

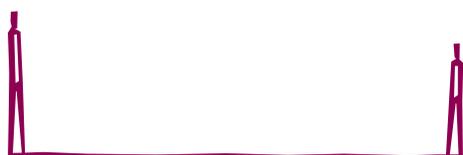
THE ARAB UPRISING

76

CAUSES, PROSPECTS AND IMPLICATIONS

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- The popular uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia have been triggered by a combination of deteriorating living standards and growing inequality (an economic deficit), a lack of political freedoms and public accountability (a political deficit), and the alienation of the demographically dominant age cohorts from the political order (a dignity deficit).
- While similar conditions exist in a number of Arab countries, socio-economic indicators suggest that the intensity of these deficits varies considerably across the Arab world. As a result, the nature and shape of protests across the region might differ.
- However, protests across the region have also been driven by a powerful “contagion effect” working on an ideational and emotional level. This contagion has been facilitated by satellite broadcasters, mobile phones, the internet, and new social media tools that elude government control and helped create new cleavages and loyalties.
- The outcome of the mass protests is likely to vary in accordance with the nature and level of cohesion of the incumbent regimes and their ability to maintain their monopoly on the use of force. While in some cases this might lead to a democratic transition from the bottom up, in other cases the outcome may be more gradual top-down reforms, a government crackdown on protestors or even a disintegration of the state.
- On a systemic level, the Arab uprising will create a new political and economic reality in the Middle East and transform the regional balance of power. While Western influence in the region will inevitably decline as a result, the Arab revolutions also have an undeniable potential to enhance regional cooperation, reduce the appeal of terrorism and help break the current deadlock in the peace process.

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A woman selling corn in Cairo's Zabbaleen District. Rising food prices have increased the cost of living for many Egyptians. Photo: Omar Hikal / Flickr.com.

The overthrow of autocratic governments in Egypt and Tunisia has radically changed the course of Middle Eastern politics. Emboldened by the peaceful mass protests that brought Ben Ali and Mubarak to their knees, young protesters have taken to the streets in many Arab capitals, demanding a better life and a more accountable government. Demographics and the political momentum seem to be on their side.

As the Arab revolution spreads, the international community grapples with its causes and consequences. Are other Arab regimes likely to fold? What will replace them? And what will the long-term impact be?

The essence of revolution

The popular uprisings that toppled the authoritarian regimes in Egypt and Tunisia and triggered the wave of pro-democracy protests that is now sweeping the region are commonly assumed to share the same roots. Protesters in both countries were motivated by a similar set of socio-economic grievances and political goals. Both uprisings also followed a similar course of events, culminating in the eventual downfall of the regime.

In both countries a widespread sense of economic malaise has been decisive in the events. While both Egypt and Tunisia experienced a period of solid economic growth and have won many laurels for their market-friendly economic reforms, most people experienced a decline in living standards. Especially amongst the lower and middle income groups, a

combination of falling real wages, high inflation and rising unemployment have wreaked economic havoc. Job creation took place primarily in the low-skilled and low-wage sectors of the economy and has been unable to keep pace with demographic growth rates. This left scores of middle-class youth unemployed and disenchanted with a political and economic order in which personal relations trumped qualifications and where crony capitalism allowed those in a position of power to amass fabulous riches. It was those lower middle-class youth that formed the nucleus of the subsequent revolutions.

Political repression and a lack of basic freedoms was another important impetus for protesters to take to the streets. While Tunisians have known few freedoms during Ben Ali's time in power, Egyptians saw some of their freedoms taken away from them as the regime clamped down on public protests and the independent media and manipulated parliamentary elections late last year. Police violence and the abuse of public authority have also been a routine part of daily life in both countries and corruption has been endemic at every level of society, albeit most visible at the top. All of this contributed to a widespread feeling of powerlessness and alienation, which explains the central themes of "dignity" and "pride" that permeated the messages of the protesters.

Protesters in Egypt were also mourning the lack of principles and the listlessness of their government in the international arena. From being perceived as the proud leader of an independent Arab world under Nasser, Egypt under Mubarak had turned into "America's poodle", unable to make independent

	GDP per capita ¹	GDP growth ²	Unemployment rate ³	Population under 25 years ⁴	Poverty rate ⁵
Yemen	2,900	6.2%	35.0%	65.4%	45.2%
Morocco	4,670	3.2%	9.8%	47.7%	15.0%
Syria	4,730	4.0%	8.3%	55.3%	11.9%
Jordan	5,240	3.2%	13.4%	54.3%	14.2%
Egypt	5,860	5.1%	9.7%	52.3%	20.0%
Algeria	8,220	4.1%	9.9%	47.5%	23.0%
Tunisia	8,620	3.4%	14.0%	42.1%	3.8%
Libya	18,720	3.3%	n.a.	47.4%	30.0%
Bahrain	23,980	4.1%	15.0%	43.9%	n.a.
Saudi Arabia	22,850	3.8%	10.8%	50.8%	n.a.

1: GDP per capita 2010 (USD at PPP), Economist Intelligence Unit, Country Data

2: GDP 2010 (% real change p.a.), Economist Intelligence Unit, Country Data

3: Recorded unemployment 2010, Economist Intelligence Unit, Country Data

4: Economist Online, "Mapping the Arab World", 17 February 2011

5: Percentage of population under poverty line, CIA World Factbook, latest recorded figures

decisions. This mattered less in the 1990s when the US seemed invincible. But recently, many in Egypt and the region have been emboldened by the example of a more independent-minded and assertive Turkey, as well as Israel's apparent inability to subdue Hamas and Hezbollah. In the light of these developments, Mubarak's unquestioning obedience to the US and his close economic and security ties with Israel appeared shameful to many ordinary Egyptians. Reclaiming Egypt's lost dignity in the international arena was therefore another motif in Egypt's revolution that is likely to have some impact on the future development of Egyptian foreign policy.

It was a combination of these three issues—an "economic deficit", a "freedom deficit" and a "dignity deficit"—that made the Egyptian and Tunisian uprisings so combustible and allowed them to spread like wildfire throughout all sectors of society. This was also reflected in the chants and slogans of the revolutions, which did not focus on a specific political or religious agenda, but rather on what protesters were rallying against: the regime, corruption, high food prices, low wages, neoliberalism, and international tutelage. Focusing on these three key deficits, rather than a concrete and potentially divisive political agenda, enabled protesters to maintain cohesion and rally mass support.

The outcome in both cases was also strikingly similar. Both uprisings started as spontaneous protests organized by urban lower middle-class youth using

social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter to coordinate and disseminate their message. Once initiated, peaceful protests quickly snowballed, drawing in other social strata by coalescing around the simple message that "the regime has to go". Under the pressure of unprecedented and largely peaceful mass protests, fissures in both regimes became accentuated, leading to the eventual ousting of the incumbent leadership by the armed forces. While the final outcome of both revolutions still remains uncertain, a political transition towards a more open and democratic system now seems to be underway.

The Arab malady

As protesters are taking to the streets from Morocco to Bahrain and violence is engulfing Libya and Yemen, it seems self-evident that there has been a powerful knock-on effect from the Tunisian and Egyptian events. In many ways this is unsurprising, given that many Middle Eastern countries are prone to the same maladies that have plagued Egypt and Tunisia. Still, the Arab world is far from being a unitary bloc. Systems of government differ and not all countries share the same socio-economic grievances. Few Arab countries are also as religiously and ethnically homogenous as Tunisia and Egypt and some harbour long-standing secessionist movements. These differences are likely to have an impact on the scale and shape of future uprisings throughout the region.

	Democracy (ranking) ¹	Corruption (ranking) ²	Press freedom (rating) ³	HDI (ranking) ⁴
Morocco	116	82	66	113
Jordan	117	50	63	82
Bahrain	122	43	71	39
Algeria	125	92	64	84
Egypt	138	115	60	101
Tunisia	144	64	85	81
Yemen	146	144	80	133
Syria	152	150	83	111
Libya	158	130	94	53
Saudi Arabia	160	83	83	55

1: Democracy Index 2010, Economist Intelligence Unit

2: Corruption Perception Index 2008, Transparency International

3: Freedom of the Press report 2010, Freedom House. The level of press freedom is scored on a scale from 0 (most free) to 100 (least free).

4: Human Development Index 2010, UNDP

On the economic front, many countries of the Arab world share the same deficits experienced by Egypt and Tunisia. Many are low- to mid-income countries with rising unemployment rates that have been affected by the recent economic downturn and its impact on exports and remittances. Rising food prices and high consumer price inflation have eroded living standards with economic difficulties most closely felt by young people who lack any future economic perspective. Market reforms and privatization in a number of countries, including Jordan, Morocco, Egypt and Tunisia, have been deeply unpopular and have been blamed by the public for deepening the current economic malaise.

Economic conditions amongst the oil-producing countries, however, are somewhat different. Some of them have suffered during the economic crisis and as a result of a collapsing housing boom, and several of them register high unemployment rates. But living standards are generally higher and economic grievances, where they arise, mainly concern the distribution of the oil wealth. Poverty is often limited to large communities of migrant workers or to certain ethnic minorities. Rising oil prices, moreover, have made it even easier for these countries to dispense economic benefits and side-payments to quell any challenge to their internal stability. Several of them, including Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, have already issued generous financial handouts in a bid to forestall protests.

However, as the examples of Libya and Bahrain have shown, economic wealth does not necessarily matter if certain sectors of society feel that they are deprived of their share of the pie or harbour other grievances. Similarly, while absolute levels of poverty are important, inequality and a lack of opportunities matter even more. The existence of a large lower middle class that has no way of advancing its ambitions has played an important role in Tunisia and Egypt. This explains why Tunisia, a country with one of the lowest poverty rates in the region, was the first to take to the streets. But the absence of such a middle class has not necessarily doomed demonstrations, as seems evident in Yemen.

When it comes to the freedom deficit, some differences are also apparent. Although free and fair elections remain a pipe dream throughout the region, differences in the quality of public administration, media freedom or levels of corruption remain large. Countries like Jordan and Morocco, for example, can boast considerably higher ratings in democracy surveys than some of their neighbours. Both organize relatively open parliamentary elections and allow the participation of some opposition groups and Islamist parties, but discriminate against others. Similarly, the direction of developments has differed. While some, like Bahrain and Kuwait, have gradually increased the space for democratic participation and adopted reform agendas, others, like Egypt under Mubarak, have rolled back previous reforms or, like Saudi Arabia, have made no attempt to open up at all.

Other social indicators also represent a mixed picture. Levels of public administration or corruption in Bahrain and Jordan are a far cry from those in other parts of the region and are often closer to those of southern European countries than other parts of the Arab world. Press freedom has varied widely, with Egypt being endowed with one of the most open media environments in the Arab world, while Tunisia used to have one of the most restrictive. Finally, the UN's human development index—a broad measure for the overall quality of human life and development—varies considerably throughout the region.

Perhaps the most difficult to fathom is the widespread feeling of lost dignity and wounded pride that has been a common theme amongst protesters. Much of this feeling seems to have derived from being part of a society that left little space for individual development and expression and is therefore a consequence of the above-mentioned economic and political deficits. But, to some extent, protesters have also been disillusioned with the current international order and the role their countries have played in this order.

Opinion polls regularly register the considerable disapproval Arabs feel towards foreign interference and international tutelage. Many condemn the close diplomatic ties between their governments and the United States, and what appears to them to be their government's silent complicity in the suffering of the Palestinians. In the past, the most popular public figures in the Arab world have often been individual leaders that defied the international community, such as Hezbollah's Hassan Nassrallah. Evidence from the Wikileaks documents and the Palestine papers have further tarnished some governments and fuelled public anger. On the other hand, regimes in Syria and Iran have been able to benefit from their uncompromising stance towards Israel and to quell public protests by alleging foreign involvement and emphasizing their own revolutionary credentials.

Finally, the pent-up energies of the youth bulge are palpable everywhere across the region. Close to half of the Arab world's population is under 25 years of age. In the past, this mass of young people was assumed to be part of a lost generation raised under squalid conditions and nurtured on a diet of religious radicalism and totalitarianism. Most analysts had discounted them as a political force. However, it is

their frustrations that are driving the revolutionary process. Technologically versatile and internationally connected, revolutionary ideas have proven to be most contagious amongst this generation. As a result, the chants, rap songs and symbolism that have been part of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt have now become part of the images and tropes of all the Arab revolutions. While underlying socio-economic indicators therefore differ considerably throughout the region, it seems to have been the shared demographic realities that made the revolt so contagious.

Understanding contagion

Besides taking into account the aforementioned country-specific factors, it is necessary to examine how the initial events in Tunisia fed similar political disturbances in Egypt and beyond. This contagion of events sheds light on the systemic international characteristics of the Arab uprising.

Generally speaking, the term 'contagion' refers to the epidemic-like spread of demonstrations and disturbances that eludes any intentional efforts by the regimes to control their intensity, scope, or direction. This type of contagious process is characterized by rapid transmission. The spread from Tunisia onwards happened in a quick and intense series of events. Hence, political disturbances in Tunisia sparked internal disarray elsewhere. Similar contagions have happened before, as in the case of a series of upheavals and revolutions in Eastern Europe at the end of the Cold War.

The contagion of political disturbances can be understood in terms of a learning process. Often, learning is considered to be a conscious cognitive process. Therefore, much emphasis is placed on the spread of ideas, information, and knowhow as the spearhead of contagion. In the initial cases of Tunisia and Egypt, it was vitally important for the protesters to pass on information on how to organize large-scale demonstrations and acts of civic disobedience. From this perspective, channels of information quickly turned into channels of contagion.

As a result, the Egyptian authorities were actively trying to clamp down on the media and were trying to control the public perception by pointing out the 'dangers' of foreign broadcasters like Al Jazeera. Their



Egyptian photographers protesting. In recent years the Mubarak regime has cracked down on independent media. Photo: Hossam el-Hamalawy / Flickr.com.

main concern was that open information concerning the widespread political disturbances would incite further troubles for the Egyptian regime.

Many of the theories in the literature, such as the ‘CNN effect’, support the view that one of the central factors in the spill-over of political violence across borders is access to the media. It seems clear that the advent of the information revolution and of new communication channels outside of governmental control have influenced the nature, intensity, and speed of the contagion effect. It is also very important to note that such critical information spreads even more easily in the age of mobile phones and the internet. Social network sites such as Twitter and Facebook further enabled the epidemic-like spread of information concerning where, when and how one can participate in political demonstrations and agitation. Thus, these developments have made control of the information flows increasingly difficult for the regimes of the region.

But new technologies also make additional tools available to governments. The Egyptian government was able to shut down much of the internet traffic and mobile telecommunications in the country. It was also able to force telecom providers such as Vodafone to send SMS messages that supported the government’s official line. The government also detained bloggers. Ultimately, these efforts proved futile and too clumsy to halt the spread of information. In fact, they merely served to fuel general anti-regime attitudes and caused functional problems for some sectors of the Egyptian economy.

Moreover, the contagion effect is based on less cognitive and conscious processes than the dissemination of information and knowhow. In other words, research into the contagion effect also makes constant references to characteristically more unconscious and habitual social learning that is primarily non-cognitive and non-technical. Instead of constituting technical knowhow, these rapid contagious learning processes are based on emotions and sentiments. The buzz felt during the spread of demonstrations is in itself intoxicating and deeply epidemic. In this way, contagion in the Middle East is based on people becoming motivated and inspired to join demonstrations and other political mobilizations. Besides teaching people how to organize protests, contagion prompts sudden jolts of collective movements and shared emotions.

Such pulses of stimulation characterize the crucial emotive aspect of contagion, which might be better understood in terms of broad yet subtle subconscious persuasion. It consists of appeal at the level of alluring, emerging collective identities and seductive group dynamics, which spread by example and through highly visible spectacles and pure buzz. For example, the images of celebrating Egyptians in Cairo’s Tahrir Square were a very powerful motivating factor for the spread and intensity of the protest movement. Such collective scenes can be very intoxicating and produce a sense of events gravitating towards a ‘new normal’. Contagion can therefore heighten the awareness of emerging identities—such as ‘the young protester’—and lead to a rapid shift in loyalties away from the ‘old regime’.



A protester with the picture of Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egypt's President from 1956 to 1970 and a hero of Arab nationalism. Many Egyptians despised Mubarak's close ties with the us and Israel. Photo: Floris van Cauwelaert / Flickr.com.

The contagion conducive to intensifying political disturbances can take the form of the transmission of new interpretative frames. These spreading and intensifying frames—such as Mubarak has to resign and, subsequently, the implication that the whole regime has to go—were conveyed by the regular yet gradually swelling mass demonstrations – for example by maintaining a regular demonstration in Tahrir Square, sustaining cordial relations with the army, fighting the regime supporters and police, and, in the end, surrounding the State TV and marching to the Presidential Palace.

Contagion therefore involves shifting identities and changing loyalty patterns. These tectonic transitions bring to the fore new movements and parties which alter the existing political context. It can be argued that contagion is more likely if there are pre-existing internal cleavages and factions. These dormant divisions can become conducive to contagion. It should be noted that this spread pattern can lead to an internal violent conflict instead of a more clear-cut popular uprising. Many of the regimes in the region have ruthlessly maintained some societal balance between a number of ethnic or religious groups. Some of these groups are more easily incited towards regime change, while others have a vested interest in supporting the regime.

Such divisive processes have been in evidence in Libya. In Tunisia and Egypt, a crucial change took place when strong economic growth brought into being a young urban lower-middle class. This new socioeconomic stratum had developed a modernist outlook fostered by strong internet skills. These people were highly connected and therefore relatively

independent of the state media system. Young protesters were activated and provoked by the events in Tunisia and motivated by uniquely Egyptian factors. By participating in the mass protests, they also developed a new sense of belonging in and to Egypt. However, it should be noted that the political upheavals in the two countries have also been marked by a spreading sense of animosity. This has found expression in the symbols of the past regime. The resulting 'purging' processes can lead to violence and open up deeper societal conflicts.

Tomorrow's Middle East

Despite the unpredictability of the current situation, it is clear that the Middle East is experiencing a deep transformation on several levels. There is no doubt that the Arab revolution sweeping the region will create a new political reality in many Middle Eastern countries. But the outcome is likely to differ. While some Arab states might be jolted into a new and fragile democratic reality, others will witness a more gradual transition or dodge the democracy trend altogether.

Much of the outcome of this transition will depend on the nature and cohesion of the incumbent regimes and their ability to maintain their monopoly on the use of force. At this stage, Arab Republics with an uncertain line of succession appear more vulnerable to regime change than hereditary monarchies. In those countries in which the military is deeply entrenched in the government—like Algeria and Syria—change seems even less likely and would require a violent confrontation.



A boy waits in line for food at the Mazraq refugee camp in Hajjah province, Yemen. Photo: Paul Stephens / Irin News.

As a result, a patchwork of different systems of government—some more democratic, some less—seems the most likely long-term outcome of the current uprising. In the meantime, and until the dust has settled, the Middle East will experience a fair amount of uncertainty and unrest which, in some cases, might escalate into civil war-like confrontations. While this situation will require much attention and assistance from the international community, the latter will remain relatively powerless in determining the outcome of this transformation.

Less obviously, but equally important, will be the impact that the Arab revolution will have on the economic order of the Middle East. There is much evidence to suggest that at least in Tunisia and Egypt the uprisings were as much a reaction to decades of political repression as a revolt against the kind of crony capitalism that developed under the guise of market reforms and privatization programmes that were sanctioned and rewarded by the international financial institutions. The continuity of labour unrests in post-revolutionary states seems to be an indication of this and represents a challenge to the future economic order. Any attempt at replacing current forms of crony capitalism with a fresh dose of neoliberal reforms is likely to evoke a strong public reaction. A return to the ways of Arab Socialism, on the other hand, would be toxic for the weakened Middle Eastern economies. A middle path will be hard to forge in countries that do not draw a majority of their receipts from the hydrocarbon economy. But an extended economic depression might well pose a threat to the fragile flowering of Arab democracy.

Finally, the Arab revolution is likely to change the regional balance of power decisively. The recent juxtaposition of a US-led “axis of moderation” against an Iran-led “axis of resistance” is unlikely to endure the current upheaval. Public pressure for a more independent international role and a revival of Pan-Arab cooperation is likely to fundamentally reorient the foreign policies of Middle Eastern countries regardless of their current form of government. A return to Arab nationalism indeed seems a plausible consequence given the revolution’s underlying themes of national pride and dignity. A rehabilitation of political Islam is likely to be another consequence of the revolution as parties like Tunisia’s al-Nahda and Egypt’s Muslim Brothers join the political process.

This transformation could skew the regional balance in favour of Iran—should it indeed escape the crisis unscathed—and present a potential threat to Israel, which might find itself more isolated as a consequence. While the Arab-Israeli conflict has played a peripheral role in the Arab uprising so far, any renewed confrontation will present a tough challenge to the aspiring democracies and has the potential to radicalize their agenda. A reconfiguration of the Arab system could also precipitate a return to the “Arab Cold War” by pitting an alliance of post-revolutionary states against the conservative Gulf monarchies eager to fend off any threat of contagion. Saudi Arabia, for example, might feel the need to intervene in Yemen or Bahrain, while the prolonged destabilization of Libya might draw in its neighbours. Although there is no shortage of possible horror scenarios, the Arab revolutions also have an undeniable potential to lessen regional tension,

boost cooperation and help break the deadlock in the peace process.

In geopolitical terms, the Arab revolutions are further confirmation that a fundamental reshuffling of the international order is underway. Intentional or not, the Arab uprising is likely to herald an end to Western hegemony over the Middle East, as post-revolutionary states are beginning to chart a more independent course in international affairs. The myth of the West as a generator of new political trends that are subsequently transferred to its periphery has not been lost on these states. Indeed, there is mounting evidence that the contagion might not be confined to the Middle East, as China attempts to quell its own Jasmine Revolution, and notions of popular democracy are becoming more widely debated in the West. Such ramifications bear all the hallmarks of a more decentralized and multipolar world. In this sense, the Arab uprising may well constitute the birth pangs of a political order that extends far beyond the borders of the Middle East.

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