

The Arab Uprisings Never Ended

The Enduring Struggle to Remake the Middle East

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Demonstrating in Tahrir Square, Cairo, January 2012. *Mohamed Abd El-Ghany / TPX images of the day / Reuters*

There are few, if any, celebrations planned for the tenth anniversary of the uprisings that swept the Arab world in late 2010 and early 2011. The days of television screens filled with crowds chanting, “The people demand the overthrow of the regime” seem like ancient history. Early hopes for revolutionary change crashed into the blunt force of military coups, civil wars, and fractured states. In 2021, there may be few beliefs more universally shared than that the Arab uprisings failed.

It is easy to understand the appeal of this idea, eagerly promoted by autocratic regimes and foreign policy realists alike. It means a return to business as usual. Both the Obama and the Trump administrations tacitly accepted that view as they shifted their gaze to other goals in the region—the former to nuclear negotiations with Iran, the latter to normalizing Arab relations with Israel.

Yet that conviction is in fact just the latest in a series of premature conclusions. Before 2011, most analysts took the stability of Arab autocracies for granted. This was wrong. As popular pressure drove four long-ruling dictators from power—Tunisia’s Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak, Libya’s Muammar al-Qaddafi, and Yemen’s Ali Abdullah Saleh—some observers rushed to assume that an unstoppable democratic wave had arrived; others warned that democratization would open the door to Islamist domination. Both were wrong. In 2012, most thought that the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad was finished. Wrong. In 2013, supporters of Egypt’s military coup argued it would put the country back on a path toward democracy. Wrong again.

In the heat of the revolutionary moment a decade ago, it did feel as though the region had changed forever. The autocratic wall of fear had broken, and empowered Arab citizens seemed destined to never again tolerate authoritarian rule. Within a few short years, however, those hopes were crushed. A military coup in Egypt ended its nascent democratic experiment. Fragile transitions in Libya and Yemen collapsed into civil war. Syria descended into a nightmarish mixture of insurgency and international proxy warfare. Eventually, autocrats across the region clawed back most of the power they had lost.

Still, the consensus that the Arab uprisings ended in failure is similarly premature and as likely to prove wrong in time. The effects of the uprisings should not be measured in regimes overthrown or democratic elections held, although their record there is not insignificant. The fact that dictators once again sit on the thrones of the Middle East is far from evidence that the uprisings failed. Democracy was only one part of the protesters’ demands. The movement was engaged in a generations-long struggle that rejected a regional order that had delivered nothing but corruption, disastrous governance, and economic failure.

By that standard, the uprisings have profoundly reshaped every conceivable dimension of Arab politics, including individual attitudes, political systems, ideologies, and international relations. Superficial similarities might mask the extent of the change, but today’s Middle East would be unrecognizable to observers from 2010. The forces set in motion in 2011 virtually guaranteed that the next decade will witness even more profound transformations—changes that will confound any policy based on a return to the old ways.

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED

After a decade of dashed hopes, it is easy to forget just how powerful and surprising the revolutionary moment that started in December 2010 truly was. By late 2010, it was clear that the Arab world was experiencing mounting popular frustration and growing economic inequality, but the region’s rulers believed that they were capable of crushing any potential threat. So did the academics studying them and the activists confronting them.

Nobody was prepared for the sheer scale, speed, and intensity of the protests that erupted simultaneously across the entire region. Arab satellite television stations such as Al Jazeera and social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter [accelerated the process](#), quickly transmitting images, ideas, and emotions across borders. Regimes that were well prepared for isolated local unrest were overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of citizens who swarmed the

streets and failed to leave. When some militaries refused to kill for their embattled presidents, the people declared victory.

Those victories in Tunisia and Egypt, where mass protests successfully evicted entrenched autocrats and set the stage for elections, galvanized protesters in other Arab countries. It is difficult to recapture the magic of the time, the new sense of community crafted in the chaos of Cairo's Tahrir Square, Bahrain's Pearl Roundabout, Tunisia's Avenue Habib Bourguiba, and Yemen's Change Square. Everything seemed possible. Change seemed inevitable. Autocrats were running scared, and nothing—not U.S. military support, not the seemingly omnipotent security services, not protesters' own fears and divisions—could stop the movement.

But no other country emulated the path of the Tunisian and Egyptian trailblazers. Regional powers backed old regimes in their efforts to destroy the uprisings, and the West did nothing to stop them. Poor governments such as Jordan and Morocco drew on financial and political support from Gulf monarchies to weather their own smaller protest movements, while passing modest constitutional reforms to placate their citizens. Bahrain's monarchy violently crushed its nascent antigovernment popular uprising, unleashing a wave of sectarian repression. Libya's Qaddafi turned the full force of his military on the protesters, triggering a rapid escalation that culminated in civil war and international intervention. Yemen fell into a long and bloody stalemate as its military splintered after months of protests.

As conflicts dragged on and revolutionary momentum flagged, most regimes' overwhelming military and financial advantage eventually won out. The surviving governments then sought revenge, punishing the activists who had dared challenge their rule. They aimed to restore fear and crush hope. The United States did little to stand in the way. When Egypt's military overthrew the elected president Mohamed Morsi and massacred hundreds of protesters in the center of Cairo, the Obama administration refused to even call the event a coup.

Nowhere was this reversal of fortune more evident than in Syria. What started as a peaceful protest movement against Assad's government slowly escalated into a civil war as the regime cracked down violently on demonstrators. The country's degeneration into conflict carried incalculable costs: hundreds of thousands dead, millions of refugees, the spread of newly virulent forms of sectarianism, and a revitalized jihadi movement. Syria's horrors have provided a useful scarecrow for autocrats. This, they signal, is what might happen if you return to the streets.

By 2013, in large part due to Syria's descent into chaos and Egypt's military coup against Morsi, a new consensus had taken hold. The autocrats had won, the uprisings had failed, and the Arab Spring was turning into an Arab Winter.

THE ISLAMISTS

Few other dynamics illustrate the uprisings' transformative effects better than the fortunes of mainstream Islamist groups. Originally hailed as important players in new democratic systems, many were eventually suppressed by resurgent autocracies or struggled to navigate transitional democracies. This arc further reinforced a sense that the uprisings had failed.

In the decade before 2011, Islamists associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, an influential movement founded in Egypt in the 1920s, were the dominant opposition force in many Arab countries. Their organizational skill, ability to provide social services, reputation for integrity, and religious appeal made them a formidable political force. Starting in the 1990s, Brotherhood intellectuals generated elaborate arguments for Islam's compatibility with democracy and critiqued existing secular regimes' autocratic governance.

Islamists did not play a significant role in the early days of the uprisings. In Tunisia, the government had largely removed such groups from public life. In Egypt, [they joined](#) the Tahrir Square protests late. When opportunities arose, however, Islamists quickly entered the political arena. Tunisia's Ennahda Party and Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood scored massive victories in those countries' first transitional elections. Morocco's equivalent, the Justice and Development Party, formed a series of governments after its electoral victories in 2011 and 2016. Libyan Islamists also joined in the electoral game, with less success. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood played a critical organizational role, mostly from abroad, in the uprising against Assad. By 2012, Islamists seemed to be ascendant.



The aftermath of an attack near Damascus, Syria, January 2018. *Bassam Khabieh / Reuters*

But these groups proved attractive targets for autocratic crackdowns and regional power politics. The post-2011 antidemocratic backlash was marketed in the West by the regimes partly as a response to an alleged Islamist takeover. Egypt's military used arguments like this to legitimate its July 2013 coup and the sweeping, violent repression that followed. In Tunisia, the Ennahda Party practiced a strategy of self-limitation; its prime minister stepped down in favor of a technocrat to short-circuit rapidly escalating political conflict. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), both of which viewed the Muslim Brotherhood as a threat and a Qatari proxy, began to crack down on the movement and declared it a terrorist organization. In response, Qatar and Turkey stepped up their support to the group, welcoming members fleeing Egypt's crackdown and aiding branches still active on the ground in Libya and elsewhere.

Rather than winning the democratic game, most Islamist groups failed thanks to both their own mistakes and government crackdowns. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood—the largest and most influential of those groups—no longer exists in a recognizable form. Tens of thousands of its members are in prison, its remaining leaders are dead or in exile, and its money was confiscated by the Egyptian government. In Jordan, the government has gone a long way toward dismantling the Brotherhood, leaving it fragmented and divided. Morocco’s Islamist Justice and Development Party has lost its luster after years of governing within the king’s constraints. Tunisia’s Ennahda ostentatiously disavowed Islamism and rebranded itself a party of [Muslim democracy](#). And outside of Kuwait, Islamist movements barely function in most Gulf countries. Modern mainstream political Islam is a shadow of its former self.

Violent Islamism is another story. Al Qaeda and its ilk were initially caught off-guard by the uprisings. The rapid success of peaceful protests made the argument that only violent jihad could bring about change look extreme. But Syria’s war rescued them. Early in the conflict, Assad released a cadre of jihadis from prison in an attempt to frame the war as a struggle against terrorism. They were subsequently joined by remnants of what was then the Islamic State in Iraq, which moved some of its leaders and fighters into Syria to join in the battle against Assad. As the uprising morphed into an insurgency, governments from inside and outside the region funneled arms and money to rebel groups. Although Western governments tried to vet and direct aid toward moderate partners, others showed little restraint. Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey all channeled assistance to armed Islamist groups and tolerated private financial support for the conflict. Those funds overwhelmingly went to the most extreme groups, tilting the balance within the rebellion.

The blowback came quickly. In 2013, jihadis in Syria initially split over the declaration of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, but then the group quickly turned its guns against the rest of the opposition. ISIS [swept across](#) eastern Syria and western Iraq, erasing the border and theatrically declaring itself the new caliphate. Its savvy social media campaigns and starkly apocalyptic messaging, coupled with demonstrable military success, drew tens of thousands of supporters to its ranks and inspired attacks abroad. Mainstream Islamist movements now found themselves squeezed between their long-standing rejection of violent jihad and their constituencies’ enthusiasm for groups such as ISIS. How could the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood continue to call for peaceful politics when its electoral participation had brought about only fierce repression and organizational disaster, while ISIS’s violence produced astonishing results?

A decade after they began, the uprisings have radically reshaped Islamist movements. The fortunes of organizations that participated in formal electoral politics spiked and then crashed. In contrast, jihadis suffered grievous setbacks but are still a viable political and ideological force: with few mainstream movements remaining as safety valves and entrenched conflicts offering ample opportunities for mobilization, more jihadi insurgencies seem likely.

THE REGION THE COUNTERREVOLUTION MADE

It wasn’t just Islamist groups that saw their fortunes take sharp turns in the wake of the uprisings. The protesters’ democratic aspirations seemed to portend a new role for the United States—one

that might deliver on U.S. President Barack Obama's famous Cairo speech promising a "new beginning" for American relations with the region. The reality, however, was much different.

The Arab uprisings challenged the entire U.S.-backed order, accelerating Washington's retreat from the region. American disengagement has many causes, including the fiasco of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, shifts in energy dependence, the strategic need to pivot toward Asia, and domestic distaste for far-flung wars. But the uprisings profoundly undermined the United States' core alliances, encouraging local powers to pursue policies at odds with Washington's and inviting global competitors such as China and Russia into the once unipolar region.

A more vigorous U.S. embrace of the uprisings might have helped more democratic transitions take hold. But the Obama administration's efforts proved tepid and ineffective, simultaneously leaving activists feeling betrayed and autocratic allies feeling abandoned. The administration's reluctance to act more forcefully in Syria and its determined pursuit of a nuclear deal with Iran further alienated the United States' autocratic partners. As a result, through much of the past decade, putative U.S. allies, such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, have often worked openly against American policies.

In contrast, the Trump administration shared the worldview of those allies, including their contempt for Arab democracy and the Iran deal. But its policies often proved no more reassuring. President Donald Trump's nonresponse to the 2019 Iranian missile attack on Saudi Arabia's Abqaiq oil refinery, for instance, which shut down nearly five percent of global oil production, shocked the region. On most regional issues, the United States under Trump seemed to have no policy at all. As the U.S. presence in the region has faded, Middle Eastern powers have been forging an incipient new order of their own.

Some parts of this alternative regional system are familiar. The death of an Israeli-Palestinian two-state solution has been a long time coming. The struggle between Iran and its Sunni Arab rivals has metastasized but follows familiar contours from the early years of the century. Iran has upped its use of proxy forces, especially in Iraq and Syria, retaining its regional influence in spite of the Trump administration's withdrawal from the nuclear deal and campaign of "maximum pressure." Tehran's [attack on Abqaiq](#) sent a message to Gulf states that a potential conflict would be costly. The steady campaign of attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq by Iranian-backed Shiite militias even pushed U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to warn that the United States might abandon its embassy in Baghdad—a long-standing Iranian dream.

The real change in the post-uprising region is the emergence of a fault line within the Sunni world stretching across the Gulf, the Levant, and North Africa. With the United States either on the sidelines or obsessed with Iran, Sunni aspirants to Arab leadership, such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the UAE, fought proxy conflicts across the regional map. These competing Sunni blocs backed rival groups in virtually every political transition and civil war, turning local political contests into opportunities for regional competition. The effects were devastating: fractured Egyptian and Tunisian politics, the collapse of Libya's post-Qaddafi transition, and a divided Syrian opposition.

It was into that polarized landscape that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman blundered like a wild elephant. MBS, as the crown prince is widely known, [rose to power](#) in 2015 by sidelining rivals and cowing potential opponents with abandon. Since then, he has initiated a series of disastrous foreign policy moves. He launched an intervention in Yemen that rapidly descended into a quagmire and a humanitarian catastrophe, bizarrely detained Lebanon's prime minister, and allegedly ordered the assassination of the opposition journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Such moves deeply damaged Saudi Arabia's global standing.

Nothing exemplifies the erratic patterns of this newly multipolar Middle East better than the quixotic 2017 Saudi-UAE blockade of Qatar, launched in response to Qatar's supposed support for terrorist groups. The diplomatic spat tore apart the Gulf Cooperation Council, once the region's most effective multilateral body, and hobbled U.S. efforts to build a unified anti-Iranian front. Rather than succumb to the pressure, Qatar simply drew on Iranian and Turkish support, U.S. protection (Doha hosts the massive Al Udeid Air Base, which is used by the United States), and its own vast financial resources. The blockade eventually settled into a semipermanent, but not particularly dangerous, new reality, with tensions mostly playing out through proxy competition in Libya, Sudan, and elsewhere. The United States' inability to compel its allies to resolve their differences and cooperate against Iran shows just how far its influence has fallen since 2011.

This intra-Gulf squabble, moreover, invited an aggressive Turkish bid for regional leadership. In northern Syria, the Turkish military redrew the region's de facto borders and put sufficient pressure on U.S.-backed Kurdish units to force [American troops to withdraw](#). Turkey followed this success with an aggressive intervention in Libya designed to counter Egyptian and UAE support for Khalifa Haftar, the commander of the military forces that oppose the interim government recognized by Turkey and other foreign powers. Turkey's military expansion, closer ties to Qatar, and support for Sunni groups abandoned by Saudi Arabia all crystallized a new regional axis cutting through the Shiite-Sunni divide.

The United States has been virtually invisible in most of these conflicts. Under Trump, whose administration was fixated on Iran and uninterested in the nuances of regional politics, Washington largely disappeared as a major actor, even in areas such as Iraq and Syria, where U.S. troops remain deployed. Far from encouraging democratic change or even defending human rights, Trump instead chose to rely on the United States' autocratic partners—hoping they could ignore public opinion and enter into an open alliance with Israel. Israel's newly formalized relationships with Bahrain and the UAE, alongside broader Gulf support for Israeli efforts to target Iran, offer some vindication of that approach. In the absence of U.S. mediation elsewhere, however, interventions by regional actors have prolonged existing conflicts, with little regard for the well-being of those on the ground. Although the combatants have long since lost sight of their original purpose, entrenched violence grinds on—held in place by regional meddling and local war economies.

WHAT IS TO COME

Despite the Arab uprising's premature obituary and dark legacy, the revolutionary wave of 2011 was not a passing mirage. Ten years on, the region's autocratic façade is cracking once again.

Major uprisings recently blocked the reelection of Algeria's infirm president, led to the overthrow of Sudan's long-ruling leader, and challenged sectarian political orders in Iraq and Lebanon. Lebanon barely has a government after a year of protests, financial disaster, and the fallout of an incomprehensible explosion at Beirut's port. Saudi Arabia has witnessed rapid change at home as it prepares for MBS's presumed royal ascension.

These events initially seemed puzzling. Wasn't the autocrats' victory supposed to restore stability? Weren't Arab publics defeated, exhausted, and despairing? In reality, what looked like an ending was only another turn of a relentless cycle. The regimes supposedly offering stability were, in fact, the primary causes of instability. It was their corruption, autocracy, failed governance, rejection of democracy, and abuse of human rights that drove people to revolt. Once the uprisings began, their violent repression fueled internal polarization and civil war, while exacerbating corruption and economic woes. As long as such regimes form the backbone of the regional order, there will be no stability.



Soldiers guarding a polling place in Sousse, Tunisia, December 2014. *Zoubeir Souissi / Reuters*

More eruptions of mass protests now seem inevitable. There are simply too many drivers of political instability for even the most draconian regime to stay in power indefinitely. The COVID-19 pandemic, the collapse in the price of oil, and a sharp reduction in remittances from migrant laborers have piled intense new pressures onto already disastrously weak economies. Simmering wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen continue to spew out refugees, weapons, and extremism while attracting external intervention. And things could get worse. The tense U.S.

standoff with Iran could escalate suddenly into a hot war, or the collapse of the Palestinian Authority could spark another intifada.

That is why, for all their assertiveness, most autocratic regimes in the region radiate palpable insecurity. Egypt's government crushes every possible sign of popular unrest. Ankara has never recovered from the trauma of a [failed coup attempt](#) in 2016. Iran's leaders obsess over external attempts to foment unrest as they struggle to cope with economic sanctions. Even the government of the UAE, where there have been few signs of domestic instability, raised eyebrows by arresting a British academic for alleged espionage. These are not the behaviors of confident governments. For them, the lesson of 2011 is that existential threats—such as democracy—can emerge from anywhere at any time. Their paranoia, in turn, drives them toward precisely the policies that fuel popular discontent. And thanks to nearly a decade of increased government repression, civil society and political institutions that might ordinarily channel popular frustration no longer exist. When such anger inevitably boils over, it will be more dramatic than ever before.

Future protests are unlikely to resemble the 2011 uprisings. The region has changed too much. Autocrats have learned how to co-opt, disrupt, and defeat challengers. Domestic unrest or regional contagion is unlikely to catch regimes off-guard, and governments are less likely to refrain from using force in the early stages of protest. But potential protesters have also learned valuable lessons. Although autocratic successes have left many Arab publics demoralized and broken, the recent revolutionary movements in Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Sudan have demonstrated that discipline and commitment remain. In all four countries, citizens proved able to sustain nonviolent mobilization for months on end despite crackdowns and provocation.

The political environment in the Middle East has also polarized into competing axes, which blocks the sort of cross-national identification that allowed the Arab uprisings to spread so easily. Unlike in 2011, today there is no unified Arab public. Regional media, once a source of unity, have fragmented. Al Jazeera is now seen as a partisan instrument of Qatari policy, not a platform for shared debate. Arab social media, meanwhile, has been thoroughly colonized by information warfare, bots, and malware, creating a toxic environment in which new cross-ideological coalitions struggle to coalesce. But as the interactions between Algerian and Sudanese protesters and the tenacity of Iraqi and Lebanese movements suggest, these difficulties are surmountable.

Compared with in 2011, moreover, the international environment is less open to a revolutionary wave today, but it is also in less of a position to prevent it. Whereas the Obama administration struggled to reconcile democratic values with strategic interests, the Trump administration fully supported regional autocrats and shared their contempt for popular protest. Nobody in the Middle East today will be looking to Washington for signals or guidance. Arab regimes and protesters alike understand that they are on their own.

To say that another surge of uprisings is coming does not mean subscribing to a deterministic view of history in which the right side inevitably triumphs. Far from it. Uprisings will happen, and when they do, they may well shatter existing orders in ways 2011 did not.

But for all the enormous untapped potential of the Middle East's young population, there is little reason to be hopeful about the Middle East's prospects. Nor will there be any easy, automatic reset when President-elect Joe Biden takes office. The Trump-brokered axis of Gulf states and Israel will likely resist every incremental change in U.S. policy. Iran will not trust U.S. commitments anytime soon. Shattered states will not be easily reconstructed. Refugees will not soon return. Jihadi insurgencies will continue to find ways to regenerate. If no other lesson is learned from 2011, it should be that the Middle East is far beyond the ability of any outside power to control.