food and Agricultural Organization, "FAOSTAT Bahrain", available at <http://faostat.fao.org/site/666/default.aspx>

## Yemen

Grievances in Yemen abound; as one of the poorest Arab countries, it ranks 133 in the United Nations' Human Development Index. Unemployment rates of 35%, literacy rates of 62%, 34% of the population in poverty, high prevalence of corruption and significant inequality in the distribution of wealth are all elements that contributed to pronounced discontent with the government. With a rocky past as a divided country subsequently engaged in civil war, Yemen has seen its share of unrest over the last decades. Plagued with inefficient state structures and pockets of insecurity, Yemen has not managed to reform its economy, still relying largely on oil exports.

Yet all of these elements, prevalent for decades, developed centrifugal capacity only because of the most rapid (not necessarily the largest) growth in population in the region – having doubled its population from 12 Million to 24 Million in only 13 years (in comparison, it took Tunisia 41 years, Egypt 36 years to double their respective populations), 46% of the Yemeni population are estimated to be under the age of 20 (31% in Egypt). Although the 'Youth Bulge' was widely seen as a factor in the revolts of Egypt and Tunisia, it is really Yemen where this element plays the most important role. As birth rates are declining in Tunisia and Egypt, they continue to remain very high in Yemen without any change in sight. Large young populations, although widely seen only as a factor contributing to unrest, can be leveraged for economic growth as consumption, taxes and per capita output rise. Japan, Korea and Singapore all experienced decisive economic growth due to their Youth Bulge in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>24</sup> However, state structures require time to adjust in order to take advantage of a young labour force, time that the speed of the population growth did not allow for. As a result, the large numbers of young unemployed people turned into a significant grievance, pressuring the labour market.

In addition, Yemen was more affected by the increase in food prices than other Arab countries, although it managed to level this in conjunction with the higher oil prices. High food prices were prevalent before the unrest; however, as the crisis erupted, the disruption of oil export led to a massive increase in food prices. The price of wheat rose by 45%, and the cost of rice by 22%. As Yemen suffers from severe malnutrition already, this fuelled the crisis even further.

As in the case of Bahrain, the triggering elements in the case of Yemen were the previous crises in Tunisia and Egypt. Mediation attempts failed, while Yemen's already weak

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<sup>24</sup> The World Bank, Youth. An Undervalued Asset: Towards a New Agenda in the Middle East and North Africa (Washington D.C., September 2007) p.ii

state structures started to crumble. Large-scale defections from the armed forces, with outbursts of violence all over the country led to a descent into massive civil unrest in which terrorist groupings, criminal gangs, members of the military and civilians opposed each other.

## *Syria*

A number of features present in the other cases are, and were also present in Syria. However, on a number of accounts Syria looked better with high literacy rates (84%), very high school enrolment (122% at the primary level), officially low unemployment rates (8.4%) and declining birth rates indicated a stable society.<sup>25</sup> In reality, unemployment rates were probably higher with around 20%, particularly affecting the youth with the highest ratio in youth-adult imbalance among the region's countries outside the Gulf States.<sup>26</sup> However, Syria's Youth Bulge reached its peak already in 2005 and expects another one in 2005; 23% of its population are under 25, facing employment difficulties as the educational system continues to produce graduates unsuitable for the labour market. Although the economy grew by 5%, no jobs were created.<sup>27</sup> In addition, curtailed political freedoms, corruption and a decade long dictatorship contributed to discontent.

Yet all of these elements had existed for a while, or changed slowly. The underlying causes were fuelled by catalysts such as a drought now in its 5th year. Syria's water resources dropped by 50% between 2002 and 2008, pushing two to three million people into extreme poverty within a comparatively short period of time: herders in affected areas have lost 85% of their livestock, and large-scale migration into cities took place within a short time, adding pressure to existing state structures. Syria, which had prided itself on agricultural self-sufficiency, was suddenly not capable of ensuring food security anymore.<sup>28</sup> As a result of global developments, fruit and vegetable prices rose by around 27% in Syria in the year leading up to January 2010, an inflation that rose further throughout 2010. In addition, poverty rates in Syria rose sharply from 2007 on; as a side effect of the transition towards a market economy, the Syrian government started to cut

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<sup>25</sup> The World Bank, Data Syrian Arab Republic, available at <http://data.worldbank.org/country/syrian-arab-republic>

<sup>26</sup> Nader Kabbani & Noura Kamel, Youth Exclusion in Syria: Social, Economic and Institutional Dimensions (Wolfensohn Center for Development: Dubai, September 2007), available at <http://jrnet.solsolver.shorensteincenter.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/Youth-Exclusion-in-Syria.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> Nader Kabbani, "Youth Unemployment in Syria: An Overview", Carnegie Middle East Center, February 10, 2011, available at [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/Nader\\_Kabbani.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/Nader_Kabbani.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> United Nations, "UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food: Mission to Syria from 29 August to 7 September 2010", available at [www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/food/docs/SyriaMissionPreliminaryConclusions\\_07092010.pdf](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/food/docs/SyriaMissionPreliminaryConclusions_07092010.pdf)

subsidies, for instance for fertiliser and fuel, leading to Diesel prices tripling overnight.<sup>29</sup> Living costs rose sharply as real wage growth fell from 9.9% in 2005 to 3.2% in 2007.

As the uprisings in other Arab states acted as triggers, its long list of grievances, in conjunction with the catalysts, spurred it into unrest. The Syrian security sector however remained largely cohesive and, more importantly, repressive in dealing with the demonstrations.

Libya As an oil-producing state, Libya has, on paper, the highest per capita income in Africa and is thus classified as an upper middle income country by the World Bank. However, the crassly unequal distribution of wealth levels this out, with 40% of the population living below the poverty line and 30% unemployed. Libya managed to crunch its Youth Bulge in the early 1980s, reducing birth rates from over 7 children per woman in the beginning of the 1980s to less than 3 in 2005-2010, but it still showed a population rate of 30% under the age of 25. Although literacy rates are at 87.4%, Libya has only 8% of university graduates.<sup>30</sup>

Historical grievances have put the Eastern region, Cyrenaica, at odds with particularly the Western Tripolitania; opposition to Italy came from the East in the shape of the Sanussi order which then provided the new Libya with King Idris as a head of state. Antagonism of the regions was exacerbated when Colonel Qaddafi ousted the King in 1969 and reportedly neglected Cyrenaica. The 42 year rule of Qaddafi saw large-scale human rights abuses, curtailment of political freedoms, and erratic economic behaviour that led Libya to total disarray. Freedom House judged Libya to be one of the nine countries with the worst human rights conditions in the world in 2010.<sup>31</sup>

The year preceding the unrest in Libya, however, was not a particularly bleak one; the economy grew by 10.6% in 2010 as oil prices remained high; of course poverty, authoritarianism and unemployment continued to exist, but in terms of economic downturn, Youth Bulge and international isolation, Libya had seen worse. What changed in 2010 was the worldwide increase in food price although the country was significantly less affected by price inflation than Syria; as Libya imports 90% of its domestic consumption products, the government countered the possible impact by

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<sup>29</sup> Syria Today, "Drawing the Poverty Line", May 2010, available at [www.syria-today.com/index.php/focus/7730-drawing-the-poverty-line](http://www.syria-today.com/index.php/focus/7730-drawing-the-poverty-line); The Economist, "Syria's economy: Hard choices for the government.", January 20, 2011, available at [www.economist.com/node/17963303](http://www.economist.com/node/17963303)

<sup>30</sup> Di Waniss A. Otman, Erling Karlberg, *The Libyan Economy: economic diversification and international repositioning* (Springer: Berlin, 2007) p.100

<sup>31</sup> Freedom House, "Worst of the Worst", available at [www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/WoW/2010/WorstOfTheWorst2010.pdf](http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/WoW/2010/WorstOfTheWorst2010.pdf)

slashing customs and taxes on imported products.<sup>32</sup> While corruption perception was continuously low, it showed little variation between 2003 and 2010.<sup>33</sup> A United Nations investigation into the state of human rights in Libya welcomed its progress.<sup>34</sup>

If anything, catalysts for Libya's civil war were the mismatch between expectations following the end of sanctions in 2006, promises of economic reform and a possible replacement of Muammar Qaddafi by his son Seif al-Islam, and the actual stagnation both on the political and on the economic front, where state salaries remained unchanged in spite of rising living costs. As economic reforms took hold and consumer goods started flowing back in, Libyan purchase power stagnated. By 2010, political debate in the exiled opposition press had become very intense, particularly following the regime's hardening its media monopoly in 2009 with the nationalisation of a media group established just two years earlier. Seif al-Islam's withdrawal from politics indicated that no change was to be expected anytime soon. The catalyst of change in the Libyan case was thus political more than economic, and was further spurred by the rapid reaction of the international community, who intervened after only 18 days of protest. As in the case of Bahrain, the international dimension acted as a catalyst, too: it is very likely that the regime's security forces would have been able to suppress the uprising as they had done in previous cases, had it not been for NATO's intervention.

As Qaddafi feared the armed forces and a potential coup d'Etat, he deliberately kept the military weak and personally oversaw the manning of important posts with loyalists. As a result, the armed forces were not capable to crush the uprising as it saw its infrastructure destroyed by the West. However, its cohesion throughout the crisis remained stronger than anticipated by many. Defection rates remained rather low.

## Lessons learned from the 'Arab Spring'

As the analysis above has shown, the anticipation of instability needs to be rethought along the suggested lines. A simple stacking of root causes does not facilitate the prediction, or prevention of crises and instability; the real challenge lies in the correct identification of their interrelation. For analysts attempting to identify potential for

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<sup>32</sup> Food and Agricultural Organisation, "North Africa Brief" available at [http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/F1F51C9012207F2A85257850005844B1-Full\\_Report.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/F1F51C9012207F2A85257850005844B1-Full_Report.pdf); Reuters Africa, "Libya axes custom, tax duties on food: report", January 12, 2011, available at <http://af.reuters.com/article/investingNews/idAFJ0E70B0JT20110112>

<sup>33</sup> Transparency International, "Corruption Perception Index 2003 – 2010", available at [www.transparency.org/policy\\_research/surveys\\_indices/cpi](http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi)

<sup>34</sup> United Nations General Assembly, "Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Libyan Arab Jamahiriya", January 4, 2011, available at [www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/16session/A-HRC-16-15.pdf](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/16session/A-HRC-16-15.pdf)



instability early on, a number of lessons can be drawn from the crisis in North Africa and the Middle East:

### *Proper Analysis of Conditions*

The main failure of analysts has consisted, so far, in the flawed scrutiny of facts and figures. High rates of employment, literacy or enrolment in education have covered the fact that grievances can be hidden behind them; structural features such as antagonism between rural and urban areas, mismatch between university output and labour market absorption capacity, unequal distribution of wealth along religious or ethnic lines are all elements that were available, but the adequate inter-linkages were not established. Multiethnicity, for instance, develops explosive potential in conjunction with ethnically ranked social stratification; likewise, the presence of a young population can be leveraged for economic growth. Recognising the interplay between different factors is the real challenge, rather than noting the root causes alone.

In the complex interplay that societies feature, analysts need to dig deeper in order to understand the intricate elements that make for potentially disruptive grievances. Identification of the point of disruption can only be done in conjunction with the identification of catalysts.

### *Identifying the Catalysts*

As catalysts are what ultimately will dislocate social structures, they deserve particular attention although they are usually less apparent than root causes. The analysis of the 'Arab Spring' shows that while most states shared a number of root causes, their catalysts were vastly diverse. This explains also why other Arab states have not seen massive unrest in spite of similar root causes being present – catalysts are what ultimately give these conditions the sense of urgency, and need to be focused on more. Early warnings of catalysts are usually sudden changes occurring in social structures, be they of economic, political or social nature. Sudden in- or decreases of global food or oil prices (a 10% increase in crude oil prices is associated with a 2.7% increase in the World Bank Food Price Index) for instance affect low- and low-middle income countries considerably more than wealthy countries, particularly in the Arab world which remains the largest cereal-importer in the world; layered on existing grievances, they can develop disruptive potential. But other rapid changes indicate the potential development of a catalyst, such as sudden increase in university graduates, urbanization rates, demography generally or even change in temperature. As catalysts are short-term (i.e. between one and five years), they differ from root causes which are decades old. Their main difference, however, is the factor of change – catalysts disrupt an existing structure,

thus contributing to change and therefore instability. The strength of a catalyst must not be understood in absolute, but in relative terms of change. As change is anathema to stability, even a change from one political system to another, even if it is normatively considered a 'better' one, will trigger instability.<sup>35</sup>

### *Review State Capacity to Deal with Instability*

As mentioned before, the state's capacity to manage the population's expectations, and subsequently unrest remains the determining factor in any crisis' outcome. Identifying whether a state actually possesses the capacity to level food price inflation by investing in reduced logistics costs, and application of risk-management tools, as in the case of Jordan, will facilitate the correct assessment of the food price inflation's impact on the country's stability. By the same token, the anticipation of the state's security forces in a situation of instability cannot be based on mere assumptions as was the case with Arab armed forces before 2011; as they were seen as pillars of authoritarianism, their support of the uprising took most analysts by surprise. As the 'Arab Spring' has shown, strong connectivity between the security sector and the regime by ways of politicisation and lack of professionalism will likely lead to their support of the government, as Syria, Libya and Bahrain have shown. However, a force distinct from the elite in power will be able to contribute to regime change.

## **Conclusion**

Although the official rhetoric of the 'Arab Spring' took on a tone of democracy and human rights, the driving factors were socio-economic in nature. This becomes particularly salient when studying a Pew survey conducted in early 2011: Democracy was associated by the vast majority – 74% – with economic prosperity, not with free speech or elections. When asked which was more important, a strong economy or good democracy, 49% of Egyptians favoured the economy versus 47% who favoured democracy.<sup>36</sup> This is not to say that the call for human rights and democratic elections are not genuine, but they were not, in themselves, drivers of massive unrest.

While root causes can be, and are, political and legal in nature, they in themselves rarely develop the centrifugal strength necessary to dislocate to the extent observed in the six states analysed here. Root causes develop explosive potential only in conjunction with

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<sup>35</sup> James Raymond Vreeland, "The Effect of Political Regime on Civil War: Unpacking Anocracy", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Volume 52 Number 3, June 2008, pp.401-425

<sup>36</sup> Pew Research Center: "Arab Spring Fails to Improve U.S. Image", May 17, 2011, available at [www.pewglobal.org/2011/05/17/arab-spring-fails-to-improve-us-image/4/#chapter-3-views-of-democracy-and-the-role-of-islam](http://www.pewglobal.org/2011/05/17/arab-spring-fails-to-improve-us-image/4/#chapter-3-views-of-democracy-and-the-role-of-islam)

catalysts; the identification of these remains a challenge as they are diverse and mainly characterised by change. Essentially, however, sudden change always bears the potential of disruption, and as such analysts are challenged to watch out for alterations not only in the economic, but also in the societal, demographic, even educational sectors. Overlooking the considerable power of these catalysts has proven, in 2011, a fatal miscalculation.



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