

## Mind the Gap – What Happens After the Arab Spring?

For 1500 years, reading coffee grinds in the Middle East has been a popular way to predict the future. Today, the futures of countries in this region are as uncertain as ever. The ongoing violent struggles in places like Libya, Yemen, and Syria, as well as the early challenges in the new Egypt and Tunisia, have brought the region to a tipping point. Revolutions and promised reforms raise hopes for more representation and rights, but have these countries really been put on a path to democracy? Is democracy what's next for the Middle East? Or is there a gap between expectations and reality?

It is almost certain that there will not be American or European-style democracies in the Arab world. Why? Experience. There is no legacy of democracy in the region. From the Egyptian to Ottoman empires, to the various colonialists, monarchies and autocrats, there is not one Arab country across the Middle East and North Africa that has a history of representative government. "In much of the region, there is little historical experience with pluralism. A hard road ahead for democracy is almost certain."<sup>1</sup>

More recently, decades of despotic leadership suppressed the rule of law, political diversity and the development of civil society, while giving rise to corruption and economic inequality. "The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) remains the most repressive region in the world—16 out of 20 countries in the region are categorised as authoritarian."<sup>2</sup> As a result, the social and political infrastructure necessary for representative government doesn't exist. "Even if the autocratic rulers were to cede power, few countries have institutions—both official and non-official—to facilitate an orderly and speedy transition to democracy."<sup>3</sup> Even Egypt, where these institutions and civil society are the most robust, is scrambling to catch up. Opposition groups are now faced with the urgency of forming credible political parties and platforms. "We are still searching for a good name for a party and an idea that attracts people's attention," said Amr Hamzawy, a 43-year-old political science professor and one of the protest organizers.<sup>4</sup>

Another casualty of the authoritarian regimes has been leadership. "Most Arab heads of governments have emerged through processes that did not include the general will or consent of the people. In other words the leadership deficit is linked to a lack of legitimacy."<sup>5</sup> Leaders in the Arab world have been both symbolic father-figures, yet strongmen, where power equated to credibility. Political accession was either hereditary or through loyalty to autocrats. There has also been no legal process or precedent for peaceful head-of-state transitions. Either dissuaded

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Carothers, "Think Again: Arab Democracy," *Foreign Policy*, March 10, 2011, <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=42991>.

<sup>2</sup> According to the *Economist's* Democracy Index, the Middle East and North Africa scored the lowest Democracy Index average of all regions. [http://graphics.eiu.com/PDF/Democracy\\_Index\\_2010\\_web.pdf](http://graphics.eiu.com/PDF/Democracy_Index_2010_web.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Zubair Iqbal, "Are Democratic Revolts Contagious? Implications for the Arab World," *Middle East Institute Policy Insights*, February 24, 2011, <http://www.mei.edu/Publications/WebPublications/PolicyInsights/PolicyInsightsArchive.tabid/876/ctl/Detail/mid/2844/xmid/1682/xmfid/36/Default.aspx>.

<sup>4</sup> Neil MacFarquhar, "United in Protest, Cairo Activists Now Struggle with Politics," *New York Times*, March 18, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/19/world/middleeast/19egypt.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/19/world/middleeast/19egypt.html?_r=1).

<sup>5</sup> Ibrahim Al-Marashi, "The Arab World's Leadership Deficit," *History News Network*, February 21, 2011, <http://hnn.us/articles/136857.html>.

or excluded by the corruption, oppression, and elitism of one-party or despotic rule, careers – even participation – in politics were rarely a viable or desirable option.

Many within and outside the Arab world look to the next generation for political leadership. The toppling of Mubarak's regime, for example, was called Egypt's Youth Revolution. However, recent experience shows that hope may be misplaced. "Although the new generation of Arab leaders showed indications of reform upon assuming power, [observers] claimed many of them have fallen back on more conservative policies and massive security systems to remain in power."<sup>6</sup> Syria's Bashar el-Assad's initial reformist platform has instead become the head of one of the region's most repressive regimes. Even the American-educated King Abdullah II of Jordan, who spearheaded the country's economic prosperity over the past decade, "initially called for the formation of a reform agenda but abandoned this plan under conservative pressure and has since begun to clamp down on the media."<sup>7</sup> Both the patriarchic nature of Arab countries and the region's history of leadership by force and coercion created a public service gap that will take time for the revolutionary Arab countries to overcome.

Another important facet of the Middle East and North Africa's experience is religion, which plays a far greater role in life and politics than in Western democracies. Islamic countries in the greater region runs the gamut from secular (Turkey) to quasi-theocracies (Iran) and religious kingdoms (Saudi Arabia). Although secular Turkey is non-Arab and has an active, yet flawed democracy, its ruling party has Islamist roots.

There is considerable concern that the region's turmoil will create opportunities for radical Islamic groups to gain political power. For example, while the Muslim Brotherhood "enjoys considerable grassroots support throughout Egypt, the secular opposition lacks strong parties and any organized presence outside of Cairo and Alexandria."<sup>8</sup> Brotherhood representatives were careful to note that the uprising was Egyptian, not Islamic. However, they quietly provided food, medical supplies, and protection to protestors. Opposition groups and political activists who spearheaded Egypt's revolution are rushing to establish a national political organization "to prevent more established political groups like the Muslim Brotherhood from filling the political vacuum they helped to create."<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile in neighboring Libya, Al Qaeda's North African arm offered assistance to rebels fighting the Qaddafi regime. Qaddafi himself claimed Al Qaeda presence as a scare tactic to deter American support of Libyan rebels.<sup>10</sup> Yet Algeria has noted increasing Al Qaeda presence in Libya and NATO has reported "potential 'flickers' of al Qaeda and Hezbollah elements [among] the Libyan opposition."<sup>11</sup> Whether it's the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt,

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<sup>6</sup> Abby Arganese and Haleh Esfandiari, "The Crisis in the Arab World's Aging Leadership," January 5, 2011, [http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=events.event\\_summary&event\\_id=645844](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=events.event_summary&event_id=645844).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Shadi Hamid, "The New Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood," *Brookings Institution Foreign Policy Trip Reports*, No. 24, March 8, 2011, [http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2011/0308\\_egypt\\_muslim\\_brotherhood\\_hamid.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2011/0308_egypt_muslim_brotherhood_hamid.aspx).

<sup>9</sup> MacFarquhar, op.cit.

<sup>10</sup> David Zucchino, "Rebels in Libya insist they're no fans of Al Qaeda." *Los Angeles Times*, April 6, 2011, <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/apr/06/world/la-fg-libya-derna-qaeda-20110406>.

<sup>11</sup> Jennifer Rizzo, "'Flickers' of al Qaeda in Libyan opposition, U.S. NATO leader says," *CNN.com*, March 29, 2011,

Al Qaeda in Libya, or other Islamist groups in the region, the potential for the rise of radical Islam in national politics is real.

Then there are the armed forces. The role of the military in Arab countries has been inextricably linked to their autocratic leaders. A key element to the success of Egypt's revolution was the military throwing its support behind the protestors. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces has ruled Egypt since Mubarak's departure. In March, the military lifted emergency laws and initiated constitutional reforms, such as introducing an amendment that bans the formation of political parties on a religious, sectarian or geographic basis. At the same time, however, Egypt's ruling military council introduced a law banning protests that "conflict with the productivity of the country," making the same demonstrations that had just changed Egypt a criminal offense punishable by jail time and huge fines.<sup>12</sup> Egypt's ruling military council has since promised to hand over power to a civilian leadership after holding a new presidential election in November. Yet the Egyptian case prompts many questions that other Arab countries looking for regime change will also have to answer: What role will the military create for itself? Can they suppress radical Islam and support democracy at the same time? Or will they even cede power?

While it's highly unlikely that western-style democracies will emerge in the Middle East, what can be expected to emerge from this Arab Spring?

Arab monarchies, like Morocco and Jordan, are poised to remain intact. "All maintain almost indelible cultural, and to different degrees religious, claims to power. All also have done a relatively better job at providing for their populations economically."<sup>13</sup> Some monarchs have proactively tried to position themselves as reformers. For example, Jordan's King Abdullah is reportedly considering empowering the prime minister's office. There have also been calls for a transition to the Spanish model; a parliamentary democracy and a constitutional monarchy.<sup>14</sup>

For the rest of the Middle East and North Africa, there is still the potential for representative governments. "The transition to democracy will be bumpy, depending upon countries' circumstances and how much institutions—and elites—are prepared to bear the new responsibilities."<sup>15</sup> Countries with even weak elements of democracy, like a powerless parliament, dysfunctional political parties, and some grassroots organizations will have an easier time replacing authoritarian regimes than those "where no alternative credible institutions exist."<sup>16</sup>

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[http://articles.cnn.com/2011-03-29/us/libya.opposition.analysis\\_1\\_james-stavridis-moammar-gadhafi-al-qaeda-or-one?\\_s=PM:US](http://articles.cnn.com/2011-03-29/us/libya.opposition.analysis_1_james-stavridis-moammar-gadhafi-al-qaeda-or-one?_s=PM:US).

<sup>12</sup> Ivan Watson and Mohamed Fadel Fahmy, "Egypt's revolutionaries say abusive treatment persists," *CNN.com*, March 24, 2011,

[http://articles.cnn.com/2011-03-24/world/egypt.revolution\\_1\\_ban-protests-female-demonstrators-cairo-s-tahrir-square?\\_s=PM:WORLD](http://articles.cnn.com/2011-03-24/world/egypt.revolution_1_ban-protests-female-demonstrators-cairo-s-tahrir-square?_s=PM:WORLD).

<sup>13</sup> Avi Spiegel, "Predicting the Future of the Middle East – The Easy Way," *HuffingtonPost.com*, February 9, 2011, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/avi-spiegel/predicting-the-future-of-\\_b\\_821143.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/avi-spiegel/predicting-the-future-of-_b_821143.html).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Iqbal, *op.cit.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

Radical Islamist groups may or may not be able to fill that gap. “For years, the Egyptian voter only had two options — a corrupt regime or us,” said Abdel Moneim Abou el-Fotouh, a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood youth movement. “Now they will have five or six choices, and they are already falling away [from the Brotherhood] in great numbers.”<sup>17</sup> Time will tell.

These Arab nations also face considerable socio-economic problems, such as income inequality and unemployment that will influence the extent and direction of political changes. “Many of the underlying grievances and triggers of these unprecedented events are economic and social in nature, though they've taken on a political form,” noted World Bank President, Robert Zoellick. “They... will not go away just because one government fell, or one leader replaced another.”<sup>18</sup> Any Arab leader or party seeking to push democratic reforms will have to successfully address these challenges.

Egypt may be the region’s litmus test. “Why is Egypt so important? Because it is the heart of the Arab world. It was the birthplace of pan-Arabism under Gamal Nasser, the linchpin of Middle East peace under Anwar Sadat. With more than 80 million people - as many as Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Syria combined - it has a large and vigorous civil society, feisty, independent media, a broad array of political forces, and a well-respected judiciary. If Egypt can make the transition to democracy, it will lead the way to a new era for the Arab world. If Cairo falls back to dictatorship of one variety or another, it is unlikely the rest of the region will move on without it. The Arab Spring will live or die in Egypt.”<sup>19</sup>

The long-term picture of Arab governance is still in the early stages of development. “It is a reconfiguration, but it may not be quite what people here expect. I’m not all that confident the net result is going to be the surfacing and then the flowering of this series of democratic states. I draw a very clear distinction between populism and democracy,” according to former National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski. “My expectation, therefore, is that what we’ll get in the Middle East is indeed a series of regimes more responsive to popular attitudes.”<sup>20</sup>

With battles still being fought across the Middle East and burgeoning Arab governments still vulnerable, what can be done in the short-run to help these revolutions succeed? Create traction. “The whirlwind of mounting demands for democratic reforms in the Arab world have the potential to go astray if not handled carefully.”<sup>21</sup>

The Middle East’s social media-driven revolutions show the potential for the extent and momentum of democratic changes. It is important for any foreign government or organization to

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<sup>17</sup> Marc Fisher, “The Spark that Ignited a Revolution,” *Washington Post*, March 27, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/in-tunisia-act-of-one-fruit-vendor-sparks-wave-of-revolution-through-arab-world/2011/03/16/AFjfsueB\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/in-tunisia-act-of-one-fruit-vendor-sparks-wave-of-revolution-through-arab-world/2011/03/16/AFjfsueB_story.html).

<sup>18</sup> “World Bank to rethink Middle East but not sure when or how,” *Deutsche Welle*, March 22, 2011, [http://www.dw-world.de/popups/popup\\_printcontent/0,,14935744,00.html](http://www.dw-world.de/popups/popup_printcontent/0,,14935744,00.html).

<sup>19</sup> Robert Kagan and Michelle Dunne, “Why Egypt has to be the U.S. Priority in the Middle East,” *Washington Post*, March 7, 2011, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/03/06/AR2011030602928.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Amar C. Bakshi, “Zbigniew Brzezinski on the Future of the Middle East,” *CNN.com*, March 30, 2011, <http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2011/03/30/zbigniew-brzezinski-on-the-future-of-the-middle-east/>.

<sup>21</sup> Iqbal, op.cit.

remember that each Arab country's path will be unique and that there will be no "one size fits all" plan for Arab democracy. Yet international organizations and western governments can provide leadership and support for this momentum to continue. "Foreigners cannot make their dreams a reality. However, the West can and should respond positively to such official requests from the new governments as the following: assign an expert on mediation to assist a local mediator during the constitution-building process; promote faculty exchanges with local law faculties; provide technical assistance to local ministries of justice; and support job creation through the encouragement [of] foreign investment and entrepreneurship and by funding programs that train youth for specific jobs."<sup>22</sup>

Despite broad anti-American sentiment in the region, the U.S. has already played a significant, and not necessarily unwelcome, role in this assistance. "[T]he weapons they used in their peaceful democratic revolution were American made, Facebook, Twitter, Google, et cetera," noted Senator Joseph Lieberman (I-CT).<sup>23</sup> Other observers often note that criticism of the U.S. is still accompanied by the desire for an American visa. The U.S.' hand-off of leadership of military operations in Libya to NATO shows how American interests can still influence, but not direct, foreign support of Arab revolutions.

"Anyone making predictions with confidence is being foolhardy," remarked Fareed Zakaria of today's Middle East.<sup>24</sup> However, that won't keep everyone from policy makers in Washington, DC Starbucks to political activists in coffee houses throughout the Arab world from looking for answers, which will shape U.S. national security interests for some time to come. In any case, it's bound to be a strong brew.

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<sup>22</sup> L. Michael Hager, "Paving the Path to Middle East Democracy," *The Hill*, March 30, 2011, <http://thehill.com/opinion/op-ed/152901-paving-the-path-to-middle-east-democracy>.

<sup>23</sup> Revolution in the Middle East: A Trip Report by Senator John McCain and Senator Joseph Lieberman," *Brookings Institution*, March 3, 2011,

[http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/events/2011/0303\\_mccain\\_lieberman/20110303\\_mccain\\_lieberman.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/events/2011/0303_mccain_lieberman/20110303_mccain_lieberman.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> Fareed Zakaria, "How Democracy Can Work in the Middle East," *Time*, February 3, 2011, [http://www.fareedzakaria.com/home/Articles/Entries/2011/2/3\\_How\\_Russia\\_Created\\_Its\\_Own\\_Islamic\\_Terrorism\\_Problem\\_2.html](http://www.fareedzakaria.com/home/Articles/Entries/2011/2/3_How_Russia_Created_Its_Own_Islamic_Terrorism_Problem_2.html).