



# **The Arab Uprisings: Causes, Consequences and Perspectives**

An Extended Summary of a Panel Discussion with Rami Khouri

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## FOREWORD

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This paper is an extended summary of a panel discussion with Rami Khouri on the topic of “The Arab Uprisings – Causes, Consequences, and Perspectives.” The event took place on October 23, 2013 at Kenensaw State University (KSU) and was organized by the International Conflict Analysis and Transformation (ICAT) research initiative, KSU’s PhD Program in International Conflict Management, and KSU’s Institute for Global Initiative.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

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On December 17, 2010 a policewoman confiscated Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi's unlicensed vegetable cart. She then allegedly slapped him, spit in his face, and insulted his deceased father. Bouazizi tried to lodge a protest with local officials, but they refused to meet with him. In response, Bouazizi set himself on fire. Bouazizi's action exposed the Tunisian population's widespread discontent and frustration with the status quo. While he was in the hospital, anti-government demonstrations sprung up throughout Tunisia. Bouazizi died on January 4<sup>th</sup> 2011. Ten days later Tunisian president, Ben Ali fled the country.

Bouazizi's death and the subsequent Tunisian revolution sparked a wave of protests throughout the Arab world. Within three years of Bouazizi's death, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen all experienced forced leadership changes. Protests, riots and demonstrations erupted in Algeria, Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Djibouti, Mauritania, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Palestine, and Western Sahara. Syria is still embroiled in a horrific civil war.

In this paper, we attempt to disentangle the causes and consequences of the Arab Uprisings. Section two of the paper touches on the historical, economic, and political factors at play in the Arab world, including a discussion of the roles of colonialism, socialist development philosophies, shallow economic reforms and political interplay with the West. We also contrast how transition in the Arab countries differs from the transition that took place in Central and Eastern Europe during the 1990's. Section three focuses on some of the many actors in the region, their interests and roles in exacerbating or mitigating the uprisings. In section four, we explore the broader international context, and examine how U.S. foreign policy, Russia, the United Nations (UN), and the European Union (EU) each responded to the uprisings. The paper concludes with a look forward and some thoughts on economic and political stability in the Arab world and the lessons to be learned.

## 2. HISTORY, ECONOMICS AND POLITICS OF THE ARAB REGION

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What caused citizens in the Arab world to rise up against their governments? While widespread frustration must have been a necessary cause, this section explores the complex constellation of historical, economic, and political factors in more detail.

### History: the seeds of dissonance

Historically, the evolution of the state occurred differently in the Arab world than in many other parts of the world. In Europe, for example, nation states evolved over more than a thousand years and their paths towards national consolidation were plastered by countless civil, interstate, and even world wars. Europeans largely chose their national identities without external interference. Over time, European tribes identified themselves as nations with common cultural, linguistic, religious, and geographic characteristics, and this all occurred before they transitioned into political states.

Over more than five centuries, the Arab world was colonized by the Ottomans, French, British and Italians. The post-Ottoman colonial period is particularly important to understand why the social fabrics of the various countries have never been as tightly knit as, for example, among European nation states. Most Arab peoples were simply not given the time to grow into nations before turning into political states. Instead, post-colonialism organized Arab people into states that were expected to grow into nations.

The so-called colonial dialectic is a useful concept to understand social dynamics in post-colonial societies (see for example Henry and Springborg 2001). This colonial dialectic consists of three moments. The first moment of colonization is often associated with assimilation. This assimilation process acknowledges that colonization has generated winners in the colonized countries as well. These winners were often urban elites who engaged in commercial activities with the colonial rulers, spoke their language, and favored their educational and cultural systems.

The second moment of the colonial dialectic consists of a counter-movement against assimilation. This counter-movement originated from those that were marginalized by colonial rule. These disenfranchised groups were typically rural peasants, whose cause was often supported by idealistic intellectuals. For those who were left behind by colonization, the military was the only opportunity for social upward mobility. Consequently, officers with strong anti-colonial sentiments gradually took over command in the military, and they were only waiting to seize the first opportunity to oust colonial rulers and their puppet regimes. For the Arab world, this second moment began in the early 1950s.

When Arab states won independence with military overthrows, authoritarian regimes with socialist ideals came to power and the winners and losers from the first moment changed places. Commercial elites became marginalized and socialist ideas promised rural communities a better future. With independence, an ideological divide between capitalist and socialist ideas was institutionalized and has never been democratically reconciled. Any reconciliation between the colonized assimilators from the first moment of the colonial dialectic and their adversaries from the second moment is what would be the third and final moment of post-colonial national consolidation. The Arab Uprisings can be seen as the beginning of this third moment.

In the Arab world, societal complications resulting from the colonial dialectic are often complicated by tribal and religious tensions. Many of the early conflicts in the Arab world had at their origin leaders who identified with a certain tribe, religion, or ideology. These leaders consolidated their power by putting people from their own kinship into the most important decision-making positions. In practice, this was often the beginning of intra-societal conflicts, which have festered beneath the surface for decades.

## **Economics: Shallow reforms and inequitable socioeconomic development**

With the exception of Bahrain, the Arab Uprisings have been thus far limited to republics, namely Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria. Monarchies have largely weathered popular discontent. This suggests that monarchies are better at oppressing popular frustration, or that people in monarchies are less frustrated, or both. From an economic perspective, “both” seems to be indeed the most plausible explanation.

After independence, Arab governments quickly became major players in development. Arab countries like Egypt, Libya, Syria, Iraq, and South Yemen pursued Arab-socialist development philosophies. Unfortunately, although socialism looks good at early stages of development, it quickly loses its charm once politicians and citizens realize that permanent central planning does not work and corruption ultimately sets in. When socialism collapsed in Central and Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s, many Arab states faced hard times as well. The oil price collapsed, the socialist division of labor fell apart, and its mutual political support system dissolved. This was in particular a kiss of death to South Yemen, which reunited with North Yemen in 1990. Other governments in the Arab world were not seriously challenged by popular uprisings at that time and stayed in power. This had catastrophic economic consequences.

Economic reforms without political reforms are by nature shallower than economic reforms that are accompanied by democratization. Shallow economic reforms typically involve only liberalizing trade policies; deeper economic reforms also transform manufacturing and industrial sectors. From a political stability perspective, economic reforms are more effective when they create more jobs in newly developing industries. These jobs provide alternative opportunities for those being laid off in inefficient sectors. Shallow economic reforms perform rather poorly in this regard. They are generally limited to the opening of new stores, restaurants and hotels, but do very little for the creation of highly-paid jobs.

Deep economic reforms that also transform manufacturing and industries, on the other hand, create such much-needed jobs.

In addition to trade liberalization, Central and Eastern Europe benefitted considerably from foreign direct investment that provided new job opportunities for those being laid off in formerly inefficient state-owned enterprises. In the Arab world, on the other hand, economic reforms did not attract much investment that would create many new jobs.

Although shallower than in Central and Eastern Europe, economic reforms in the Arab world had nevertheless led to economic growth. This economic growth, however, generally benefitted only a few, for example, the possessors of scarce import licenses or the owners of cell phone and internet services. Moreover, not surprisingly, those who benefitted most from economic reforms were often closely related to the political leadership, thus adding political dissatisfaction to the economic frustration that ultimately fueled the Arab Uprisings. This economic misery was a unifying force in otherwise heterogeneous Arab societies, and this unity came to a head with the overthrow of political regimes. After the ousting of the regimes, the social heterogeneity along tribal, ideological and religious lines quickly resurfaced, which complicated political consolidation, bringing to an end the third moment of the colonial dialectic.

The future economic course of the Arab world is highly uncertain. When socialism in Central and Eastern Europe broke down, or Latin America was confronted with the debt crisis, citizens had been widely unified in acknowledging that there are no alternatives to democratization and liberal market reforms. In the Arab world, liberal market reforms are not necessarily seen as the only way into a better future. Market reforms, at least in rhetoric, had already been advocated by Ben Ali, Mubarak, and even Assad. Liberal market reforms since 2010 have, therefore, a very different connotation in the Arab world than in the 1980s and 1990s in Central and Eastern Europe and Latin America, respectively.

Most Arab citizens do not only yearn for political freedom and economic opportunities, but an economic constitution that combines market freedom with equitable social development. Both alleged liberal market reforms introduced by Arab leaders and structural adjustment in other parts of the world succeeded in terms of growth but failed in terms of equity. Thus, the reputation of market liberalism is tainted. In addition, the outbreak of the 2008 global financial and economic crisis was also not helpful to boost market liberalism's popularity. These events provided the perfect soil for political Islam and the view of Islamic economics as a third way to market liberalism. Of course, both political Islam and Islamic economics still owe Arab citizens a conclusive economic constitution that can overcome the concerns of their skeptics.

Despite his 2012 democratic election, Egypt's Islamist model under Morsi was not that sustainable third way toward market capitalism or socialist central planning, as the 2013 revolt demonstrated. After coming to power, Morsi confused democratic victory and the right to govern within a particular social contract with the power to change that social contract. Morsi unfortunately emerged from a long tradition of presidentialism and reliance on a cult of leadership in Egypt, which Nasser had perfected. Egypt has never had a culture of cooperative constitutionalism and Morsi turned out not to be the man who would lay the first stone of a democratic foundation for Egypt.

Arab countries are not all alike with respect to their colonial legacies and the characteristics of their particular colonial dialectic. In contrast to Egypt, developments in Tunisia, for example, have been more promising. Tunisia had a post-colonial vision of constitutionalism, which originated in the so-called "neo-dostour" movement, where "dostour" is the Arabic word for constitution. Perhaps because of this historical precedent, Islamists in Tunisia have been more cooperative than in Egypt and more prepared to participate in the democratic process. Today, many Arab countries deal with legacies of political authoritarianism, botched economic reforms, and considerable Western support for both. An important question is therefore: What were the political dynamics behind this constellation of legacies?

## **Politics: Western support but a missing social contract**

As mentioned above, socialist-flavored Arab countries came under considerable political and economic pressure at the end of the 1980s and early 1990s when socialism in Central and Eastern Europe collapsed. This was particularly true for Egypt and Syria. After the disintegration of the USSR, both countries required Western support. This was easier for Egypt, which had already signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1979 and therefore became a de-facto partner of the West and a major recipient of foreign aid. Syria embarked on a similar strategy at the beginning of the 1990s by agreeing to initiate peace talks with Israel. Before that, Syria was also cooperative in negotiating a peace treaty to end Lebanon's civil war. Both factors helped Syria increase its political stature with the West. Moreover, both countries were given the opportunity to intensify their bonds with the West by agreeing to join the allied military forces in the liberation of Kuwait (1990-1991).

Tunisia has always had friendly relationships with the West. Tunisia had been colonized for a relatively short period (1881-1956) as compared to, for example Egypt, which fell under French and British influence as early as 1798, or Algeria, which became a French colony in 1830. The wedge driven into the society by colonial rule was therefore less deep in Tunisia, and as a result it emerged politically more moderate than Egypt and Algeria after independence. The same holds for Morocco, which experienced brief colonization between 1912 and 1956.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the West had good reasons to maintain its relationships with the existing relatively friendly and stable political regimes in North Africa. The only exceptions were Libya, where Qaddafi pursued an anti-American course, and Algeria, where a wait-and-see policy guided relations even though a pro-Western government had stopped democratization "experiments" when it became clear that the Islamic Salvation Front would emerge victorious.

In contrast to the relationships with governments in Central and Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s and early 1990s, the West saw few reasons, if any, why regime change in the Arab world

could be to its benefit. Of course, it can only be speculated what would have happened in the Arab world, had the West not propped up many of its political regimes. In that case it is possible the Arab Uprisings would have occurred at the same time as the transformation in Central and Eastern Europe.

Political consolidation towards a more democratic society requires at least three things. First, a broad consensus is necessary on the social contract reflecting the normative values of society and the constitutional principles that regulate government-citizens relationships. Secondly, functioning institutions like courts, military, and a public administration, which are committed to upholding these principles, must be in place. Only after these two conditions are met, democratic decision-making processes regarding the provision of certain public goods can be expected to function without political turmoil. In the Arab world, these three steps are occurring less sequentially rather than simultaneously. So far, Tunisia seems to be the country closest to successfully managing these challenges.

Given the socio-economic complexities in the Arab world, successful democratic consolidation will be a time-consuming process. This complexity must be acknowledged by all stakeholders, including the West, which has a tendency to romanticize and overestimate the power of democratic elections. In order to master the difficult negotiations towards a social contract, most Arab states possibly could have reduced political violence following the overthrow of their regimes, if they had agreed on technocratic governments first. The task of these technocratic governments should simply have been to maintain existing government operations, which would have given the various tribal, religious, and ideological groups enough time to agree on a social contract.

### **3. REGIONAL ACTORS**

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What were the internal dynamics at play in the Arab Uprisings? How did different actors influence the various movements across the region? This section explores these questions by examining the roles of certain regional actors as well as the role played by new social media technology.

## The Muslim Brotherhood

Religious groups in the region have garnered much attention throughout the Arab Uprisings. Strained relations between the West and Islam, especially since the collapse of the Soviet Union, have magnified the role of religion in the Arab world. Perhaps undue emphasis has been placed on the role of religious groups in the region and their influence on recent events, but the rise of Islamism interwoven with political revolutions further blur the lines between politics and religion. While there have been legitimate religious groups at work in the Arab Uprisings, many are simply “fringe militant terrorists” according to regional expert Rami Khouri, who adds that he “would not dignify some of them by calling them religious groups” (October 2013). It is important to distinguish between religious groups that are working to gain political power and groups that use religion towards their own ends. Khouri identified the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis as legitimate religious groups. Both Islamist movements seek adherence to Islam and Islamic law as a guide for Muslim life in the family, community and state.

The Muslim Brotherhood was founded in Egypt in 1928 and has proliferated throughout the Arab world. While the Brotherhood was banned from the political scene in Egypt in its early history due to its goals of governmental overthrow, the organization has gained popular support over the years for its philanthropic activities (Laub 2012). Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) is perhaps one of the most well-known members of the Brotherhood and is credited with promoting armed struggle against the state. He laid out this idea in his 1964 book *Ma'alim fi al-Tariq* or *Milestones*. In it he points to the limits of Western democracy and also the failures of Marxism in the Eastern Bloc. He calls for a way of life that is “harmonious with human nature, which is positive and constructive, and which is practicable” (Qutb 1964, 4). Islam, he says, is the means by which to achieve this goal.

Qutb explains throughout *Milestones* how Islam should guide the creation of an Islamic society. Since the time of the Prophet Mohammed, people have drifted away from Islam and God; this condition is known as *Jahiliyyah* or ignorance. Qutb asserts that “Islam cannot fulfill its role except by taking

concrete form in a society, rather, in a nation; for man does not listen, especially in this age, to an abstract theory which is not seen materialized in a living society. From this point of view, we can say that the Muslim community has been extinct for a few centuries..." (Qutb 1964, 4). This doctrine is often cited by extremists "to argue that governments not based on Sharia are apostate and therefore legitimate targets of jihad" (Laub 2012).

The Muslim Brotherhood turned from its use of armed struggle in 1970, towards a practical approach to achieving their objectives of an Islamic state; creating an Islamic vanguard. While the concept of an Islamic vanguard was part of Qutb's *Milestones*, the Brotherhood shifted from "building a vanguard of Jihadists to building a vanguard of political workers and politicians" (Zenishek 2013). The new approach to creating an Islamic vanguard sought to Islamize society through political elites and societal engagement (Brown 2010).

Although the first political candidate associated with the Muslim Brotherhood ran for office in 1984, most of the period of Hosni Mubarak's rule was devastating for the Brotherhood, which mostly played the role of an oppressed opposition party. It was not until Egypt's 2011 Mubarak ouster that the Brotherhood really began to gain political traction. The 2011-2012 parliamentary elections saw the Brotherhood win 45% of the seats in the People's Assembly and 58% of the contested seats in the Shura Council. Rutherford points out that the Muslim Brotherhood was "the only competitor with a strong national organization, which paid off" (2013, 43). The organizational capacity of the Muslim Brotherhood is perhaps then to be credited with the group's sustainability and success as compared to other religious groups. In addition to winning parliamentary seats, Mohammed Morsi became the first Muslim Brotherhood candidate to be elected to the presidency in 2012. As mentioned above, Morsi's brief tenure as president was not without controversy. Many were fearful of a Sharia state and the potential infringements on civil liberties and women's rights (Laub 2012). Morsi proceeded to appoint 17 governors across Egypt that were affiliated with the Brotherhood, fueling new concern and protest.

Shortly thereafter Morsi was ousted by the military and the new constitution was suspended pending revision. January 2014 saw votes on a new constitution that restored the state's previous ban on religiously affiliated political parties (Laub 2012).

The Muslim Brotherhood has no doubt played an important role in the Arab Uprisings, specifically within Egypt. Since the Morsi ouster, the Brotherhood stands at a critical point that requires serious self-evaluation. Many fear the Brotherhood turning towards terrorism. This largely depends on the government's stance on the Brotherhood and other religious groups. A December 24 car bomb that was responsible for the deaths of 15 people and numerous injuries was suspected to be the work of the Muslim Brotherhood, although the Brotherhood denounced the act. Nevertheless, a spokesman for interim Prime Minister Beblawi all but officially condemned the Brotherhood as terrorists stating that the group had "showed its ugly face as a terrorist organization, shedding blood and messing with Egypt's security" (BBC 2013). Byman and Wittes suggest that the Brotherhood is at risk of becoming a terrorist group: "Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood is not a terrorist movement, at least not currently. But the move by military-led government to ban it from politics and declare it a 'terrorist organization' may become a self-fulfilling prophecy" (2014). Sadly, if the Brotherhood is not provided a legitimate avenue to pursue its political interests, it may well turn back to Qutb's doctrine of armed struggle.

## Iran

Other actors that have influenced the dynamics of the Arab Uprisings, include regional actors, such as Iran, Israel, the Arab League, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

Iran is particularly interested in the outcome of the various uprisings, especially insofar as those outcomes influence Iran's own pursuit to be a major regional player (Marashi & Parsi, 2013; Parchami, 2012). Specifically, Iran has long awaited the replacement of pro-Western governments with friendlier Islamist regimes (Marashi & Parsi, 2013). In order to achieve its own goals, Iran has played a variety of

roles in the region, waiting and hoping for Islamist success in Egypt and Tunisia, while actively waging a proxy war with Saudi Arabia in Yemen (Parchami, 2012) and elsewhere in the region.

President Ahmadinejad strongly condemned Saudi Arabia and the GCC's intervention in Bahrain and threatened to intervene in order to support the uprisings (Parchami, 2012). Conversely, while Iran has supported protests in states such as Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and Bahrain, it has taken the opposite stance to protests in Syria and among Iranians themselves (Parchami, 2012). Syria is Iran's closest ally in the region (Parchami, 2012), a position potentially lost if Bashar al-Assad is successfully ousted. Iran has assisted Assad with both money and troops (Khouri, 2013), which can be interpreted as another location of Iran's proxy war with Saudi Arabia; notwithstanding Iran's predispositions and influence throughout the region, there is hope in some quarters that with the presidential election of reformist Hassan Rouhani, the winds of change may be coming to Iran as well (Ansari, 2013).

## Israel

Israel seems to have taken a wait and see stance on the Arab Uprisings, although Israel typically has a pessimistic view of regime changes in neighboring states, fearing that the unknown may be a greater threat to national security than the known (Inbar, 2012; Peleg, 2013). In reality, little has changed for Israel in terms of its regional position, and the spread of democracy among Arab states could yield a positive outcome (Peleg, 2013). Furthermore, as its hostile neighbors are consumed by their own internal battles, Israel is less likely to be directly attacked by other states. Israel's government can watch the drama play out without much interference, while bolstering its own border defenses (Inbar, 2012). Nevertheless, should the United States and Saudi Arabia choose to directly intervene in Syria, Israel would be inclined to follow their lead (Khouri, 2013).

## The Arab League

The Arab League, has seen the uprisings as a chance to make itself politically relevant again (Khouri, 2012; Maddy-Weitzman, 2012). For instance, the Arab League supported the removal of Qaddafi and a no-fly zone over Libya (Masters, 2012). It has been more decisive in condemning the regime in Syria, even going so far as suspending Syria's membership, providing support for dissidents, and meeting with opposition groups (Khouri, 2012; Masters, 2012). In 2012, the Arab League introduced a plan to the international community to send peacekeeping troops into Syria, hailing praise from the European Union (BBC, 2012). While these steps show a more active Arab League, further intervention into the affairs of Arab states remains to be seen.

## The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

The GCC is fully vested in encouraging favorable outcomes for its members, as evidenced by a more proactive course of action than the Arab League (Maddy-Weitzman, 2012). GCC troops - primarily from Saudi Arabia - helped quell unrest in Bahrain, mediated for President Saleh's resignation in Yemen, and prompted the Arab League to support NATO and Libyan opposition efforts in toppling Qaddafi (Maddy-Weitzman, 2012). The Gulf monarchies also condemned the Syrian regime, closed their embassies within Syria, and supported the removal of Assad by calling on the international community to intervene (Khouri, 2013; Maddy-Weitzman, 2012).

## Al Qaeda and Radical Islamists

Zakaria (2011) stated that "the Arab revolts represent a total repudiation of al Qaeda's founding ideology. For 20 years, al Qaeda has said that the regimes of the Arab World are nasty dictatorships and that the only way to overthrow them is to support al Qaeda and its terrorism." The successful popular uprisings of 2011 and the subsequent rise of moderate Islamist parties in Tunisia and Egypt could have served as a fatal blow for al Qaeda and its violent, uncompromising moral ideology. Hopes were high

that the establishment of a strong, moderate political Islam could serve as a buffer against more radical Islamist groups, particularly after the West had started to understand and endorse the nuances of moderate political Islam in the Middle East. A “lazy conflation” with radical Jihadism in the post 9/11 world had then helped al Qaeda to thrive amidst the US-led global war on terror. In recent years however, al Qaeda increasingly struggled to justify its cause and actions and recruitment became more and more difficult (Lynch 2013). Even though the early popular mobilizations in Tunisia and Egypt left little room for radical Islamist jihadist rhetoric, Lynch (2013) claims that the Arab Uprisings may actually have turned out to be a huge win for the organization.

The failure of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and to a certain extent of the Tunisian Al-Nahda party to lead a successful democratic transition process has crippled the belief of many in the future of moderate political Islam. The Egyptian military’s crushing of the Muslim Brotherhood, arguably al Qaeda’s most viable competitor in Islamist politics, may reverse the trend of differentiating between al Qaeda and more moderate factions (Lynch 2013).

While stalling progress in Tunisia and Egypt and continuing chaos and fights along tribal lines in Libya may strengthen radical Islamist rhetoric indirectly, the civil war in Syria has served the purpose of al Qaeda a more direct cause, with jihadist forces playing a more active role. While Assad’s claims about the involvement of foreign terrorist fighters in the Syrian uprising were long dismissed as desperate propaganda in Western policy and media circles, Islamist forces, partially led by al Qaeda, have come to play a dominant role in the struggle to oust Assad (Sharp and Blanchard 2013).

The involvement of Islamist groups has contributed to the already existing struggle between rebel groups in Syria over the legitimate representation of the opposition. The formation of the Syrian National Council as the main political representative of the Syrian Opposition is further not recognized by the Islamist radicals who have taken over control of some of Syria’s territory (Landis 2013; Sharp and Blanchard 2013). The division of the opposition in three major currents became apparent in 2013. While

the Free Syrian Army is composed of mainly defected soldiers and Syrians in exile, two major Islamist currents, namely Jabhat al Nusra, an arm of al Qaeda and the terrorist organization Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) have come to dominate the scene in the country (Sharp and Blanchard 2013; Panikoff 2013). ISIS is a jihadist group formed in Spring 2013 as an offspring of al Qaeda's affiliate organization in Iraq. While the precise number of fighters is unknown, it is assumed to include several thousand, mainly foreign non-Syrian jihadists. It has taken over control of cities in the Northern and Eastern parts of the country where it has established brutal rule according to strict interpretations of Shari'a. According to Austin (2014), ISIS is operating independently of Jabhat al Nusra and the Western supported rebels, involving deadly clashes between the different fronts. The aim of ISIS is to create a Sunni Islamic religious state based on Shari'a in Iraq and Syria. According to Lynch (2013), the influx of foreign fighters in Syria demonstrates a new resonance for calls for jihad, which had lost its appeal after several years of setbacks in Iraq and Pakistan. He further states that observers might be accurate in their assumptions about a potential strengthening of jihadist insurgence in Iraq as well as the possibility of new terror threats once these fighters return to their home countries.

### **The role of social media**

In a presentation on the causes and consequences of the Arab Uprisings, Rami Khouri commented that, "social media in relation to the Arab Uprisings is like Paul Revere's horse in relation to the American Revolution" (October, 2013). While not a direct cause of the uprisings, it was a necessary component of the uprising process. Without social media, groups in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, and Libya would have all struggled to spread information, gather, and unify quickly.

In Tunisia, social media served to both draw international attention to the uprisings and mobilize the internal opposition into more organized dissent. Again in Egypt mass protests were organized using Twitter, Facebook, and other mobile-based technologies. Similar patterns were observed in Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Bahrain. Howard et al (2011) identify three ways social media

influenced uprisings. First, social media played a central role in shaping the debates that occurred in these countries. Second, the events observed on the ground in all these countries occurred after a large spike in politically-based social media activity, and third, social media was a crucial tool in spreading the revolutionary message and democratic ideas across borders (Howard et al., 2011). While some states were more successful in executing social media appeals for action and spread of information, much debate ensued about how critical a role social media actually played in the uprisings.

The critics who claim that social media was not a key factor point to observations that government control of media in the region is rampant, “more than three dozen nations, primarily concentrated in East Asia, North Africa, the Middle East, and central Africa, filter access to the Internet” (Bertot, et al., 2010, p.267). We saw media shutdowns in Tunisia, Bahrain, Egypt and to lesser degrees in most other states that experienced an uprising. Additionally, popular social commentators including Malcolm Gladwell have downplayed social media’s power to influence lasting political and social change (Gladwell, 2010), although statements such as these made before the uprisings may simply need to be revised given the evidence.

Proponents of social media and its use during the Arab Uprisings say that it was a vital tool of organization, expanded access to information for the global community, connected citizens who would otherwise not be able to connect, and removed the gatekeepers who previously limited the spread of information by means of state-controlled media (Schmidt & Cohen, 2013). Though attempts were made to quell the influence of social media by several governments during the uprisings, their response capacity proved inadequate.

Social media is only one of many factors, domestically and regionally, that influenced the progression of small protests to large, powerful movements in the uprisings. Historically, people have always found ways to connect, rise up, and resist oppression; however, social media has provided citizens with new access and faster capabilities. Media control was attempted by governments during

the uprisings, but because information can spread globally within seconds, leaders like Mubarak, Assad, and Qaddafi were met with internal demands for accountability and change, and externally by demands for transparency. Clearly the time was ripe for the fires of change to be ignited in vast parts of the Arab world. Arguably, social media provided fuel for that fire.

## 4. INTERNATIONAL DYNAMICS OF THE ARAB UPRISINGS

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Though the Arab Uprisings are primarily a domestic event for individual Arab states, the potential outcomes have drawn the attention of international actors, including the United States (US), Russia, the United Nations (UN), and the European Union (EU). Although these countries and international organizations have taken little direct action, much has occurred indirectly, especially in Syria, provoking Rami Khouri (2013) to describe the war as “the world’s greatest proxy war since Vietnam” (para 1).

### The Role of the United States

Examining the behavior and influence of the United States on the Arab Uprisings necessitates an examination of U.S. action in relation to specific states. Because U.S. response and direct engagement varied so greatly from one state to the next, very few generalizations can be made about U.S. influence in the Arab Uprisings overall. What is apparent, however, is that American interests in the region tiptoed around military intervention (Pressman, 2013). Additionally, we saw for the first time a willingness of American leaders to engage directly with political Islam.

Although the U.S. did not directly intervene in Libya, it supported the overthrow of Qaddafi through the intervention of NATO. Through NATO the U.S. was able to essentially set the agenda for Qaddafi’s overthrow, while avoiding “boots on the ground” in yet another part of the world. Because of Libya’s close proximity and the geographical separation of the opposition forces from the core of Qaddafi’s troops, NATO and the EU successfully provided aerial power to support and protect the

opposition (Patrick, 2011), which surely would have failed to topple Qaddafi on its own.

The case of Syria also highlights the Obama administration's reticence toward direct involvement in the region. While initially taking a hardline approach and threatening action if evidence of chemical weapons use were to emerge, Obama then backed off in the face of overwhelming evidence of the use of chemical weapons, acknowledged by his own administration. The Obama administration's cautious wavering provided an opening for the Russians to step in and outmaneuver the American's diplomatically, leaving Assad firmly entrenched and the Syrian people without hope of an end to the nightmare of their civil war (Byman, 2013).

In Tunisia and Yemen, U.S. influence has been mixed as well. Tunisia received strikingly less attention than Egypt, which is not surprising given Egypt's historical ties to the U.S. and its strategic importance for U.S. policy in the region. As Tunisia rebuilt, the U.S. verbally supported elections and implementation of a secular government, but did so with limited involvement. In Yemen, the U.S. was concerned about the potential for Al Qaeda to take hold, and had received significant threats from Al Qaeda in Yemen. The Obama administration supported a new leader with ties to the old regime (Gilboa, 2013). In other words, there has been no standard approach to U.S. foreign policy in the region but rather a case by case approach. As territorial, ideological, and political interests varied across the region, so did U.S. involvement.

American involvement in Bahrain was limited, as was its acknowledgement of what was occurring, perhaps so as not to offend its strategic ally, Saudi Arabia and to appease the ruling family of the country which is hosts to America's fifth fleet. (Amirahmadi & Afrasiabi, 2011)

## **The Role of Russia**

Russia plays a complicated role in the Middle East, and like the U.S., has had to walk a political tightrope. Russia would like to see the influence of the West diminishing in the Arab world, but at the same time it fears the spread of radical Islamists who sometime ally themselves with Russian Islamists in

the Caucasus, a sentiment it shares with Israel (Freedman, 2013; Khouri, 2013; Nizameddin, 2013).

One of Russia's closest allies in the Middle East had been Muammar Qaddafi, with whom Russia held longstanding arms contracts worth billions of dollars. Nevertheless, during the Libyan uprising, after a weak show of support for Qaddafi, Russia eventually aligned itself with the Arab League, which supported a no-fly zone over Libya (Freedman, 2013). When the issue was taken up by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in the spring of 2011, rather than leveraging its position to protect Qaddafi, Russia chose to abstain from a vote that authorized military action and a no-fly zone (Bilefsky & Landler, 2011; Freedman, 2013). Later Russia again tried to support Qaddafi siding with the African Union, which was calling for dialogue between rebels and the Qaddafi regime. In the end, as things looked bleak, Russia encouraged Qaddafi to step down (Freedman, 2013).

Russia's tepid support for Qaddafi contrasts starkly with its unwavering support for Syria's President Assad. In contrast to Libya, the complexities of the Syrian situation and the lack of a clear policy and a firm response from the U.S. and the EU have left strategic opportunities open for Russia in Syria. In particular, it outmaneuvered the U.S. diplomatically when it moved to broker an agreement with Assad and the U.S. for the removal of chemical weapons from Syria (Gearan & Wilson, 2013). Russia also used its permanent position on the UNSC to veto UN action against Assad, in essence buying Assad time in the face of intense international pressure to back down against the opposition forces (Freedman, 2013; Nizameddin, 2013). Russian military support and cooperation with Assad, along with technical assistance for Syria's air defense program have demonstrated Russia's commitment to supporting the Assad regime despite Assad's continuing unpopularity in the region (Nizameddin, 2013). Nevertheless, its maneuvers may well have compromised some of its relationships with other Arab States (Nizameddin, 2013). Sensing its diminishing regional standing, Russia has recently weakened its ties to Assad and tried to renew its relations with the Arab League (Freedman, 2013). Clearly, Russia, like everyone else, was caught off guard by the proliferating Arab uprisings, and like the U.S. has pursued its

interests without a well-conceived strategic plan.

## The Role of the United Nations

Largely constrained by differences among the UN Security Council members in response to the Arab Uprisings, UN actions have been widely criticized. In the rare cases that it has been able to act, it has, of course, done so according to the preferences of the UNSC's five permanent members. As a result, the UN has been unable to effectively react to the crisis in Syria and was far more effective at formulating a coherent response to the Libyan crisis. As is often the case, the UN has been more successful providing humanitarian aid rather than providing leadership in the face of political discord.

The most politically contentious issue concerning the Arab Uprisings in the UN has been Syria. At the onset, both China and Russia, two permanent members of the UNSC, used their veto powers to prevent concerted UN efforts against Assad (Lesch, 2013). Even as various individuals and branches within the UN, such as the High Commissioner for Human Rights, called for greater action on the part of the UNSC, Russia and China refused to compromise (BBC, 2012). A major breakthrough occurred in 2013, with the Russian-U.S. agreement to remove chemical weapons from Syria, a plan supported by a UNSC resolution (Gearan & Wilson, 2013; Khouri, 2013); however, the UN's ability to enforce the weapons removal plan has already been challenged by repeated delays on the part of the Syrian government (United Nations, 2014).

In contrast to the controversial and delayed action in Syria, the UN was far more engaged in Libya. This is primarily due to the fact that Russia and China were less resistant to a proactive UN role in curbing the violence against civilians. China's abstention and Russia's diminished support for its longtime friend enabled the UNSC to pass a resolution authorizing military action, "including airstrikes against Libyan tanks and heavy artillery and a no-fly zone" (Bilefsky & Landler, 2011, para 1). Two days after the UNSC resolution passed, NATO stepped in and assisted the rebels during the final eight months of their uprising (Deeb, 2013).

The UN humanitarian and technical assistance activities have solicited far less attention and controversy among the permanent members of the UNSC. The UN has responded to humanitarian needs in the various refugees camps in Syria's neighboring countries and has assisted in organizing elections in Tunisia and Egypt.

## **The Role of the European Union**

The European Union has tried to have a consistent and coherent response to the Arab Uprisings. Yet the policy and interests of each member state of the EU is an important element for understating how the EU has responded to the Arab Uprisings. Like the UN, the EU is both constrained and compelled by its members, resulting in the inevitable contrast between the many public statements and few policy recommendations and more assertive actions by individual member states. This has led to some states, notably Britain and France, urging the EU to take action in countries such as Libya and Syria despite hesitation among other members, such as Germany (Echague, Michou, & Mikail, 2011).

Initially, the EU proclaimed general support for democracy and institution building in response to the Arab Uprisings while at the same time avoiding a one size fits all attitude or taking direct action (Echague et al., 2011). The EU supported the no-fly zone over Libya (Freedman, 2013), and at the request of France and Britain, the EU imposed sanctions, froze assets, and delivered humanitarian aid to Libyan groups (Echague et al., 2011). In regard to Syria, the EU supported the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces and in May 2013 ended its arms embargo on Syrian opposition groups (Arango, 2012; Ryan, 2013). Meanwhile, France not only supported the Coalition, but also recognized it diplomatically as the representative of Syria (Arango, 2012). At the same time, like the U.S., the EU has been relatively silent in condemning human rights violations in Bahrain (Amirahmadi & Afrasiabi, 2011). Some speculate that EU inaction towards Bahrain rests on the presence of America's Fifth Fleet, therefore making it an American problem (Amirahmadi & Afrasiabi, 2011). Others argue that by sending the EU's Foreign Policy Chief to Bahrain in Spring 2013 to discuss human rights, the EU is

quietly pursuing dialogue with Bahrain and the rest of the GCC (Dempsey, 2013). Nevertheless, while the EU purports respect for human rights as one of the cornerstones of EU membership, it has thus far struggled to consistently advocate on behalf of human rights throughout the duration of the Arab Uprisings.

## OUTLOOK

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After the uprisings, the future of the Arab world is highly uncertain. A difficult colonial history, societal tensions, and botched economic reforms have been at the root of Arab frustration. The absence of a broad consensus on the political and economic direction is a major hindrance to the swift political and economic consolidation of the region. Adding insult to injury, external interventions as always have complicated the political dialogues. The outlook for the Arab region as a whole is therefore grim.

One concern refers to the future of Muslim-Christian relations. All secular pre-revolution states, especially Egypt, Iraq, and Syria, practiced neo-millet systems that tolerated religious pluralism. Under these systems many Christian communities prospered and held political positions. Under new political systems Christians fear that their economic, political, and security status will deteriorate.

Another concern relates to future external interventions. As opposed to the post-revolutionary status of former socialist Central and Eastern European, as well as the post-sovereign debt crisis Latin American countries, the external political environment was much less controversial. From the mid-1980s until the 1990s, the world was largely unipolar with no alternative to market liberalism and democracy. This favorable external environment helped political consolidation emerge in these countries. In the Arab world, the situation is much more complicated. For one, whereas the collapse of socialism and the sovereign debt crises were regional events, the Arab Uprisings are still rather local dynamics. Only Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen have seen some form of regime change. All other Arab states, most notably the monarchies, are still intact and they actively interfere in other countries, in particular Saudi

Arabia and Qatar as well as the non-Arabic states of Turkey and Iran. In addition, the European Union, the United States, Russia, and even China pursue rival interests in Arab states. This suggests that the region will remain in turmoil for a long time.

Is there a glimpse of hope? Yes, there is. One hope is, for example, that one country becomes a success story in terms of political consolidation and economic recovery after an uprising. Tunisia may become such a leader for the region. Another, less likely hope is that the international community grows closer together politically and provides a unified international front to stop the carnage in Syria and to assist the region with some kind of an economic Marshall plan. This would be the great triumph of this generation of world leaders. Thus a glimmer of hope flickers above the Arab world, unfortunately, the multiple divisions from within and from outside keep that glimmer of hope flickering rather weakly.

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