REPORT ARAB POLITICS BEYOND THE UPRISINGS

Introduction to Arab Politics beyond the Uprisings

Experiments in an Era of Resurgent Authoritarianism

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The Arab world continues its intense, long reckoning with new political forces even as authoritarian systems reassert control and as some states have devolved into violence. The Middle East and North Africa are in the middle of an era of epochal contestation. Tectonic processes burst to the surface with the popular uprisings of 2010–11, and continue today, albeit often in less visible forms. The region's political energies run the gamut from radical and revolutionary to reactionary and repressive, and are engaged in serious efforts to rearrange the map of hard power and governance. At stake is control, legitimacy, and competition between established and emerging ideologies.

Arab Politics beyond the Uprisings: Experiments in an Era of Resurgent Authoritarianism—the result of a multi-year effort at The Century Foundation, supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York—studies some of the considerable political energy shaping the Arab world. Momentum cuts in all directions—for repression as well as for change—but hard power and political ideology are being profoundly contested. Just as important as the subject matter of this collection's case studies are the methods that they deploy: detail-rich narrative and ethnography that offer grist for analysis and the development of theory, rather than the other way around. Political thought and organization persist whether the times are quiescent or violent. The regional restoration of authoritarianism has not resolved the pivotal struggle underway, although for the time being it has shifted the balance in favor of reactionaries.

Keeping an Eye on Political Ferment

The research in this series seeks to identify the ideas and mechanics at play in a region where governance, state control, and legitimacy are being contested—by established forces as well as new constituencies empowered since the peak of the uprisings. No longer is Arab politics a slow-moving competition dominated by dictators, monarchs, and organized Islamist parties. A host of actors are now vying for political space, including empowered bureaucracies and institutional players, wealthy individuals, militants, populist political movements, civil society organizations, journalists, artists, and protesters. Generations of repression failed to erase political life, which has sprouted in marginal and at times unexpected places. From some of these quarters, new thinkers and activists have proceeded to challenge the power of the state, lay their own claims to hard power, and articulate different visions of political life and governance. These energies and movements are by no means always benign or idealistic. Their ideology and goals vary, and they include many actors whose primary focus is the construction of a more resilient authoritarian order.

Quite clearly, political energy and aspiration have survived the political uprisings and their short-term defeat. It is less clear in what direction that energy will push the Arab states and whether the reversal of the popular revolts will become permanent.

At the time of this writing, more than six years have passed since much of the Arab world erupted in revolt against decades of corrupt authoritarian misrule. Today, the region's story is largely one of authoritarianism restored, or fiercely defending itself in civil wars that are reducing some states to ruin. The optimism of 2011 can feel like a historical artifact, an idealistic, perhaps naïve aspiration built on hope without any firm analytical foundations.

However, the underlying causes of the uprisings for the most part remain unresolved. And political life throughout the region has changed irreversibly, even in places such as Syria or Egypt that have suffered pronounced backlash and repression since the peak revolutionary moments of 2011. These changes are not always for the better, and in some cases have quite clearly been for the worse. Yet there are considerable forces at play in the Middle East and North Africa today, engaged directly in the political sphere as never before. Existing communities and institutions, such as the independent media, have taken part in political discourse and idea creation with renewed vigor. Plutocrats and wealthy individuals, always a key adjunct to ruling regimes in weak states, have expanded their political agency. As resurgent authoritarians increase pressure on civil society, political efforts have continued in the human rights and reform communities. In some cases, authoritarian pressure has spawned new, sometimes radical political challenges from political organizers determined to throw off old ideological and sectarian labels. As authoritarians have silenced political discussions in traditional venues, such as labor unions and talk shows, the breach has been filled by spaces that are relative new to overt politics, such as the fine arts. In states weakened by civil war, experiments at self-rule and new politics have emerged in the ungoverned interstices. Some are malignant, like the Islamic State group, some carry on the inclusive reform rhetoric of the early uprisings, and some fall in between. All of them represent profound and ongoing disruptions of the political order that existed before the uprisings. However the wars evolve, the effects of these experiments on politics and society will be enduring.

There is no evidence-based reason to believe that progress is inevitable in the Arab world, any more than there is evidence that it is doomed to an eternity of sclerotic despotism. The region is still rife with extensive and abiding aspirations for a new order: there are efforts at creation, and a backlash against them; the erosion of state institutions and local initiatives to replace them; and fragmented challenges to fragmenting ideologies of legitimacy. These efforts and trends are too frequently glossed over in simplistic judgments of the uprisings' failures and successes. The Arab world remains in dramatic flux, and contains a multitude of possibilities.

Better Techniques for Understanding Arab Politics

The Century Foundation conceived this project with two primary aims. First, to document with clarity and precision the forces at play in the region, with special attention to under-studied regional interactions, ideological shifts, and political spaces not traditionally associated with the pursuit of hard power or political change. Second, to showcase an approach steeped in granular detail and historical context, so as to record some of the region's contemporary political history before it fades from living memory. This approach, we hope, will enrich the understanding of policy makers, analysts, and scholars who are rooted outside the region, bring them in closer contact with those from and based in the Arab world, and foster a spirit of communal inquiry and cooperation.

During the last wave of popular uprisings, many close observers of Arab political life, including some of its central participants, were shocked by the widespread popular anger that coalesced in 2010–11, and by the unexpected potential of people power to bring recalcitrant governments to heel. In fact, much of the thinking and organizing that bubbled into public view during the revolts had long been coalescing, and in plain sight—at least plain enough for a few activists and researchers who were interested and receptive.

Many factors contributed to the failure to fully appreciate Arab political dynamics prior to 2010, especially the growing energy and courage of the constituencies willing to oppose government policies. Before the uprisings, many observers of Arab politics tracked popular movements and smaller activist efforts, but few expected them to play an important or influential role. Analysts looking for drivers of political instability often discounted activity in marginal or secondary spaces such as the arts, among students and the wealthy, and in civil society. Soft politics and culture were often considered separate and unrelated to the pursuit of hard power, which supposedly only took place in spaces such as political parties, labor unions, the military, and the ruler's inner circle.

Of course, it is easy in hindsight to pinpoint crises or movements that later proved important. Still, there are lessons to be learned from analysts' oversights in the lead-up to the upheaval. For one, it pays for researchers and policy analysts to invest attention in a wide array of political and social actors. Traditional power centers and institutions remained important throughout the peak period of popular revolt, but were also joined by a crowd of suddenly important new entrants to the political arena. Effective research and analysis required quickly adapting to an expanded range of actors. Looking ahead to the coming period of political ferment and contestation in the Arab world, observers, analysts, and policymakers should position themselves to best understand the forces at play and the drivers of instability, transition, and restoration.

This project doesn't claim to predict which social phenomena will play future roles as drivers of instability or change—to do so is plainly impossible. Instead, these studies should encourage a broad and agnostic analysis of a wide range of political spaces. These contemporary histories and ethnographic reports improve the analytical tools at our disposal and contribute important qualitative data. This is not to suggest that a deeper and more nuanced understanding of political, social, and cultural dynamics will allow for more accurate predictions of coming instability. Rather, our hope is that this research can place analysts in a better position to understand the next unexpected political events that occur in the Arab world.

Historical Perspective

The popular uprisings that began in December 2010 in Tunisia sparked a wave of engagement across the Middle East and North Africa, whose reverberations continue to this day. Throughout 2011, the region was enthralled by bold ambitions for a new dawn of accountable governance, transparency, and rights. It was considered inevitable that an old generation of dictators would be swept away, and it was widely believed that massive change, driven by the inchoate power of the people, would manage to implement revolutionary change without violence or civil strife.

Tunisia alone seems to have charted a relatively favorable course. Elsewhere, the best scenarios are where the status quo survived without widespread violence, as in Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, or Saudi Arabia. In other countries, uprisings were quashed, as in Bahrain; dictatorships returned, as in Egypt; or war decimated the state, as in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen.

Human rights monitoring, advocacy, direct action, and documentary journalism all have critical roles to play in holding state power accountable. But none function by design as a pathway to power, or even to reform or change. They are adjuncts, not levers—and certainly not direct sources of hard power. One of the distortions of authoritarianism is that it neuters representative and mobilizing hard-power institutions—labor unions, political parties, and so on—that normally act to check and balance the government. As a result, ill-equipped soft spaces often take up the role of balancing and challenging the state. In authoritarian states, journalists, human rights monitors, and other entities conceived as referees or watchdogs end up substituting for the opposition, since the state has eliminated all formal rivals. For decades, this set-up neutralized challenges to the state. But the endemic, generational failures of states to deliver on promises of services, security, and citizenship actually transformed these soft-power incubators into viable contenders for hard power.

This project emphasizes the basic tools of qualitative research, with detailed descriptions, interviews, and contemporary histories that enable comparative analysis. A firmly grounded understanding of what has happened and what is happening today makes the best starting point for any policy analysis about what is to be done and what might happen next. The project's approach carries, we believe, great potential for use in researching other spaces as incubators of political ideation, including but not limited to the economy, burgeoning institutions like the civil defense corps in rebel Syria (known as the White Helmets), initiatives to document history and culture across the region, sports fan clubs, informal groupings of the wealthy, militias, and prisons. This project puts forward data that should be useful even without the analyses that accompany it, and the case studies should be of enduring use to those who study and observe the Arab region.

Research across Sectors and National Boundaries

We couldn't tackle every overlooked or under-researched case that came to mind, so we begin, in this project, with a selection of studies that shed light on emerging political dynamics and illustrate the approach we want to promote. We would have liked to include studies on Egyptian prisons as incubators of political thought; wealthy individuals, such as Egyptian billionaire Naguib Sawiris, as influential political vectors; pan-Arabism among online media activists and journalists around the region; nongovernmental organizations coping strategies adapted to post-uprising crackdowns; and other ideas. But the inquiries in this project make a sound start, both in charting new territory and in embodying an analytical approach based on observation and ethnography. We have organized the research into four loose categories: ideas and practice, civil society, culture and media, and governance.

The first section, focusing on ideas and practice, examines regional factors and trends that illustrate the cross-border interactions and learning that played an integral role in the revolts and the reaction to them. We chose just a few fundamental concepts that have been central during the recent period to underscore the importance of ideology, regional modeling and emulation, and the overt borrowing that takes place among governments and movements within the Arab world. Michael Wahid Hanna charts the role of liberalism—notable, like liberalism, more for its absence than its presence. He focuses on Egypt, as part of a larger inquiry into the intellectual history and future prospects of secularism as an organizing idea in Arab politics. Nathan J. Brown and Benjamin Helfand tackle the broad yet shallow adoption of a legal reform paradigm by revolutionary movements. Their close look at judicial reform constituencies in revolutionary Egypt, and the stalled truth and reconciliation effort in Tunisia, tells a cautionary tale for movements that substitute ready-made rule of law rhetoric for an articulated political agenda of their own. Monica Marks draws authoritatively on the details of Tunisia's transition, the lone clear-cut success story from the uprisings, to question how extensively Arab countries should set expectations based on the trajectory of their neighbors. Shared political idioms and forces shape the

wider Arab region, but specific factors make Tunisia's transition away from dictatorship of only limited use as a blueprint for other Arab states. Michael Stephens tells the story of the battle for influence between the wealthy monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula, whose regional ambitions have been an underestimated driver of Arab politics. Stephens's account persuasively illustrates the significance of Gulf foreign policy. Despite a mismatch between financial resource and policymaking capacity, the monarchies have driven many of the region's political pathologies, including entrenched disputes between competing Islamist factions and between Islamist and secular authoritarians. The chapters in this section apply interdisciplinary methods to a regional canvas, and assume a coherent if limited affinity within the Arab region. Usually such analysis is reserved for factors like religion, jihadi mobilization, the resource curse, the regional impact of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, or American or Russian influence. The studies in this project apply the same broad palette to other forces and ideologies that spring from the region.

The second section focuses on civil society, the wellspring for much of the activism during the uprisings and a continuing source of opposition to unfettered state power. The Arab world's vibrant civil society has long disproved arguments that the region lacks initiative. In the period since the uprisings, however, critical sectors of civil society have been saddled with outsized expectations as they try to fill voids left by indifferent governments or ineffectual political parties. I examine the efforts of a fledgling Lebanese political movement, Beirut Madinati, which challenged the existing political order and self-consciously tried to learn from the previous popular reform and dissident movements in the region. Beirut Madinati's wide appeal but limited successes raise important questions about the potential for popular protest movements on their own to pressure ossified political systems. Sima Ghaddar looks at another Lebanese movement, a grassroots coalition that tried without success to alter the country's citizenship laws so that women would be able to pass nationality to their spouses and children. She argues that citizens can benefit from improved services and political representation even in the aftermath of failed efforts to change laws. Khaled Mansour chronicles the unprecedented levels of repression deployed against Egypt's vibrant human rights community as part of a wider crackdown on civil society by the authoritarian regime. He argues that a critical and free civil society is not only a moral imperative, but a necessary precursor for economic and political health. Karim Medhat Ennarah demythologizes Egypt's organized "Ultras," or extreme soccer fans. He documents the history of the Ultras and the struggle for accountability and justice after seventy-two fans were killed in a stadium stampede in Port Said in 2012. The inconclusive saga challenges neat preconceptions about class, justice, and agency in Egypt's popular uprising.

The third section looks at culture and media. These chapters analyze political spaces that are often relegated to the margins as vectors of "soft power," or as cultural artifacts that reflect social currents without playing a meaningful role in political life. Especially in authoritarian states that close traditional avenues of political expression and contestation, other public spaces assume outsize importance. As a result, arts, cultural activities, journalism, and online communities often become some of the sole or most important forums for political organizing, argument, and expression. Are artists

and journalists political forces in their own right, or do they reflect hard politics and activism that have been banished from the public sphere by security states? The answer, it seems, is both. Ursula Lindsey profiles art activists in Morocco who have self-consciously taken up a banner that they believe political activists have dropped—and who fashion themselves, through their arts work, as a bulwark against Islamists. All power politics is local, social and cultural, Lindsey's research suggests. Political cartoonists in Egypt have pushed the red lines of free expression, argues Jonathan Guyer in a rich and nuanced chronicle of one of the few public spaces that has preserved a measure of critical autonomy during Egypt's authoritarian relapse. Far from serving as a mere safety valve, Guyer writes, cartoonists manage to criticize authorities and nurture oppositional ideas at a time when such activity is rarer and more dangerous than ever. Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi affords us a longer view of a similar phenomenon, showing the dual role of fine arts painters as simultaneously darlings and critics of the ruling elite. Egypt's painters have acted as a sort of social conscience, opportunistically flitting between the roles of political gadfly and activist. The political relevance of fine arts cannot be denied, he writes, but nor should it be overstated, as painters, like many other displaced political exponents, navigate the narrow lanes of permissible discourse in an authoritarian state. Also in Egypt, the online publication Mada Masr emerged as one of the more dynamic, and long-lasting revolutionary institutions founded in the spirit of the 2011 uprising. Like many of its peer collectives, Mada has tried to embody revolutionary ideals while building an institution it hopes can challenge state power. Laura C. Dean's oral history of Mada tells an important story about Egypt, and simultaneously embodies a style of case study research we believe is vital to documenting and understanding Arab politics in opaque times. Expanding on some of the dynamics that drive Mada, Marc Lynch investigates the wider context of the thought communities built on new media platforms. He finds that many of the same forces that drove the 2010–11 wave of revolts persist, and that despite authoritarian pressure, so do the tools and spaces where critical dissident communities organized and sharpened their ideas. Social media, Lynch argues, will play a major role in future waves of change in the Arab world.

The fourth and final section examines governance. Arab authoritarians, like their peers around the world, often justify their abuses with the paternalistic claim that their subjects simply aren't ready for democracy or any other form of self-governance. And yet the Arab region is hosting more experiments than ever before in self-rule and autonomous local governance. What can we learn from some of the pivotal cases of governance since the uprisings? This project's governance studies explore the mechanics of rule in areas of Syria and Egypt where traditional power arrangements have come under strain or have collapsed entirely. (There is much related work to be undertaken across the region, but especially in zones of conflict or absentee state rule, including Lebanon, Libya, Yemen, and Syria.) Starting in Syria, Samer Abboud expands our view of the conflict to include a mostly underestimated factor: the new elite created by the wartime economy. Syria's new conflict class, Abboud argues, perpetuates the strife and will play an important role in any postwar order. Yasser Munif delves into the early revolutionary period in the city of Manbij, where leftist and nationalist rebels briefly created alternative power structures that radically challenged not only Syria's regime but also dominant

Western, neoliberal norms. In a pathbreaking study of the intersection of Islamist ideology, warlordism and the wartime smuggling economy, Aron Lund tells the story of the rise and fall of a Syrian rebel enclave on the edge of Damascus. His rich account forces us to understand the local and mercenary motives of many of the Syrian conflict's most pivotal actors. It also provides a template for analyzing conflict, ideology, and self-rule on a bedrock of unsparing, holistic observations that take into account a sometimes bewildering sweep of actors and motivations. Sam Heller employs a similar approach to examine the record of rebel self-rule in the province of Idlib through the competition between two dominant Islamist militias for control and the loyalty of residents. An empirical account of the local government and service networks built by the Islamist militias drives a broader inquiry into the problems of establishing alternative substates in the shadow of even a weak authoritarian central authority like Bashar al-Assad's. Related efforts have gathered momentum in communities in Egypt and Syria where noncombatants have carved out elements of local rule or local initiative through various guises of civilian local or popular committees. Cilja Harders and Dina Wahba draw on extensive fieldwork over a long period of time to assess the potential of the popular committees that have brought new, if flawed, forms of representation to marginalized neighborhoods in Cairo. Asya El-Meehy asks critical questions about whether these organic local committees and councils in Syria and Egypt fulfil their stated promises of inclusion, representation, and transparency. Her original empirical research suggests that experiments in local self-rule often fall short of their aims and ideals.

Root Causes and Future Change

We hope that the chapters in this series encourage detail-rich studies that are overtly engaged in policy analysis and addressing the needs of policymakers. We have carefully chosen these case studies not only for the topics they focus on, but for the methods they employ. If the community of analysts, academics, policy makers, journalists and others concerned with the political condition of the Arab states is to better understand it, there needs to be an accurate map of the political landscape and the forces at play. Traditional power centers remain pivotal and are often the only elements of the political equation subjected to thorough study and analysis. But as the last few decades have shown, Arab political efforts are underway beyond known spaces such as the military, ruling party, official opposition, and labor unions.

We are concerned with the past: the root causes, the structural factors, the details of social displacement, repression, and political aspiration. Equally, we are concerned with the future: where change might come from, where the forces of the status quo or of authoritarianism are likely to flourish, and how these competing forces might fare. A complete picture of the present political moment requires detailed ethnographic data along with a contextualizing theoretical framework. Citizens and rulers in the Arab world will continue to litigate their governing compacts in the coming years against a backdrop of increasing turbulence not just in the Middle East and North Africa but worldwide. Many of the pathologies

studied in isolation as phenomena of the Arab world will more and more obviously be understood as universal political phenomena. Specific context and history will be all the more crucial to differentiate the outcomes and effects of street protests, popular movements, authoritarian executives, balkanized institutions, entrenched networks of patronage, and corruption. The nineteen studies collected here will provide an invaluable guide to the next phase of political struggle in the Arab world. We also believe they provide a template for analyzing popular politics in authoritarian contexts.

Read the Reports

You can find the reports in this series on the TCF website, where they will be released at weekly intervals in the following order between now and May 2017. The edited volume will be available from TCF Press in May 2017.

Governance

Sam Heller, "Keeping the Lights On in Rebel Idlib: Local Governance, Services, and the Competition for Legitimacy among Islamist Armed Groups."

Aron Lund, "Into the Tunnels: The Rise and Fall of Syria's Rebel Enclave in the Eastern Ghouta."

Samer Abboud, "The Economics of War and Peace in Syria: Stratification and Factionalization in the Business Community."

Asya El-Meehy, "Governance from Below: Comparing Local Experiments in Egypt and Syria after the Uprisings"

Cilja Harders and Dina Wahba, "New Neighborhood Power: Informal Popular Committees and Changing Local Governance in Egypt."

Yasser Munif, "Participatory Democracy and Micropolitics in Manbij: An Unthinkable Revolution."

Ideas and Practice

Nathan J. Brown and Benjamin Helfand, "Reforming Justice: The Failure of Politics and Rule-of-Law Reform in Egypt and Tunisia."

Monica Marks, "Tunisia's Unwritten Story: The Complicated Lessons of a Peaceful Transition."

Michael Stephens, "The Arab Cold War Redux: The Foreign Policy of the Gulf Cooperation Council States since 2011."

Michael Wahid Hanna, "A Tangible Absence: The Eclipse of Liberal and Secular Thought in the Arab World"

Civil Society

Thanassis Cambanis, "People Power and Its Limits: Lessons from Lebanon's Anti-Sectarian Reform Movement."

Sima Ghaddar, "Second-Class Citizenship: Lebanese Women Fight to Pass Nationality to Children and Spouses."

Khaled Mansour, "Egypt's Human Rights Movement: Repression, Resistance, and Co-optation."

Karim Medhat Ennarah, "The Ultras Ahlawy: Football, Violence, and the Quest for Justice."

Culture and Media

Ursula Lindsey, "Culture Is the Solution: As Political Reform Stalls, Moroccan Activists Engage Citizens through Art."

Jonathan Guyer, "Speech Bubbles: Comics and Political Cartoons in Sisi's Egypt."

Sultan al-Qassemi, "The Politics of Egyptian Fine Art: Giving a Voice to the People."

Laura C. Dean, "All Truth Is Worth Publishing: Mada Masr and the Fight for Free Speech in Egypt."

Marc Lynch, "Mobilizing through Online Media: Why the Internet Still Matters for Change in the Middle East."

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