Reflections on the Arab Uprisings

November 17, 2014
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The Project on Middle East Political Science

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by the Carnegie Corporation and the Henry Luce Foundation. For more information, see http://www.pomeps.org.
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Arab youth activism for gender equality

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Introduction

‘T is the season to reflect upon the course of the Arab uprisings. Over the last few weeks I have participated in three major workshops including nearly 50 scholars – and had to miss yet another in favor of a quick trip to Tunisia. It is not difficult to understand this intense urge to take stock, given the sorry state of the region and catastrophic results of virtually every one of the 2011 uprisings. The overblown criticisms of the field of Middle East political science over its failure to predict the uprisings have been thoroughly aired by this point. But what about the field’s performance during the Arab uprisings? Academics have written an unprecedented amount of real-time analysis and commentary over the last few years. What did we miss, misinterpret, exaggerate or rush to premature judgments about along the way?

The first of the workshops focused explicitly on this question. I asked a group of the authors from my edited volume *The Arab Uprisings Explained: New Contentious Politics in the Middle East* to write short memos assessing their contributions critically after having another year to reflect. Those memos have been published as *POMEPS Studies 10 Reflections on the Arab Uprisings*. Their auto-critique is full of worthy observations: We paid too much attention to the activists and not enough to the authoritarians; we understated the importance of identity politics; we assumed too quickly that successful popular uprisings would lead to a democratic transition; we underestimated the key role of international and regional factors in domestic outcomes; we took for granted a second wave of uprisings, which thus far has yet to materialize; we underestimated the risk of state failure and overstated the possibility of democratic consensus.

One point that emerged in the workshop discussions is the extent to which we became too emotionally attached to particular actors or policies. Caught up in the rush of events, and often deeply identifying with our networks of friends and colleagues involved in these politics, we may have allowed hope or passion to cloud our better comparative judgment. That’s a fine quality in activists, but not so helpful for academic rigor.

Intriguingly, as the workshop’s discussion brought out, this may also apply to today’s widespread and deep depression over the restoration of fierce Arab authoritarianism. Things are indisputably bad right now. But does that mean that the negative trends will inevitably continue? Just as we rushed to prematurely embrace the inevitable success of the 2011 uprisings, perhaps today we are prematurely rushing to accept the inevitable triumph of the autocrats. After all, does the region look stable right now? Is it really so impossible to imagine the failure of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi’s Egypt amidst a growing insurgency, fierce repression of all forms of independent civil society and utterly unresolved economic woes? Are the monarchs of the Persian Gulf really so comfortable as the price of oil slides well below $80 a barrel, sectarian hostility and extremist Islamist trends grow, and regimes haplessly jail dissidents and try to silence Twitter? Perhaps one of the lessons of our irrational exuberance in 2011 should be to avoid exaggerated despair today.
My colleagues speak for themselves in their memos. As for me, there are a number of areas where I've been rethinking things over the last year or two. There are some negative developments that did not surprise me, I should add, even though I had hoped they would be avoided. My earlier book *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East* devoted an entire chapter to demonstrating how each previous round of popular mobilization in modern Arab history had ended up with the consolidation of even more heavy-handed authoritarianism. The disastrous results of the decision by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood to field a presidential candidate were easily foreseen. So were the catastrophic consequences of external support to the Syrian insurgency, which has produced unbelievable human suffering but few real surprises to anyone versed in the comparative literature on civil wars and insurgencies. We’ve paid a lot of attention to the problems of Yemen’s transition.

But here are a few of the areas where I wrote a lot over the last few years that I’ve come to think do need careful rethinking:

**Libya**: The Libya intervention is one of the very few military actions in the region that I have ever supported – and the results overwhelmingly suggest that I was wrong. I do not in any way regret my support for that intervention, which saved many thousands of lives and helped to bring an end to a brutal regime. Still, it is impossible to look at Libya's failed state and civil war, its proxy conflict and regional destabilization, and not conclude that the intervention's negative effects over the long term outweigh the short-term benefits. Moammar Gaddafi’s fall, combined with the prominence of armed militias, left Libya without a functioning state and little solid ground upon which to build a new political order. The likelihood of such an outcome should have weighed more heavily in my analysis.

The reasons for rethinking the intervention go beyond Libya itself. I had placed a great deal of emphasis on the demonstration effects of an intervention. My hope had been that the intervention would act to restrain other autocrats from unleashing deadly force against protesters and encourage wavering activists to push forward in their demands for change. Unfortunately, this only partially panned out and had unintended negative effects. U.S. cooperation with the Gulf Cooperation Council states in Libya compelled it to turn a blind eye to the simultaneous crushing of Bahrain’s uprising.

The worst effects were on Syria. The Libya intervention may have imposed a certain level of caution on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, leading him to search for just the right level of repression to stay beneath the threshold for international action. But that didn't last for long and his violence quickly escalated. Meanwhile, the Libya intervention almost certainly encouraged Syrian activists and rebels – and their backers in the Gulf and Turkey – in their hopes for a similar international campaign on their own behalf. That unintended moral hazard probably
contributed to the escalation of Syria’s civil war. The campaigns are also interdependent in terms of U.S. policy: The failures in Libya very likely contributed to Washington’s (in my view very wise) reluctance to intervene in Syria, especially after the September 2012 Benghazi fiasco.

So what lessons should be learned from the failure of this intervention to produce a stable Libya?

**A New Arab Public:** For a long time I believed that a mobilized Arab public would never again allow themselves to be manipulated and dominated by autocrats. Whatever the tactical setbacks and inevitable ups and downs of difficult transitions, I thought that the generational transformation would keep trends moving in the direction of more open politics. It was this new Arab public that gave me at least some optimism that the region could avoid repeating the failures of the past.

That conviction suffered a near-mortal blow in Egypt, where a shocking number of the youth and public voices who had made the uprisings proved more than willing to enthusiastically support the restoration of military government and violent repression of the Muslim Brotherhood. It was not simply the military’s successful coup that was shocking – such a denouement was always a possibility. The shock was the coup’s embrace by many of the popular forces upon whom hopes of irresistible change had been placed. The new Arab media and social media proved to be just as capable of transmitting negative and divisive ideas and images as they had been at spreading revolutionary ones. Egypt’s military coup traveled just as powerfully as had its revolution. The pan-Arab revolutionary unity of early 2011 has long since given way to sectarianism, polarization between Islamists and their enemies, and horror over the relentless images of death and despair in Syria, Iraq and Libya.

The media generally played a highly destructive role in the post-uprisings environment. For a brief, tantalizing moment, independent television stations and newspapers seemed to constitute a genuine Egyptian public sphere. But that quickly collapsed. Unreconstructed state media offered up a relentless stream of propaganda. Many private media outlets were captured by the state or by counter-revolutionary interests and the airwaves filled with the most vile forms of populist incitement. Meanwhile, transnational broadcasting descended into little more than transparent vehicles for state foreign policies, a change most noticeable – and damaging – with the once proud Al Jazeera. And while social media and new Web sites have certainly offered a plethora of opportunities for information to flow and opinions to be voiced, they have largely failed to supplant mainstream media as a source of news for mass publics.

So is it still true that the new Arab public will prevent any return to the old order or will it be assimilated into a new form of populist authoritarianism in the name of anti-Islamism and stability?
Calvinball: I may have failed to fully appreciate the corrosive effects of one of the things that I really got right: Calvinball, i.e., profound uncertainty about the rules of the game. I had argued that the transitions really suffered from the absence of a basic agreement on the rules of politics, which generated intense fear for the future and strategic dilemmas for all actors. The relentless parade of pathological choices made by almost every actor in countries such as Egypt or Libya, I thought, could be explained by this profound uncertainty rather than by their own character flaws or organizational characteristics.

My Calvinball theory was right, and might have gone even further. Elections couldn't resolve political conflicts in the absence of a constitution outlining the powers and limitations of the bodies being selected, while political parties struggled to plan for elections in the absence of guidance on districts or electoral rules. The absence of a consensus on a constitution also fed fears for the very identity of the state, which lurked behind the dangerous polarization in states such as Egypt, Libya and Tunisia. Finally, the erratic decisions of a politicized judiciary played an especially damaging role in Egypt, where the politicization of the judiciary left no legitimate, trusted neutral arbiter of these legal and constitutional battles.

But I was less successful in figuring out how to overcome these problems. In the heat of Egypt’s uniquely chaotic transition, I thought that simply getting a constitution in place – any constitution – would help to alleviate the debilitating effects of institutional uncertainty. But that proved to be wrong. In the absence of a legitimate process producing a sufficient consensus, the constitution proved to only exacerbate the deep social and political crisis. Tunisia, as in so many other areas, did far better in this regard; indeed, Ennahda leader Rachid Ghannouchi recently told me that the constitution had conclusively settled the debate over identity and ideology in Tunisia, allowing for the beginning of normal politics. I’m more convinced than ever that moving beyond Calvinball is essential for any successful transition, but what makes a transitional constitutional design process work – or fail – needs a lot more attention.

So what kind of assurances can actually be made in mid-transition to overcome the effects of Calvinball uncertainty?

Islamists and Transitions: I believed that the Arab uprisings offered a historically unique opportunity to bring Islamist groups into the democratic process, which would normalize politics and isolate and marginalize jihadist trends. For a while, it worked, as Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi parties enthusiastically contested elections. Tunisia’s Ennahda not only contested and won the first elections, but by gracefully handing over power following the second election it also (hopefully) finally put an end to the hoary myth that Islamists would only allow “one man, one vote, one time.” But overall the democratic experience of Islamists in these transitions proved devastatingly negative – and jihadists have duly taken advantage.
The problem did not lie in our understanding of Islamist movements, which mostly played to form. It was in their struggles to adapt to a new, uncertain political environment in which victory was actually a possibility and a strategy of self-restraint and slow, patient social transformation no longer seemed appropriate. It also lay in the fears their success generated among everyone else, the inability of political systems to tolerate their ascendance, and the extent to which national and regional forces would go to block them from governing. Islamists proved less adept at governing than they had been in opposition, and the transitions paid the price.

The intensity of the public backlash against the Muslim Brotherhood and Ennahda may be partially explained by the uncertainty described above and by months of relentless media incitement, but that doesn’t make it less real. Explaining how these movements squandered decades of carefully cultivated reputations for integrity in a few short years and why their emergence generated such a virulent response demands more explanation than it has thus far received. So will the long-term effects of Egypt’s military coup on Islamists’ views of democratic participation; who at this point could credibly argue that Islamists should view elections and democratic governance as a viable option? And so does the ability of al-Qaeda and other jihadist movements to survive the initial ideological challenges and to metastasize into new forms such as the Islamic State.

So how should we understand the new world of Islamist politics, with the Muslim Brotherhood’s project and organization in shambles and new jihadist movements on the rise?

Those are only a few of the many issues that scholars are now rethinking as we settle in to this violent, unhappy post-uprisings phase of the region’s history. Download POMEPS Studies 10 Reflections on The Arab Uprisings and please tweet your own candidates for reflections and rethinking at me.

Marc Lynch, Director of POMEPS
November 17, 2014
Advice for youngsters: Do as I say, not as I did

By Nathan J. Brown, George Washington University

For decades, political scientists studying the Middle East have felt marginalized by their disciplinary colleagues. At the heart of our resentment have been two very different, almost contradictory, claims. First, many of us have felt that empirical work trying to make sense of politics within the region has required serious study of language, history, culture, and extended time working in the region. We may bristle at being considered area studies specialists, but we have insisted that serious regional training is necessary for most research. Second, political scientists doing research on the region have complained about a feeling of Middle Eastern “exceptionalism” in the broader discipline – a prejudice that politics operated by different rules made the region of interest to political science only for its exoticism.

While not fully contradictory, these two complaints pulled in very different directions. The first insists that special training was necessary; the second that the Middle East should be amenable for comparative work. What was needed, then, was a set of scholars with deep regional knowledge and experience still trained in the methods of the discipline and oriented toward the increasingly strong preference in most disciplinary programs for causal explanation over scholarship that can be dismissed as primarily idiographic, “area studies” work.

That set of scholars has arrived – over the past decade or so, a new generation of political scientists has been able to ground itself both in rich (and nuanced) empirical work in the region and emerging methodological and theoretical trends in the discipline. Significantly, most of these scholars did not combine regional and disciplinary training in their doctoral programs. Instead they approached them (intentionally or not) in sequence – they accumulated language skills and regional experience before beginning their doctoral training. And one valuable (if ironic) piece of advice for aspiring Middle East scholars might therefore be: Learn everything you can about the region before you start studying it, since most doctoral programs will not make much space for it.

But in retrospect, I suspect another factor was also operating that made the broader discipline less interested in Middle East work; that factor has changed even more dramatically and has led to our being welcomed back into the discipline. Politics in the Middle East was boring because there did not seem to be much of it. In previous decades, in order to participate in disciplinary debates, Middle East scholars had to explain what was not happening (democracy), what seemed anemic in comparative terms (social movements), or what did not change (persistent authoritarianism). Our dependent variables did not seem to vary very much. The Middle East seemed to be where politics – at least domestic politics – went to die.

And when that changed in ways that drew enormous global attention in 2011, we found ourselves suddenly welcome. Those who studied subjects that led them to ignore us in the past suddenly sought us out to ask questions, form panels at conferences, participate in special issues, and on-line symposia. The uprisings of 2011 showed that politics was very much alive in the region.

But oddly, that welcome by our colleagues has paid limited rewards thus far. When the uprisings shook the region, we were armed with a set of conceptual tools, approaches, and subjects that first seemed terribly relevant: democratization, transitions, social movements, and regime change. What was happening in these areas was surprising but very much amenable to comparative analysis. But those things seemed to change quite quickly. And we have struggled to keep up. In a workshop of specialists on the Arab world in 2011, participants asked Valerie Bunce what advice she had for us based on what scholars of the falling Soviet bloc missed, she said “Keep your eye on the authoritarians.” Some of us did, but more of us should have. In 2014, suddenly security services, civil wars, and identity issues loom far larger than they did in our thinking three years ago.
Reflections on the Arab Uprisings

What does this suggest for a young student interested in the Middle East but beginning a doctoral program today? The region may seem especially daunting now. Politics is all too alive in the region; there seem to be too many moving targets to aim at. Today’s topic will seem not simply old fashioned but perhaps naïve when the dissertation is completed.

Of course, I have already given one piece of advice to a beginning doctoral student: If you do not have regional experience and training coming into the program, you are unlikely to get it now. So go back and be raised in the region or by people from the region. If those options are not available, spend a couple years living there (and more studying a language or two). Then come back and I can teach you – and you can teach me.

I can be a bit more helpful and specific for a student who has followed this advice already. In particular, let me suggest three areas that are likely to be ones where a well-trained political scientist will be able to make a strong disciplinary contribution based on empirical work in the Middle East in the coming years. These areas where disciplinary interest is high, gaps clearly exist, and close study of Middle Eastern cases seem very likely to help fill those gaps:

Legacies of authoritarianism: Bunce was right; we should never have taken our eyes of the authoritarians. But there is something else we need to probe as well – how patterns of authoritarian politics survive authoritarian regimes. The structures of authoritarian regimes deserve our attention (indeed, as I will suggest in a moment, they deserve more of our attention), but that is not what I mean by “legacies” here. Just as important as state structures are the political patterns, forces, organizations, constituencies, modes of interactions, expectations, and linkages that grow up under a set of authoritarian conditions. They can survive a change of regime in ways that we need to understand much better.

In a book I edited a few years ago on democracy and democratization, it became clear to me that the discipline was increasingly focusing on a middle temporal range: No longer was regime type understood primarily as a result of long-term historical, social, and economic trends or as an outcome of contingent and short-term struggles. Instead, something in between seemed to be attracting our attention.

Societies go into regime change with the actors and patterns that they have. Patterns of interactions between Islamists and non-Islamists, for instance, or patterns of labor politics in the post-2011 period are heavily shaped by what came before. And there seem to be clear parallels with other regions in this regard. Recent interest on authoritarian legacies in the former Soviet bloc make this clear, but there are other ways that inter-war experiences informed post-war ones in Europe (such as party formation), or that patterns of authoritarianism in 1970s Latin America (such as economic changes) shaped politics in the 1990s that have not yet drawn our full comparative attention.

More nuanced picture of authoritarianism: The study of authoritarianism (and of a variety of non-authoritarian regimes) has burgeoned. But I have been frustrated that much writing on the subject has replaced teleology (authoritarianism as a residual category for democracies that have not yet happened) with functionalism (in which every feature of authoritarian politics is seen as serving the purpose of regime maintenance, or even the interests of an individual autocrat). Yet that clearly has never been the case for well-established authoritarian systems, and the Middle East is rich in opportunities to probe the complexity and varieties of authoritarian politics in a manner that does not treat it only as a matter of autocratic intelligent design.

Identity politics: Political scientists have not had enough to say about identity politics in the Middle East. An earlier generation was trained more in political economy and avoided sect, ethnicity, and tribe for that reason; that attitude survived in an aversion to anything that seemed “essentialist.” But if there is one thing clear in the region today, it is that identity politics is of interest not because it is timeless but because it varies so much. Of course, there
is much recent work on precisely this subject (especially when identity politics takes conflictual and even violent form), but this is still a very rich field to explore. There is a dependent variable here that varies like crazy; it is time to understand what causes those changes.

Indeed, more generally, I do not mean to imply that no work has been done in these areas. Each one has seen some significant pioneering work already. But each one is likely to be fertile ground for wonderful empirical work and fresh insights for the study of politics as the discipline of political science currently conceives it. A beginning student could be trendy, useful, and nuanced all at the same time.

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Reconsidering “Theories of Transition”

By Daniel Brumberg, Georgetown University

Any discussion of the relevance of the Transitions Paradigm to the Arab world’s political uprisings of 2011 to 2012 raises wider questions about the conceptual approaches that have guided the study of the Middle East. The heady expectations that these revolts would provide the launching pad for bringing Middle East studies fully and permanently into the main stream of comparative political science – an expectation that clearly animated the work of the authors of The Arab Uprisings Explained: New Contentious Politics in the Middle East at the group’s inception – has seemingly been dashed. Far from ushering in democracy, with the exception of Tunisia, the Arab revolts were followed by state collapse, civil war, or intensified ethno-religious or identity conflicts. While I wrote the “Theories of Transition” against the backdrop of these grim developments, I do not argue that the multiple trajectories of the Arab revolts demonstrate the irrelevance of the Transition Model, or that they confirm some grand notion of Arab “exceptionalism.” The problem that bedevils all comparativists is that all political systems are in some way exceptional. Thus our key challenge is to blend or link “rationalist” theories that assume a wider, universal, or exogenous rationality with approaches that speak to economic, social, and identity dynamics or logics deeply embedded in local, national, or regional arenas bounded by time and geography.

In meeting this challenge, we must contend with the fact that the Transitions Paradigm was born of local, regional, and global forces specific to a particular age, namely the Cold War. Fused in the crucible of capitalist-labor struggles, it highlighted the emergence of “Bureaucratic Authoritarian” (BA) regimes whose members were unified not by any common economic interests, but rather by their mutual fear of labor and socio-economic instability. While not using the term, Guillermo O’Donnell described a “protection racket” regime that was riddled with tensions but remained unified so long as its members believed that there was no safe alternative outside the BA’s cold embrace. This is why O’Donnell, Adam Przeworski, and their fellow
authors argued that transitions have their origins in the “decline of fear” that many BA regimes experienced, either because they succeeded in their economic missions or they failed. In both cases the original catalyst for forging and sustaining regime unity was undermined. Freed from the terror that had previously glued the regime together, challengers from within and outside regimes embarked on coordination struggles to define a new political formula, one that opened up the political arena sufficiently wide to create a measure of democratic legitimacy, but that nevertheless secured institutional structures and rules whose cumulative effect was to make it hard for labor to politically mobilize and thus pose a significant threat to capitalist restructuring.

Thus conceived, political parties, elections, and even politics itself are tools for structuring social disputes. Democratic pact making provides a universal mechanism of conflict resolution that is animated by an exquisitely rational calculation that a “democracy without democrats” is a second best solution that all key parties and leaders can embrace and create once they tire of endless iterations of violent conflict. This rationalist view is precisely what made the Transitions Paradigm so attractive and seemingly useful. By providing an all-purpose tool that could seemingly be applied to any and all local or national contexts irrespective of cultural, religious, or ideological factors, it set the stage for the field of “Transitology” itself.

My argument was not that these rationalist assumptions are irrelevant to the Middle East, but rather that they must contend with – and must therefore be adjusted – to take into account two other factors specific to national and regional contexts. The first is the presence and effect of ethnic, religious, sectarian, or ideological identity conflicts. Institutionalized and systematically manipulated by ruling elites in a myriad of different Arab autocracies, once these regimes were challenged and or collapsed in whole or in part, the effect of these identity conflicts was to greatly magnify the fears of domination or exclusion that all key actors, particularly those most likely to lose elections, brought to the political arena. These intensifying fears – which were magnified in some cases to a near existential level, as in Syria and Bahrain – greatly complicated efforts at pact making and negotiating.

The second of these factors has to do with the different ways that these conflicts were institutionalized in different kinds of autocratic systems. I argued that these different institutional legacies helped create both the constraints and the opportunities for pact making in different Arab states. To illustrate this point I highlighted the contrasting cases of Egypt and Tunisia. In Egypt, somewhat paradoxically, a legacy of state managed “liberalized autocracy” under the umbrella of a well institutionalized military/security apparatus encouraged competing groups to negotiate with the military rather than with themselves, whereas in Tunisia, a legacy of full autocracy that lacked a similar military/arbiter created a different kind of dynamic, one in which the contending groups had to either fight or negotiate. The result was failure in Egypt, and relative success in Tunisia, as was subsequently demonstrated by the negotiation of a new constitution.

By in large, I think events have supported my overall assumptions and lines of conceptual argument set out in the original chapter. But several factors merit greater attention and also help to explain the multiple trajectories of the Arab revolts. First is the role of outside regional and global forces, which in all cases played some role in promoting or undermining pact making between regimes and opposition, and within opposition themselves. In Tunisia, these regional and global forces played a positive role; in Egypt, a very negative one. Second, I need to give more attention to national media, and to the role that semi-official television and satellite stations played in fostering the escalating fears of key identity groups. This dynamic was especially important in Egypt, and helped set the stage for the June 2013 mass protesting and subsequent coup. Third, I need to take a wider-angle view of the key role that socio-economic, cultural, and ideological conditions played in fostering or undermining negotiations over a new political order.

As I noted in the original paper, the Transitions Paradigm itself was not oblivious to such structural factors.
Despite its apparent focus on leadership, choice, and collective action problems, it highlighted socio-economic, institutional, and even ideological factors and conditions and the ways in which these factors constrained or opened dynamics of pact making and democratic consolidation. For example, the focus on the role of civil society and its “resurrection” was crucial to the paradigm’s gradualist conceptualization of the conditions that pushed forward and widened the dynamics of elite pact making and its capacity to create stable foundations for a more sustained drive to democracy.

When considering the “fight versus talk” scenario that emerged out of the legacy of Tunisia’s full autocracy, it seems quite clear that certain familiar factors – such as the size of the urban middle class and the related issue of state-managed secularization that goes back to the era of former President Habib Bourguiba – set the stage for the election of the Constituent Assembly in which non-Islamist forces were sufficiently represented such that the Islamists had little choice but to negotiate rather than try to impose their preference on their non-Islamist rivals. These deeper structural preconditions seem to loom large. Similarly, while the legacy of a depoliticized military was crucial, that even under the rubric of a much more tightly controlled political system organized labor and its leader managed to maintain a measure of autonomy and credibility helped make it possible for Tunisia’s general labor union, the UGTT, to play an arbitrating role, along with other members of the “Quartet.” The role of the UGTT, along with the Tunisian Industry, Trade, and Handicrafts Union (UTICA) chairwoman, the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH) chairman, and the Bar Association, testifies to the importance of a state building process that created, to put it plainly, a relatively robust middle class and business sector. This dynamic limited any hegemonic aspiration of the Ennahda party and especially its base of young followers, many of whom wanted the leadership to pursue a more “Islamist” agenda.

The role of such structural factors not only helped to cushion the potentially negative effects of identity conflict in Tunisia, they also point to the simple lesson that while identity politics must be factored into any wider account of transition dynamics, by itself identity conflict does not determine outcomes. Long-term state building dynamics and preconditions narrow or expand the horizon for pact making, and wise leadership can further take advantage of opportunities while bad leadership can squander openings that are generated by long-term state building dynamics.

Given the multiple factors at work in any national scenario and, as I argued in my original chapter, a more inductive “configurative” approach is far more useful than any effort at squeezing cases into a more deductive model. The Arab political rebellions of 2011 to 2012 have their origin in distinctive national and regional factors, a fact of life which presents scholars of the Middle East with the continuing challenge of placing their region in a wider comparative enterprise. I would rather focus on a small “n” and deploy more historically sensitive qualitative approaches that problematize the issue of causality, than struggle to fit the small number of crucial cases in a bigger “n” study – one that comes up with regressions that can ultimately seem to be digressions.

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Reflections on the Arab Uprisings

More about states and bankers: Prospects for Islamic finance

By Clement M. Henry, University of Texas at Austin

In The Arab Uprisings Explained: New Contentious Politics in the Middle East I was trying to explain the successes and failures of Arab uprisings by their underlying financial structures, pointing out key differences between the strong states, Egypt and Tunisia, on the one hand, and the weak bunker states of Libya, Syria, and Yemen, on the other. I also showed how the other strong state in the region, Morocco, was able to manipulate divisions and neutralize its February 20 movement by a combination of constitutional reform and economies of patronage facilitated by the banking system. Now it is time to zero in on key differences between Egypt and Tunisia and try in more general terms to think in game theoretic ways about reversing the polarization of Arab civil societies.

In addition to the obvious differences between the Egyptian and Tunisian military establishments, Tunisian civil society seems key to the different outcomes of political transition. Unlike the Egyptians, the Tunisians were able to pull together a political transition process and keep it afloat. Not only did a self-coopted transitional assembly of “civil society” devise and implement electoral laws, when the Ennahda party and its opposition seemed unable to reconcile their differences, a Quartet of the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT); the Tunisian Union of Industry, Commerce, and Handicrafts (UTICA); the Tunisian Bar Association; and the Tunisian League of Human Rights managed eventually to shepherd a working consensus for the new constitution and elections.

Was Tunisia’s civil society really somehow more capable and developed than Egypt’s? Arguably Egypt’s Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) never gave civic associations a chance to prove their mettle. Also, Egypt’s second uprising, on June 30, 2013, against the Muslim Brotherhood, followed by the group’s massacre at the hands of the new transitional regime on August 18, perhaps gave Ennahda a decisive push toward giving up power to a transitional government a few months later. It can still be argued that the Tunisian civil society actors – and Ennahda – displayed greater political acumen than their Egyptian counterparts. They also operated under different cultural constraints. Shadi Hamid nicely contrasts the respective historical contexts and former President Habib Bourguiba’s distinctive legacy.

Detailed research may uncover illustrative episodes and anecdotes and even tease out political sophistication scales from the Arab Barometer and other surveys that the uprisings facilitated, at least temporarily, in Egypt as well as Tunisia.

To the extent, however, that civil society structurally depends on an active, relatively autonomous private sector, it may, with the possible exceptions of some monarchies, be a dead end, at least temporarily, in other parts of the Middle East and North Africa, where the private sector is still either submerged in the informal economy or orchestrated by ruling families. How across the region may we imagine ways of reversing the polarization between various forms of Islamism, on the one hand, and advocates of liberal polity on the other? Polarization across the region seems to be intensifying, moving some Islamists toward jihadism and some liberals toward fascism, each side calling for the annihilation of the other. How might the momentum be reversed? What Islamist forces might offer incentives for taming jihadists? Under what conditions might liberals prefer illiberal democracy to military dictatorship? I will focus on taming jihadists under the assumption, possibly mistaken, that liberals might then become more tolerant of Islamist identity politics.

Let me review possible banking and financial underpinnings for renovating civil societies. These could,

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2 Shadi Hamid, Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East, Oxford University Press, 2014.
following Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, offer more peaceful pastures for ideological contestation. Financial structures obviously do not determine political outcomes but they can offer incentives for bringing informal economies out into the open, thereby offering greater potential for civil society building. I propose to examine Islamic finance as a potential underpinning for a “civil state with Islamic identity,” as Youssef Qaradawi puts it.

This set of financial practices, when officially authorized, can color a civil state with some Islamic identity. Islamic banking has been developing since the mid-1970s in peaceful competition with conventional banking. It represents an alliance between mainstream ulama, co-opted to monitor compliance with Islamic jurisprudence, and conservative Muslim investors. It has made significant progress in the Middle East and North Africa, where Arab Barometer studies indicate widespread disapproval of interest-based lending and conventional banks in general.

I hypothesize that Islamic finance may gradually sap the informal economies underlying bunker states. In societies distrustful of or rejecting conventional interest-based banking Islamic finance can lure the informal economy out into the open by financing small and medium enterprises and even engaging in microfinance, which is much neglected in the region. Identity-based economics can complement and tone down identity politics by giving more economic actors a stake in the system.

As political philosopher Montesquieu proposed in 1751, “gentle commerce” may undermine arbitrary exercises of violence. For Montesquieu the spirit of commerce inculcates “a certain sense of exact justice, opposed to brigandage on the one hand and to those moral virtues, on the other hand, that might distract one from the rigorous pursuit of one’s interests...” Might it be a stretch to imagine a commercial mentality opposed to jihadism and favoring an instrumentalist ethic or wasatiyya (balance or moderation)? Arab Barometer surveys not only suggest that Islamic finance has a potentially receptive audience. The majorities of Muslims who reject interest and conventional banking tend also to be relatively apolitical religious conservatives. Among the elite, too, Islamic finance may represent an alliance between wealth and conservative ulama.

Driven by wealthy Gulf investors, Islamic finance has steadily gained market share in many Arab countries, including Syria. Led by Malaysia, it is also gaining traction in Indonesia and other countries with Muslim majorities. Even states with Muslim minorities, such as Britain, have Islamic banks catering to them. The grand total in the world of sharia-compliant financial assets, to be sure, while approaching $2 trillion still does not add up to those of a major U.S. or Chinese bank. And although Islamic banking continues to grow more rapidly than conventional banks in most Arab countries, the skeptic may still ask whether it really mobilizes new clienteles or simply diversifies the portfolios, as in the Gulf, among wealthy investors.

In Syria of all places, some Central Bank data are available to test such a hypothesis until 2012. After 2006, when Syria permitted three Islamic banks to begin operations, they quickly penetrated Syria’s rudimentary financial markets. By the end of 2011 they held 16.5 percent of the total assets of Syria’s burgeoning private sector, which now held 27.2 percent of Syria’s total commercial bank assets. During the period currency in circulation as a percentage of the money supply steadily declined until 2011, when it dramatically increased under the pressures of political events, terminating chances to test whether Islamic finance

5 Montesquieu, Esprit des lois, XX: 2
6 Monzer Kahf, “Islamic Banks: The Rise of a New Power Alliance of Wealth and Sharia Scholarship”
Reflections on the Arab Uprisings

was attracting new clienteles. Had violent jihadist factions not hijacked the opposition, both sides could have shared an interest in continuing experimentation with Islamic finance, a source of legitimation for the regime yet also, apart from dress codes and family status laws, one of the very few “Islamist” identity markers.

Be that as it may, can we identify any of the moderating political effects that Montesquieu hypothesized? “Gentle,” instrumentally minded bankers invariably at least pretend to shy away from politics. Yet there can be synergies between political parties or factions and Islamic financiers. There can be incentives for them to cooperate, say, in a venture capital enterprise. A logic of tit for tat will work as long as the players accept modest but steady rates of return. Robert Axelrod’s model of the iterated prisoners’ dilemma assumes that the players are “rational” and share Montesquieu’s instrumentalist ethic. May partisan entrepreneurs and financiers share the necessary discipline to obey the model?

How might one test such a proposition? Might Islamic finance somehow contribute to strengthening an Islamist mainstream to isolate the jihadis? If history is any guide, al-Qaeda tended to avoid the banks after 9/11. After some initial confusion in Washington about Islamic finance the U.S. Treasury Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) targeted only one small Sudanese “Islamic” bank in its financial “Global War on Terror.”

In theory Islamic finance could assist in regulating regional cash flows more effectively than the standard anti-terrorism regulation of conventional banks. Heavy-handed regulation of the (very conventional and highly respected) Arab Bank, indeed, may drive more regional finance into Dar El-Islam’s new banking system. For fear of unnecessarily offending mainstream Muslim opinion and having learned from past errors, international regulatory authorities (such as U.S.-led Financial Action Task Force) might be less heavy handed than in the recent case of the Arab Bank, when the U.S. Treasury Department trumped State Department concerns about suppressing critical evidence for the defense.10

In retrospect the private Gulf Cooperation Council supporters of Islamist oppositions in Syria and Libya might have been more consistent and less “pernicious” in their support of Syrian factions, had they operated through Islamic financial vehicles. As Wendy Pearlman suggests, “Unity is likely to remain elusive unless external actors cooperate in instituting a transparent, accountable centralization of financial support.”12

Islamic banks at least in theory have an even greater stake in transparency and accountability than conventional banks. Their distinctive form of financing is equity rather than debt based, and consequently the investors require more extensive information about their entrepreneurs than the standard credit checklist for conventional borrowers. These theoretical considerations may be quite irrelevant to war zones but in the long run Islamic finance, by sapping the foundations of the Middle East and North Africa’s informal economies and responding to popular desires for interest-free banking, may build up civil societies supporting civil states. Even if viewed as illiberal, such states may be more liberal and inclusive than military dictatorships.

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11 See Lynch “The Political Science of Syria’s War,” 3

Changes in youth activism for gender equality, and in the media, in the “Arab Spring”

By Vickie Langohr, College of the Holy Cross

* A version of this piece appeared on The Monkey Cage, November 10, 2014.

Many of the political changes initiated by the “Arab Spring” have negatively affected struggles for gender equality. Violence against politically active women has increased, from the “virginity tests” of protesters in Cairo less than a month after Hosni Mubarak’s overthrow to the June 2014 assassination of Selwa Bugaighis, a prominent Libyan activist who helped organize the “Day of Rage” protests which started the Libyan uprising and advocated for gender quotas in parliament. The installation of more competitive elections has often further challenged women’s rights. Egypt’s first post-Mubarak constitutional assembly, whose membership closely reflected the Islamist majority in parliament, produced a constitution in which the main reference to women was a promise that the government would “guarantee the reconciliation between the duties of a woman toward her family and her work.” The current constitution, which features much stronger language on women’s rights, including an explicit statement of equality between men and women and state commitments to “appropriate representation” of women in the parliament and to protect women from violence, was produced by an assembly appointed by a decree from the interim president installed by the military after Mohamed Morsi’s overthrow.

These challenges are all quite real. But it is also the case that new forms of grassroots politics during the “Arab Spring” have often demonstrated an unprecedented commitment to gender equality among younger generations of activists. While there is no evidence that this commitment is shared by youth (defined here as people under 30 years old) more broadly, the fact that it is enacted by movements which have attained a high profile – often through positive media coverage – may help to “normalize” women’s rights among the broader population. This suggests another issue that begs for more research: the increasing use since the “Arab Spring” of television to break taboos in addressing sensitive social topics and to directly challenge government officials. This essay briefly examines new forms of modelling or working for women’s rights in Morocco and Egypt, highlights how changed media practice has multiplied their effects, and concludes by asking what constitutes the most appropriate universe of comparative cases for exploring these new forms of women’s rights activism.

While Morocco’s February 20 movement did not achieve the political reforms it sought, it offered a provocative model of how some pro-democracy activists represented a commitment to women’s right to an equal role to men in the public sphere. Zakia Salime notes that this commitment was evident from the first February 20 video encouraging citizens to join its protests. The video begins with 20-year old Amina Boughalbi, a founding member of February 20, explaining why she would protest; male and female activists then alternate throughout the video describing their reasons for protesting. The first speaker at the first press conference organized by February 20 – and the speaker who spoke on behalf of the movement - was a 19 year-old woman.1 The prominent role of women in representing February 20 was not limited to visual representation, nor only to the early members of the movement, who Zeineb Touati describes in “Arab Spring and Arab Women: Challenges and Opportunities” as “students and young people who were not members of a party or a union.”2 Women continued to play a central role as the movement expanded to include organizations such as human rights associations and labor unions. Each group with membership in the 160-person National Council

1 Zakia Salime, “A New Feminism? Gender Dynamics in Morocco’s February 20th Movement,” Journal of International Women’s Studies, October 2012
of Support of February 20 was represented by three members, one of whom had to be a woman. Similarities with February 20 can be seen in the Egyptian Women’s Union (Under Formation), which emerged after Mubarak’s overthrow and would send one male and one female member to each meeting with other groups.

In Egypt new grassroots work on women’s rights has come not in the form of opposition movements seeking political liberalization but primarily in work against sexual harassment in the streets, in the metro, and during eids (Muslim religious holidays), as well as against sexual assaults at protests. It is very likely that sexual harassment has increased since Mubarak’s overthrow; in March 2013 Mariz Tadros found that focus group participants in five Egyptian governorates unanimously reported such increases since 2011. Sexual assaults at protests have also skyrocketed: Between November 2012 and August 2013, more than 200 women were assaulted at large political gatherings.

Between June and December 2012 at least five movements emerged to combat sexual harassment or sexual assault during protests. Young men and women in their early and mid-20s who had not previously been politically active formed the groups Basma and Against Harassment, while a third group, I Saw Harassment, grew out of a long-standing women’s rights NGO. Each group organized male and female volunteers to go to crowded areas such as Cairo’s Talaat Harb Square during eids. Some members urged passersby to intervene if they saw harassment, while others physically separated groups of men pursuing women and assisted survivors who wanted to file police reports. These groups have significantly expanded their work over time. In early November 2014, I Saw Harassment provided anti-harassment training to hotel workers in the Sinai resort of Sharm el-Sheikh as part of a cooperation agreement with the Chamber of Hotel Facilities. The agreement, signed in April 2014, materialized one month after the rape of a British tourist in Sharm el-Sheikh raised fears of further declines in the all-important tourist industry. In addition to these anti-harassment groups, in November 2012 two other movements – Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment/Assault (OpAntiSH) and Tahrir Bodyguard – emerged to rescue women from assaults at protests.

Positive coverage of anti-harassment and assault activists on Egyptian satellite television has been one component of a larger increase in discussion of public sexual violence since Mubarak’s overthrow. Members of anti-harassment and assault groups are portrayed as role models. The announcer of a February 2013 show introduced a segment with Basma activists by saying that “after the 25th of January … the youth that are emerging want to help in everything and compensate for the deficiencies that may be present….that these movements are present is an excellent development in our country.” Other shows examine the role of religious and government authorities in public sexual violence. In November 2011 and December 2012 television talk show host Yousri Fouda interviewed visibly injured women the day after each was sexually assaulted at a protest; each woman directly charged representatives of the then-ruling government (the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces in 2011, and Muslim Brotherhood supporters in 2012) with their assaults. Extensive television coverage of “private” women’s rights issues has also occurred in Morocco. After 16-year old Amina Filali, who was forced by her family to marry a man alleged to have raped her, committed suicide in March 2012, Zeineb Touati notes that “debates were organized on television, especially on the state-owned first channel [al-Oula], in the presence of Bassima Hakkaoui, minister of solidarity, of women’s rights and the family.” On the March 21 episode of Moubacharatan Ma’akum (Live On the Air With You)

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4 Mariz Tadros, “Politically Motivated Sexual Assault and the Law in Violent Transitions: A Case Study from Egypt,” Institute of Development Studies, June 2013, p. 21

5 “New President, Old Patterns of Sexual Violence in Egypt,” Vickie Langohr, Middle East Report Online, July 7, 2014

6 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FH9feOPZXog&list=UUrAiOV1-D1us3caNLfXN1OQ, broadcast January 30, 2013

7 “This Is Our Square: Fighting Sexual Assault at Cairo Protests,” Vickie Langohr, Middle East Report, Vol. 268, Fall 2013

8 Touati, 131
talk show discussing Filali’s case, for example, women’s rights activist Nuzha al-Elwi challenged a representative of the Justice and Freedoms Ministry, a portfolio held by the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) as part of its plurality victory in the November 2011 elections.

The willingness of satellite television broadcasters in Egypt since February 2011 to challenge political and social taboos has been noted by some commentators such as Adel Iskandar and Naomi Sakr, but deserves further analysis to understand both its sources and limitations. On-air challenges to government officials occurred fairly frequently in the early period of SCAF rule as well as during Morsi’s presidency. Although a scathing interrogation of the Health Minister occurred on a widely watched talk show in June 2014 after video of a woman assaulted in Tahrir during celebrations of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi’s inauguration went viral, such challenges to government officials have otherwise all but disappeared. But discussion of sensitive social issues may continue even in the current extremely repressive political climate, in part because one of the motivations for such coverage is economic. As the number of satellite channels increased from four at the end of the Mubarak era to 16 by late 2011, increased competition for viewers has led to increased coverage of topics thought to have prurient interest, which anti-harassment activists are convinced motivates much of the media coverage of their work.

In trying to better understand Egyptian anti-harassment activism, I have looked at prominent forms of women’s rights activism that developed elsewhere during similar periods of struggle against authoritarian rule. In a contribution to a forthcoming roundtable in the International Journal of Middle East Studies, I note that women’s rights groups that emerged during struggles against dictatorship in countries like Brazil and Indonesia were usually made up of women mobilizing, at least initially, around issues that concerned them as mothers, from the lack of day care to the difficulties inflation posed to their ability to feed their families. The Egyptian activists described here are often younger than these women, do not organize around motherhood and include large numbers of young men. Perhaps, then, the most apt category of comparison is not women’s rights mobilization in contexts of political transition in recent decades, but rather other forms of youth activism today independent of regime type. Groups similar to that of anti-harassment activists in Egypt, for example, have also sprung up in democratic India, including Blank Noise, an anti-harassment group founded by a female college student in 2003. Blank Noise is now active in nine Indian cities and counts a majority of its members from the 16-35 age group. Young men and women played a major role in the protests against the death of a 23-year old woman after a gang rape in New Delhi in December 2012. As Albeena Shakil noted, while activist work against rape and other forms of violence against women since the 1970s had been carried out almost exclusively by women, in the 2012 New Delhi protests “young students from universities and colleges, both males and females, came out demanding women’s rights,” representing what Shakeel argued “may be a turning point in our country.” The “Arab Spring” has not provided a “turning point” in struggles to keep women safe from sexual violence, but it has opened up multiple new ways for activists to challenge such violence.

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11 “Protests, the Justice Verma Committee and the Government Ordinance,” Albeena Shakil, Economic and Political Weekly, February 9, 2013
Elections in transitions: Change and continuity

By Ellen Lust, Yale University

The Arab uprisings that began in 2010-2011 were dramatic moments, capturing the attention and imagination of people at home and abroad. In Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and, to a lesser extent, Yemen, long-standing leaders were toppled; new parties and movements emerged; and voters flooded the polls. And yet, even in the midst of such enormous change, there was continuity. Existing political logics and institutional arrangements continued to impact outcomes, and the expectations that citizens developed through decades of authoritarian regimes shaped voting behavior to a striking extent.

In The Arab Uprisings Explained, I argued that elections play multiple roles in shaping state-society relations, with different effects on regime stability. The role of elections depends partly on how the elections fit within the political logic and power structure of the regime. In the chapter, I focused on how institutional arrangements drove political logic, arguing, “where elections are integrally tied to the regime’s legitimacy (primarily one-party regimes), elections contribute most to instability and are least useful in shoring up incumbents that come under crises. When a regime’s legitimacy is insulated from electoral politics (primarily monarchies), elections are least likely to contribute to instability.” 1 I also explored how the role of elections could also change over time. The emergence of new political problems – including succession struggles, economic stagnation, and overdrawn state coffers – could change the stakes of elections, the willingness of citizens to engage and, finally, the impact of elections on stability.

Since that chapter was written, the Arab world continues to demonstrate both the diversity of roles that elections can play, and how they reflect and impact the power relationships within regimes. The more than 40 elections held since 2011 have shown just how diverse elections can be. There have been elections over local municipal seats, constitution-writing assemblies, parliaments, presidents, and constitutions. For each type of election, of course, the stakes have been different.

More importantly, however, the meaning of elections differs, even when the institutions at stake are the same, because they play different roles in the larger political game. Look at the presidential elections, for instance: Yemen’s presidential election was a fait accompli intended to legitimize the regime; Egypt’s first presidential election, leading to Mohamed Morsi’s election in 2012, was a high-stakes affair over the future of the country, while the Egyptian presidential election in 2014 was carefully orchestrated, with fairly pre-determined outcomes intended as a step toward legitimizing the incumbents. So, too, is the case with constitutional referendums. Egypt’s first constitutional referendum in 2011 was more important as a step in the transition than in the details of the amendments (which were quickly disregarded); its second and third referendums, in 2012 and 2014, were arguably attempts at political capture, by opposite sides of the political spectrum. Elections play different roles not simply because they determine who comes to power in institutions with different rights and responsibilities, or even because the balance of power between contenders is different, but because they play a role in the broader regime formation and maintenance, and the issues at stake vary: Elections can legitimize winners, be the final blow to oppositions in a larger battle for power, be part of an on-going struggle over the regime, or simply allow a process of contestation over lower level stakes (whether in consolidated democracies or autocracies).

Elites are keenly aware of how elections fit into larger political struggles, but for many citizens, elections are understood in the ways that they are nested in daily lives, patterns of behavior, and social relationships that do not change quickly. Certainly elections in transitions can put

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policy as well as patronage on the table, leading many
who previously abstained to go to the polls. But, for many
– and perhaps in some cases even most – citizens, little
has changed. Those who went to the polls before 2011 in
the hope that the winner would help them get their child
into school, their sick parent to a hospital, or gain access
to other state services continue to look for the same. Old
habits die hard.

I saw this time and again in the last few years. Voters
tended not to distinguish between elections for the
president, parliament, Constituent Assembly, or other
institutions that, at least in theory, should play very
different roles. For instance, when I asked one Tunisian on
the eve of the country’s 2011 elections for the Constituent
Assembly (charged with drafting a constitution) if it
mattered to him whether the candidate understood legal
and constitutional issues, he looked astonished. What
mattered, he explained to me patiently, was that the
candidate was a good man who served the area well. The
same was true in Egypt. Certainly some voted for the “big
issues,” seeing the very direction of the country at stake.
But many others cast their ballots based on whether
the person is “a good man” (or, less frequently, “a good
woman”), whom they see as helping them, or people like
them with everyday problems. Not surprisingly, when I
asked people in August 2014 if voters in the upcoming
parliamentary elections would “go back to” casting
their ballots on the same bases as they did under ousted
President Hosni Mubarak (when service provision had a
huge impact on candidate choice), many pointed out that
they never stopped.

Over time, we generally see greater reluctance to go to
the polls across all countries. In Egypt, the turnout levels
remained nearly the same in the Egyptian presidential
elections of 2012 (43.4 percent of registered voters in first
round and 51.8 percent in the second) and 2014 (47.5
percent), but only after authorities extended voting and
pro-Sisi forces reportedly put pressure on Egyptians to go
to the polls. Most analysts and pollsters also expected a
much lower turnout in the recent Tunisian parliamentary
elections than in the Constituent Assembly elections of
2011, and many felt exhilarated when the turnout was
higher than expected.

That the public is less enthusiastic about elections is not
surprising. Across the world, the euphoria that has initially
driven voters to the polls has dissipated as transitions
proceed. Citizens in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya are far
more concerned with security and economic issues,
such as inflation and unemployment, than they are with
elections and even human rights. Moreover, and this is
key, many view democracy in economic terms – a narrow
gap between rich and poor, providing the basic necessities
for all people, or creating opportunities for the middle
class – rather than in terms of accountability. Again, this is
neither new nor unique: Amaney Jamal and Mark Tessler
argued in 2008 that over half of Arabs saw economic issues
as the most important characteristic of democracy, and
Arab Barometer and Transitional Governance Project polls
find this today. Analyses of Afrobarometer polls during
the transition period there also showed similar results.

2 “Egypt extends presidential poll by a day,” Al Jazeera, last modified
com/news/middleeast/2014/05/egyptians-prepare-second-day-
polls-20145271124420247.html. Crucial sentence: “Voters have
reportedly received text messages telling them they could be fined if
they do not vote.” For a more general statement of concern regarding
the increasingly controlled nature of the presidential elections, see
“Carter Center Expresses Concern about the State of Egypt’s Political
cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/news/pr/egypt-05162014.pdf

3 “SIGMA Conseil: Pour les législatives Ennahdha et Nidaa se
tuniscope.com/article/42795/actualites/politique/sigma-424410
(accessed October 23, 2014)

4 My colleagues and I found this in surveys conducted in Egypt,
Tunisia, and Libya as part of the Transitional Governance Project,

5 Amaney Jamal and Mark Tessler, “Attitudes in the Arab World,”

6 Bratton and Mattes (2000) found both intrinsic support for
democracy and performance-based support, based on economic
well-being and political rights. See Michael Bratton and Robert
Mattes, “Support for Democracy in Africa: Intrinsic or Instrumental?”
Afrobarometer Working Paper No. 1 (2000), accessed October 23,
AfropaperNo1.pdf
It does help to explain, however, why enthusiasm for elections and support for democracy wane as economic problems escalate and security staggers. Elections, so often touted as a symbol of democracy, seem to bring little real change; parties are unable to mobilize support; and elected governments fail to bring economic growth and security.

Moreover, where transitions have stumbled, many voters learned the hard way that their votes may not count. Egyptians who trekked to the polls in the 2011-12 parliamentary elections saw a judicial decree disband the elected parliament less than a year later, in June 2012. The same was true of the presidential election that brought Morsi to power in summer 2012, and the referendum that passed the hastily drawn constitution of 2012. Both were overturned when Egyptians took to the streets the following summer. Libyans now face similar lessons, as they see the newly elected parliament sidelined, with a civil war raging and a “second parliament” formed.

The future remains to be seen, of course. It is too early to know the extent to which citizens will remain engaged in elections, and what the outcomes of elections will be. It is clear, however, that elections continue to play varied roles depending on the political struggles at hand, even when they are contests over the same type of institutions. Moreover, citizens’ engagement in them is driven by immediate conditions and their past learning. Ultimately, it is both elite struggles over institutions and citizen engagement that will determine what the future looks like.

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The evolution of Islamism since the Arab uprisings

By Quinn Mecham, Brigham Young University

*This piece appeared on The Monkey Cage on October 24, 2014.

The Arab uprisings of 2010-2011 provided a major shock that led to the rapid evolution of Islamism in the Arab world. While it was clear at the outset that the shock to Islamist movements would be large, how Islamist movements would internalize that shock and the direction in which they would evolve were highly contingent on the evolution of the Arab political systems. Since the initial uprisings, Islamist movements have evolved dramatically due to a several key trends that have defined and redefined their experience in the new Arab political (dis)order. These trends must be understood in the context of the opportunities Islamist movements faced in initial uprising period.

Although most Islamist movements, such as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, were initially slow to lead popular mobilization against autocratic Arab regimes, they recognized that they could benefit from changes in the post-uprisings political landscape. As it became apparent in many Arab countries that new elections could translate popular support for Islamist movements into political power, many Islamist groups supported the electoral process and launched aggressive campaigns to define society’s needs and capture votes.
These visions, championed by diverse Islamist groups such as Ennahda in Tunisia, Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi groups in Egypt, Islah in Yemen and the Justice and Development Party (PJD) in Morocco, as well as Islamist groups in Libya, Jordan and Kuwait, saw the 2011-12 period as a potential renaissance for Islamist participation in governance. They clumsily entered into political competition with other actors who also sought to redefine the emerging political order. In a large number of countries experiencing political turmoil (Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, Yemen, Kuwait) Islamist groups found new levels of political prominence. Importantly, however, they were actively repressed by the state in Syria, and often had only limited access to key domains of state power (in Libya, Egypt and the monarchies).

Since their initial experience with mass mobilization and the political openings in 2011-12, four main trends have affected Islamist movements in the Arab world that have dramatically shifted their perceived political opportunities. These trends have led to the rapid evolution and devolution of Islamist groups, often in deeply defining ways that will leave a long-term organizational legacy on Islamist groups far into the future. I discuss each of these trends in turn.

**Trend #1: Repression of the Muslim Brotherhood**

Though a longstanding actor of significance in Egyptian society and politics, as well as a leader among Islamist movements in the Arab world, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood initially appeared to benefit significantly from the political opening after the fall of President Hosni Mubarak. The Brotherhood had wide ranging internal discussions regarding its electoral strategy in the post-Mubarak period, but ultimately chose to compete aggressively for both control of the People’s Assembly and the Egyptian presidency. In the Egyptian elections of 2011-12, the Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) won both the Assembly elections and the presidency, leading many in Egypt to fear Brotherhood dominance of the institutions of government.

In retrospect, the Brotherhood’s move to reverse its initial decision not to contest the presidency was a fateful one. After its candidate, Mohamed Morsi, narrowly won the election and became president of Egypt, he sought to challenge existing centers of power in Egypt, and was unable to resolve the deep economic and social challenges faced by Egyptians in the wake of political turmoil. Widespread popular anger at governmental ineptitude, combined with military concerns over potential threats to its economic and political prerogatives, led the Egyptian military and courts to disband the Brotherhood-dominated Assembly and subsequently forcibly remove Morsi from office in 2013.

Although a case could be made that the Brotherhood-dominated government had squandered its extensive popular support, the military decision to forcibly remove an elected Islamist government had enormous consequences for the incentives of Islamist groups to compete in popular elections. Furthermore, the military and judicial decision to aggressively pursue the Muslim Brotherhood as an organization, regardless of its political positions, cast a long shadow over Islamist political calculations that has only darkened over time. Beginning in 2013, the Egyptian state launched a massive campaign to brand the Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, to systematically imprison leadership and to destroy the organization’s capacity as a political and social organization. In the process, human rights protections dramatically receded in Egypt, forcing remaining members of the Brotherhood underground or into exile. Simultaneously, the Brotherhood was pursued outside of Egypt, particularly in Saudi Arabia and a number of Gulf countries as Gulf leaders provided the new military regime in Egypt with budgetary support.

This dramatic turn of events, which took the Arab world’s most prominent and popular Islamist group from the heights of governance to a position where it was forcibly and irremediably excluded from normal politics has deeply affected the organization’s capacity and incentives to participate in regular political processes. A similar process occurred with the Islamist Salvation Front (FIS), which
won elections in Algeria in the early 1990s, and triggered a long and brutal civil war in that country. While there are as of yet no strong signs that civil war looms for Egypt, it is clear that perceptions of injustice coupled with exclusion from the political process have altered the incentives for Islamists in Egypt in a way that could produce militancy.

**Trend #2: State Failure and the Rise of Islamist “State-Building”**

A second trend that has become more pronounced in the Arab world since 2011 is state failure. This has been most prominent in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen. State failure is marked by the inability of the state to provide security and basic state goods such as sanitation, transport, education and health facilities. As central governments have lost control over territory and have lost their monopoly over the use of violence, Islamist groups have been the most prominent of those who have stepped in to fill the breach. Islamists have competitors in the form of tribes and ethnic groups, but they have found it easier than these groups to secure external funding, weaponry and fighters, many of which have come from abroad and have rallied around a pan-Islamic identity.

Since 2013, a number of militant Islamist groups have begun to transition away from strategies that seek primarily to destroy or destabilize the state (e.g., in Syria and Iraq) to groups that seek to monopolize violence over territory that they control. While they still see existing states as rivals to be challenged, they have discovered that they have the ability to build organizational and economic capacity to rule territory and to distribute patronage to their political clients. These militants have both rejected the participatory political norms of groups like the Muslim Brotherhood as well as the anarchic tendencies of the al-Qaeda franchise in favor of norms based in militia-based governance. This brand of militancy requires the development of broader ideology of governance than al-Qaeda possesses, as well as resources that can be managed to produce a regular income.

Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip provided early territorial based models of militant Islamist governance, but it has now spread through large parts of the Levant and Mesopotamia, as well as into parts of Libya and Yemen. The rise of the Islamic State group that crosses the traditional Syrian and Iraqi border territory is the most expansive of these new models, governing at present close to 8 million people and commanding large economic and military resources. The Syrian conflict has led other Islamist groups to adopt a similar model on a smaller scale. Likewise, large parts of Libya and Yemen are now controlled by Islamist militias.

What distinguishes these groups from other Islamist groups is their ability to incentivize populations living under their control (through good governance, extortion or fear) to submit to their authority and often to participate in providing security or governance. They reject the Westphalian state system in favor of often unorthodox models of “Islamic” state governance, borrowing many of the tools of modern state systems but rejecting the legitimizing norms of these states. As these new political orders increasingly challenge international norms and the states in which they operate, their ability to maintain resource flows and territorial control will remain an open question.

**Trend #3: Islamists as Actors in Sectarian Proxy Wars**

The enormously destructive conflict in Syria has become a catalyst for a new level of proxy conflict between Middle Eastern actors, most notably between the dominantly Sunni countries of the Arab Gulf and Shiite Iran. This international conflict using local proxies has shaped how Islamist groups are funded and behave, leading to increasing Islamist militancy and to the development of sectarian ideologies.

As the Syrian opposition to the regime of Bashar al- Assad evolved from a dominantly non-violent campaign to a militant one, arms and resources to Sunni combatants flowed into the country from the Arab Gulf. When the competition between fragmented rebel groups for external funding intensified, they often sought to distinguish themselves from competing groups through their ideology, which in many cases came to mirror the anti-Shiite tendencies of dominant private and government funders.
Active Iranian funding for the Assad regime gave the Syrian conflict an increasingly sectarian cast, which had already been the case for some time in Iraq. By 2013, as the Iraqi and Syrian rebellions began to overlap in their organization, Islamists on both sides began to view the civil wars in these countries as existential sectarian conflicts. The Islamic State’s dramatic territorial gains in Iraq during 2014 have further aggravated the sectarian tendencies of Iraq’s Shiite-dominated government, and Shiite militias have been deployed throughout much of the country to counter the real and urgent threat from Sunni militants.

Sectarianism in Syria has led to Islamist violence across sectarian lines in neighboring Lebanon, as Sunni militants have targeted Hezbollah positions. Yemen has also seen violent clashes between mainstream Sunni Islamists (Islah) and the Shiite Zaydi Houthi movement, which have spread into the capital, Sanaa. Both countries remain at risk of civil war, which would likely fall along Sunni-Shiite lines. The ongoing funding of militants with highly sectarian ideologies by sympathetic external actors leaves Islamist groups in many parts of the Arab world more militant, well-funded, diverse and sectarian in their ideology than prior to the Arab uprisings. This is a trend that has already led to deep polarization across Islamist groups and will take many years to reverse.

**Trend #4: Political Learning Continues**

Despite the increasing levels of government repression, militancy and sectarianism experienced by Islamist groups since 2012, a number of Islamist groups have adjusted their strategies to limit their exposure to these trends and to remain relevant in their political systems. Just as the initial Arab uprisings created a large demonstration effect for protest movements throughout the Arab world, the deeply negative political developments in many Arab countries have led to increasing caution and political learning among Islamist groups in neighboring countries.

Islamist groups in countries such as Algeria and Jordan have chosen not to lead a major challenge against their governments, in part because of the negative lessons of Islamist activism from the 1990s civil war in Algeria and the contemporary civil war in Jordan’s neighbor Syria. Likewise, Islah in Yemen is operating in a context where al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula plays a militant role. As a result, Islah has sought to frame its ideology in a way that will avoid charges of militancy and allow it to capture some of the spoils of the post-Ali Abdullah Saleh political transition.

Perhaps the most interesting political learning has been demonstrated by the Islamist Ennahda party in Tunisia. Although Egypt watched Tunisia’s uprising against then-President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali closely, which then led to mass protests in Egypt that unseated President Mubarak, Tunisians have observed the military’s removal of President Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood with great interest. President Morsi’s unwillingness or inability to offer significant concessions to his political opponents helped to trigger a military intervention with profoundly negative consequences for the Egyptian group. When public protests subsequently began in Tunisia against the Ennahda government and led to political deadlock, the Islamist government chose to resign in favor of a technocratic government. This helped to preserve the democratic system as well as the movement’s ability to participate within that system. As a result, Ennahda maintained its political reputation and organization within the Tunisian system. In Morocco, a similar process has unfolded since the Islamist PJD won elections in November 2011. While the party was criticized by many Islamists for being too conciliatory to the palace in a system that clearly favors the institutions of monarchy, it has maintained influence within that system in part due to its political conservativism.

As Islamist militancy leads to increasing conflict, and as the consequences of increased government repression become more apparent, many mainstream Islamist groups in functioning states are likely to exercise increasing caution in their political behavior in the near term, learning from the current political disorder in the Arab world.

These four trends have been deeply influential on the evolution of Islamist movements in a short period of time, and they are likely to be lasting in their effects. Unlike the
fragile political transitions of 2011-12, which were subject to a range of political forces that worked against their success and stability, the destructive trends in large parts of the Arab world since 2012 are much harder to reverse.

This is primarily because they have led to the dismantling of important forces that take a long time to build. These earlier, but fragile, forces include the democratic interest and participation of Islamist groups, cross-sectarian coalitions that support state governance, and even state capacity itself. Both state and nation have fractured in many parts of the Arab world since 2012, and neither will be reconstituted except in the long-term. This has led many Islamist groups to face permanent exclusion from their states and societies, or to try to recreate state and society on their own terms by force.

Neither of those scenarios augurs well for the future of Islamist groups in the Arab world, and will lead many Islamist leaders to make difficult choices in the near term. If Islamists can continue to play a constructive role in Tunisia, Morocco or even Iraq by channeling Islamic norms of justice on behalf of national interests, then they may yet play a role in the urgent task of nation building. If, however, either narrow ideological interests or exclusion from the political process prevent Islamist groups from contributing to the processes of nation, state, or regime-building in the region, they will likely remain but one more contribution to the ongoing dissolution of the Arab world’s political order.

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Comparing explanations of the Arab uprisings

By David Siddhartha Patel, Brandeis University

In 2010, an unemployed Tunisian fruit vendor, harassed and humiliated by local officials, went to his town’s municipal office to complain. After being denied a meeting with the mayor, he returned with a can of gasoline and set himself on fire. His death triggered no protests; he did not become a national symbol who embodied others’ grievances. Today, few outside of his hometown of Monastir remember Abdesselem Trimech’s March 3 self-immolation.

Almost every account of the Arab uprisings contains some variation of the following sentence: “The Arab uprisings began with the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, an unemployed Tunisian street vendor, on December 17, 2010 in Sidi Bouzid.” Bouazizi was the third Tunisian to set himself on fire in 2010.1 Yet, almost no one mentions the earlier self-immolations or asks why Bouazizi’s triggered

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1 Tunisians in previous years had also used self-immolation to protest government decisions. Muhammd Gharsallah of Kairouan set himself on fire in front of the presidential palace in Carthage in 2007, reportedly after being denied a loan to purchase almond trees.
massive protests when earlier ones had not. Comparing these three instances might help us to identify which factors were more or less important for a local event to become a national one.

Trimech’s and Bouazizi’s backgrounds and the circumstances of their deaths are remarkably similar, but they differ in one notable respect. Trimech was from Monastir, a major tourist resort along the coast; Sidi Bouzid is in the economically and culturally marginalized hinterland. In existing accounts of the Tunisian uprising, scholars have emphasized the importance of the hinterland’s relative economic underdevelopment, lack of public services, and high unemployment. Silvia Marsans-Sakly also notes that coastal city dwellers mocked accents from the interior; they were socially marginalized within Tunisia as well. But, the third case suggests that regional context alone is not a sufficient cause. Chams Eddine Heni lived in the impoverished hinterland town of Metlaoui, approximately 87 miles southwest from the similarly-sized Sidi Bouzid, and his self-immolation on November 20, less a month before Bouazizi’s, did not trigger protests. What was different?

Bystanders recorded Bouazizi’s self-immolation with cell phones, and videos and pictures of it circulated on Facebook and blogs. Heni’s suicide does not appear to have been recorded. The ability of Tunisians to empathize with Bouazizi’s plight appears to have been aided by the fact that they could see images – and knew that others could see images – of what that situation drove him to do. Hearing about it was not enough. The rest of the narrative is well known: Bouazizi’s family protested outside the municipality building, local members of the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) staged demonstrations in small towns and framed Bouazizi as a victim of the regime, and Al Jazeera learned about the early protests from the web and covered them when Tunisian stations were not.

This simple reexamination and comparison of the first step in the narrative of the Arab uprisings yields a few insights. It suggests that some key features were not sufficient for the local act to become a national one. This led me to reassess the power of emotions – especially those triggered by visual images – in mobilizing protest. Why did copycat self-immolations in other Arab countries not trigger similar protests, especially when citizens knew it worked in Tunisia? Were any of those events recorded and shared? The comparison also suggests many of the studies on transnational diffusion in the Arab uprisings – including my own work – might have benefitted by looking at tactics or slogans that did not successfully spread. For example, the slogan ash-shab yurid isqat al-nidham (the people want the fall of the regime) spread rapidly from country to country. But, it seems that the earlier Tunisian slogan of shugul, huriyya, karama wataniyya (work, freedom, national dignity) did not transfer as easily. Why?

There is much still to be learned about the Arab uprisings, including how they spread and why. Now that an initial wave of largely descriptive accounts has been published, the way forward is to go back and conduct rigorous comparisons that allow variables – on both the right and left hand sides – to be considered. Al Jazeera broadcasts aided the transnational diffusion of what social movement scholars would call repertoires of contention. How did publics in other countries converge on a set of slogans and tactics? Future research might examine broadcasts of Al Jazeera from this period to see which slogans and tactics were shown and which were not, perhaps linking them to the subsequent spread of tweets and Facebook posts. Do we remember Khalid Said’s name because images of his

2 Bassam Haddad and Jillian Schwedler mention that two earlier self-immolations in Tunisia “sparked nothing” (Haddad, Bassam, and Jillian Schwedler. 2013. “Editors’ Introduction to Teaching about the Middle East Since the Arab Uprisings,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 46, 2: 211-216, p. 212). Silvia Marsans-Sakly is the only scholar I know of who goes into detail on the earlier cases (Marsans-Sakley, Silvia. 2012. “The Tunisian Revolution: Making and Meaning of an Event,” *EurOrient* 38:185-200). In general, scholars have been more likely to compare Bouazizi’s action with those of Buddhist monks’ in South Vietnam in 1963 or Jan Palach’s self-immolation in Prague in 1969. Like Bouazizi, those examples also inspired others to emulate their act.

3 We cannot know if the fact that Bouazizi survived for 18 days in the hospital was also important; the images of Ben Ali visiting the bandaged Bouazizi spread widely.

disfigured corpse went viral while those of similar victims of regime brutalities in other countries did not? What role did visual images play in making the city of Daraa, its teenagers, and the Omari Mosque the story of the beginning of the Syrian uprising instead of other stories of how the uprising began? Who can push a story in a way to make it the story, the narrative behind which mobilization occurs?

The Arab Spring might be over, but the analysis of what happened and why is only beginning.

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**Inter-Arab politics and international relations in the Middle East**

*By Curtis R. Ryan, Appalachian State University*

For the *Explaining the Arab Uprisings* volume, my chapter, “Inter-Arab Relations and Regional Politics” examined several key dynamics in regional politics, including the central driver for many political outcomes in the region: regime security and survival. The uprisings of the Arab Spring refocused the attention of many scholars, policymakers, and activists on the politics of regimes – on regime survival, regime collapse, regime change, and the difficulties encountered in creating new regimes. Almost four years after the start of the Arab Spring, understanding the politics of regime survival remains a central part of Middle East political analysis, but the “survival” question now applies not only to regimes, but also potentially to entire countries: Will Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen and other countries remain single states or break up into component parts? for example.

In this memo, I will revisit two themes in the international relations of the region, noting their continued importance, but also some significant changes in the shifting regional balance of power and the domestic and regional importance of identity politics.

Alliance politics and the shifting regional balance of power

During the first three years of the Arab Spring, it was striking how different Arab regional politics was from earlier eras – not just in the collapse of heretofore long-lived autocracies, but also in terms of inter-Arab relations within the regional system itself. In earlier eras, Arab politics had seen struggles for dominance or hegemony (often taking an ideological guise) between three main protagonists: Egypt, Iraq, and Syria. In the early years of the Arab spring, however, the names of these capitals – Cairo, Baghdad, and Damascus – no longer implied centers of regional power, but rather of chaos, insurgency, civil war, or revolution. The countries and capitals of the old Arab Cold War were now no longer protagonists in regional leadership struggles, but instead had become arenas for struggle themselves.

By the time of the 2011 uprisings, this Arab power vacuum in inter-Arab relations led to an unusual constellation of rising powers. Saudi Arabia, long used to playing a behind the scenes role in regional struggles, now openly asserted itself in regional politics, with decidedly mixed results.
The tiny emirate of Qatar became, temporarily, a major source of power and influence. It too attempted to play an assertive foreign policy role, stretching from Libya to Syria. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other Arab Gulf monarchies in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) intervened across the region, with money and arms, affecting domestic politics far beyond the Gulf. Their roles were in some cases supportive of revolution (against Muammar al-Qaddafi in Libya and Bashar al-Assad in Syria) but also counter-revolutionary (in the Gulf itself). The GCC even launched a military intervention to secure the survival of the regime in Bahrain and counter-revolutionary efforts across the Gulf have not ceased since. Yet Saudi Arabia and Qatar also engaged in heated rivalry and proxy conflict themselves: backing Salafi Islamist movements (for example in Saudi Arabia) or, in the case of Qatar, the Muslim Brotherhood, in Egypt, Syria, Gaza, and elsewhere.

How fortunes have changed. In 2013, Qatar appeared to be playing a regional role far beyond its means: with Islamist movements rising across the region. By 2014, however, the Muslim Brotherhood had been overthrown in Egypt, and was subsequently banned in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. With the rapid decline in fortunes for the Muslim Brotherhood, Qatar too seemed to have been relegated once again to its role as a lesser power in regional affairs. Yet the Saudis were in no position to declare victory: Iran remained a powerful regional rival, and one that Western powers were negotiating with as an accepted part of the regional status quo; while many of the Salafi movements that had received Saudi backing now took on a stridently anti-Saudi tone. When Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, and even Jordan took part in airstrikes against the militant self-declared “Islamic State” (also know as ISIS or ISIL), this was a measure of the weakness and severe insecurity of these regimes.

Similarly, in 2011, in part because of the inter-Arab power vacuum, and in part because it seemed to represent a case of successful and somewhat democratic Islamism, Turkey had clearly been the ascendant regional power. The irony of the moment was that the most popular leader across the Arab world was not Arab, but Turkish – Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. But here too, fortunes soon changed dramatically. Like Qatar, Turkey was affected by the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, marked even by a personal vitriolic animosity between Egypt’s General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and Turkey’s Erdogan. By 2014, both had become presidents of their respective countries, and the animosity, if anything, increased.

In some respects, multiple regional powers had attempted to grab power at a pivotal moment in time, yet all found themselves overstretched in various ways, and all faced unintended and unanticipated consequences of their activist and interventionist foreign policies. But this power vacuum was in many respects caused by the decline in U.S. influence and credibility in the region – dating not to the Arab Spring but to the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. The deadly ramifications of that war continued to destabilize the entire region, with a corresponding decline in U.S. power, influence, and credibility.

By 2014 what was most striking about the regional balance of power was this: There wasn’t one. Iran remained powerful but largely friendless, tied to its own interventions for the regime in Syria and against the regime in Yemen. Turkey had in a mere three years gone from regional superstar to its earlier image as the former imperial power attempting once again to intrude upon Arab affairs. Israel had engaged in yet another war in Gaza, with a staggering death toll that nonetheless left Hamas intact, but security for Palestinians and Israelis alike remained as elusive as ever. Yet even in the midst of the Gaza conflict, Israel and several Arab states seemed to have formed a de facto alignment for status quo. Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE had all become something of a status quo alignment, in large part against Islamist forces such as the Muslim Brotherhood (including Hamas) in contrast to earlier pro-Ikhwan efforts by Qatar and Turkey.

Within inter-Arab politics, the GCC remained the only standing alliance, but one marked by intense rivalries and divisions, and which seemed to be a coalition of Sunni Arab monarchies and autocracies reprising their roles from the earlier Arab cold war. This time, too, they were
Reflections on the Arab Uprisings

But this time the new regional cold war was not really Arab, but mainly a Saudi-Iranian struggle that manifested in competitive interventions with a pronounced sectarian tone. While the local sectarian violence was very real, the broader Sunni-Shiite aspect of the new regional cold war was more symptom than cause. In short, primordial hatreds were not driving the international relations of the region; rather, material and ideational power struggles were actively manipulating sectarian and ethnic tensions in a cynical struggle for power with devastating results.

Sub-national and transnational identity politics

In the book chapter, I had suggested that Pan-Arabism remains a force, but not the Pan-Arabism of the heyday of the movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Then the movement was led by relatively new, ideologically-charged military regimes, who soon found themselves in conflict not only with conservative monarchies, but also with each other. Today, it remains a staple of analysis to declare Pan-Arabism dead. But beyond this now outdated statist version, there remain powerful lines of identity and pan-Arab identification at the societal level. The new media revolution has facilitated this still further, but people in the region do in fact care about, and follow, the news in other Arab countries from North Africa to West Asia. But these identities compete with national and increasingly sub-national identities as well, especially as the weakness of the regional state system has been made amply clear.

Lines of identity – ethnic, tribal, religious, sectarian, national – are usually seen as part of comparative politics; while the regional balance of power is part of international relations. But to really understand either set of phenomena, one must ignore the borders of subfields, and cross them. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt benefited from Qatari and Turkish support, but the military regime that ousted the Muslim Brotherhood was itself supported by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. It would be impossible, in short, to accurately explain these dramatic regime shifts within Egypt without turning to regional international relations. Similarly, many foreign policy choices in the region have internal as well as external motivations, requiring serious analysis to draw on comparative politics to explain international relations outcomes.

At the start of the Arab Spring, hopes were high that societal Pan-Arabism would lead youth movements and pro-democracy movements and perhaps even new democratic Arab regimes to form transnational coalitions of support. The efforts were there, certainly, but so too were the efforts of authoritarian states to exploit identity politics, fuel divisions, and divide and rule populations. While there were and are some cross-border efforts among pro-democracy groups, by 2013 these were eclipsed by transnational support efforts of ruling regimes. The other most notable transnational form of identity politics came in the form of transnational Jihadi networks (including ISIS) that challenged the state system. In short, it is transnational authoritarianism (and even transnational militant Jihadism) – not transnational democracy – that seemed to have gained the upper hand in regional politics.

And it is in this context that it is worth revisiting what regional alliances actually are. As I suggested in the book chapter, these may technically be alliances between countries, but in more realistic terms they are transnational support coalitions between ruling regimes, against both external and internal threats (real and perceived) to their security and survival.

Regional conflict

The period since 2011 has been particularly tumultuous in regional politics, with the initial optimism of the early Arab Spring democracy movements giving way to resurgent authoritarianism, militancy, and violence by state and sub-state actors. The rise of the “Islamic State” even prompted the emergence of a renewed international coalition and Western military intervention in the name of fighting terrorism. In that sense, 2014 has echoes from the early days of the “War on Terror” from 10 years earlier. Then and now, there remains the danger in media analysis, punditry, and policymaking, of seeing countries (especially in international relations) as holistic units. But given the internal rifts and
struggles within many states, it has become absurd to speak without qualifiers of what Syria, Iraq, Libya, or Yemen are doing on the regional or global stage.

But another over-simplification may be even more problematic: seeing current lines of conflict as constants rather than variables. This has long been noticeable in public perceptions of the Arab-Israeli conflict, but it is now dangerously applied to explain regional sectarianism as a constant, allegedly from 632 to 2014. There is a real danger to seeing even deep fissures of current conflict as supposedly primordial cleavages in regional politics – to believe, in short, the myths that “they have always been fighting,” whether this applies to Muslims and Jews, Arabs and Kurds, or Sunnis and Shiites. While there is no shortage of ethnic and sectarian hatred, seeing these as endemic in regional politics also leads people to dismiss the region entirely in terms of rational explanations. If people have “always been fighting,” then both explanations and solutions seem pointless.

In this context, a key role of political science research is to provide more realistic explanations for regional conflict or cooperation, based on facts rather than popular mythology, but also ones that dispel pervasive or even brand new myths about the underpinnings of regional politics.

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Political system preferences after the Arab Spring

By Mark Tessler, University of Michigan and Michael Robbins, Princeton University

*A version of this piece appeared on The Monkey Cage, October 29, 2014*

A key factor leading to the Arab uprisings was a demand for better and more responsive governance. Central to this call was an emphasis on karāma, meaning dignity, which reflects a desire for political leaders who respect their country’s citizens and care about their welfare. As the composition of demonstrators in Egypt’s Tahrir Square and elsewhere demonstrated, Arab citizens of nearly all backgrounds could agree on this demand. Public spaces were filled with individuals of all backgrounds – young and old, religious and secular, men and women, and rich and poor – gathered in a calling for a change to their political systems.

Yet, what type of change did Arab publics seek? In most countries there was no unified vision about the type of political system that would be most appropriate at the time of the Arab uprisings.1 Although large majorities of people surveyed in the Arab world have expressed support for democratic rule, preferences about the ideal type of democracy have varied. Most importantly, the role for religion in politics has been widely contested.

Following the Arab Spring, elections were held in countries across the region, including in those that were only moderately affected by the uprisings. Islamist parties or candidates won the largest share in elections in a number of these contests, including in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Morocco. Many factors accounted for their electoral

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success, ranging from the nature of electoral rules and the absence of credible alternatives to organizational and mobilizational capacity and the preferences of Arab electorates. Regardless of the reasons, however, these outcomes allowed citizens in some countries to experience Islamists in government while those in other countries, observing from a distance, could more clearly imagine what the election of an Islamist party might mean for their own country.

Moreover, although the protesters of the Arab Spring called for dramatic political changes, today relative few Arabs favor rapid reforms. Across 10 of 12 countries where data are available, at least 7-in-10 respondents say that political reforms should be implemented gradually instead of all at once. The case of Algeria is particularly instructive; in the months following the Arab uprisings 54 percent of respondents said political reform should proceed gradually, but just two years later nearly 78 percent said the same.3

Clearly, the events since the Arab Spring have affected Arab public opinion. Yet, how has it changed attitudes about the best political system? Do Arab publics remain supportive of democracy in the wake of the difficulties associated with democratic transitions in a number of countries? Has the experience of Islamists in government led to an increase, or a decrease, in support for political Islam?

The Arab Barometer – a series of nationally representative public opinion surveys – offers insight into these questions. The first wave of surveys was conducted in 2006-2007, well before the events of the Arab Spring. The second wave took place from late 2010 through 2011 and spanned the initial events of the Arab Spring. Finally, the third wave, from late 2012 through early 2014, was carried out well after the initial uprisings. Comparing results from three waves, we find that support for democracy remains high but support for political Islam has decreased. Interacting these two trends, our main finding is that Islamist democrats – those who support both democracy and political Islam – are becoming scarcer across the region.

Support for democracy

Arab publics continue overwhelmingly to support democracy. In all but one country surveyed, three-quarters or more of respondents in the third wave of surveys agree or strongly agree with the statement: A democratic system may have problems, yet it is better than other systems. This belief is most widespread in Egypt (85 percent) and Lebanon (85 percent), followed by Tunisia (83 percent), Jordan (81 percent), Palestine (81 percent), and Algeria (80 percent). Although lowest among the countries surveyed, overwhelming majorities also favor democracy in Iraq (76 percent) and Yemen (73 percent).

Evidence from other regions suggests that support for democracy tends to decline following democratic transitions.4 Although the degree to which any Arab country has actually made such a transition is debatable, evidence from the Arab Barometer suggests that this conclusion does not apply in the present-day Arab world, where support for democracy has remained relatively stable since the Arab uprisings. In Jordan, Palestine, Algeria, and Iraq, support remains at similar levels in all three waves of the study. In Lebanon, support has declined 7 points from the first wave (2007) to the third wave (2012), but it remains among the highest in the region.

Levels of support for democracy have decreased the most in Iraq and Yemen, falling by 10 points and 9 points, respectively. Most likely, these changes are the result of domestic factors rather than regional factors. In Iraq, the failure of the government of former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to build a strong and inclusive political

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system may have led a fair number of Iraqis to question whether democracy is suitable for their country – most notably Sunnis and other minority groups. In Yemen, the state remains extremely weak and is struggling to contain challenges from the Houthi rebellion in the north and the secessionist movement in the south, which may predispose many Yemenis to believe that an authoritarian government is needed to reestablish and maintain political order.

**Support for political Islam**

A clear outcome of recent events is a decline in support for political Islam across the region. In the most recent waves of surveys, Arab publics are less likely than before to say that religious leaders should have a say over decisions of government. Algeria has witnessed the most dramatic decline with support for political Islam, falling from 60 percent in 2006 to just 34 percent in 2013. A similar decline has occurred in Egypt, where 37 percent supported political Islam in June 2011 compared to 18 percent in April 2013 (-19 points). Most other countries witnessed a similar decline, including Palestine (-15 points), Iraq (-11), Lebanon (-9), and Yemen (-7).

There are two exceptions to this trend: Jordan and Tunisia. In Jordan, support for political Islam has held relatively steady across all three surveys. In 2006, 52 percent favored political Islam compared to 47 percent in 2012, which represents a decline of 5 points and nearly falls within the margin of error of the surveys.

In Tunisia, there has been no significant aggregate change in support for political Islam. In October 2011, 25 percent of Tunisians favored a role for religious leaders in decisions of government, compared to 27 percent in February 2013. These results strongly suggest that the experience of living under a government headed by the Islamist Ennahda party did not lead to a significant decline in overall levels of support for political Islam.

Yet, these dichotomized results conceal an important trend: The intensity of attitudes about political Islam has changed markedly among Tunisians. Of the 75 percent of respondents who did not support political Islam in 2011, 56 percent disagreed with the statement that religious leaders should have influence over government decisions while 19 percent disagreed strongly. By 2013, a shift of about 20 points had taken place between these positions, with only 36 percent disagreeing and 38 percent disagreeing strongly. Thus, living for more than a year under the Ennahda-led government appears to have increased the intensity of attitudes about the place of Islam in political affairs.

**Political system preferences after the Arab Spring**

Interacting attitudes toward democracy and political Islam provides additional insight into the political system preferences of Arab publics. Table 1 provides a summary of the four preferences for governance that are analyzed in this paper:

1) Democratic Secular; 2) Democratic with Islam; 3) Authoritarian Secular; and 4) Authoritarian with Islam. Table 2 presents the empirical results for these four types of governance. The table includes the six countries that were surveyed in all three waves and two additional countries, Egypt and Tunisia, which were only surveyed in wave two and wave three.

A comparison of survey results across the different waves shows a clear trend: Support for democracy with Islam has declined across the region. In six of the seven countries, support for this worldview is significantly lower in wave three than in previous waves. Compared to the first wave for which data are available in each country, support for democracy with Islam dropped significantly in Algeria (-28 points), Palestine (-15), Iraq (-13), Egypt (-11), Lebanon (-10), Yemen (-8), and Jordan (-7). Only in Tunisia did support for this form of political system remain unchanged.

Despite this general trend, the dynamics associated with an updating of political system preferences appear to vary by country, and some thoughts about this variation may be offered as a stimulus to further reflection.
In Algeria, the decline in support for democracy with Islam is largely the result of a dramatic increase in support for secular democracy (+25 points). This change – which primarily occurred between the first wave in 2006 and the second wave in April 2011 – may reflect that much of the support for political Islam in Algeria has for a long time been strategic in nature. Thus, since the regimes in Egypt and Tunisia fell due to protests that were not driven by Islamist parties, Algerians seeking change may have decided that effective opposition to the non-democratic status quo was more likely to come from secular than Islamist forces. Beyond this, given the relatively small difference between levels of support in the second and third waves, the performance of Islamist governments in Egypt and Tunisia apparently did little to make Algerians think that Islam might be the “solution” after all.

In Palestine as well, declining support for democracy with Islam was largely replaced by support for secular democracy between the first and third waves. Again, the major change occurred between the 2006 survey and the 2010 survey, suggesting that some of the same dynamics were operating. In addition, the timing of the first survey – soon after Hamas’s victory in parliamentary elections – may have contributed to the higher level of support in this survey compared to those that followed.

The results have been similar in Egypt between the second wave, conducted in June 2011 before parliamentary or presidential elections, and the third wave, which was carried out in April of 2013 after Mohamed Morsi had been president of Egypt for 10 months. During this 22-month period support for democracy with Islam declined by 11 points, falling from 27 percent to 16 percent. This loss of support was accompanied by a 19-point increase in support for secular democracy. Meanwhile, support for authoritarianism with Islam also declined by 8 points. The surveys strongly suggest that living under a government led by the Muslim Brotherhood turned Egyptians strongly against the organization’s basic ideology.

In other countries, the nature of the shift in public opinion is less clear. In Iraq, for example, support for democracy with Islam has declined while support for secular authoritarianism has risen significantly between the first and third waves. In Lebanon, the shifts have been away from democracy with Islam to both secular democracy and secular authoritarianism.

In Yemen, the slight increase for support for democracy with Islam between the first and second waves (+8 points) had been reversed by the third wave. From the survey in February 2011 to December 2013, support for democracy with Islam declined by 16 points. As in Iraq and Lebanon, the shift in Yemen was not to a single alternative political preference.

Tunisia is the key exception to the general disappearance of Islamist democrats across the region. Support for democracy with Islam held steady at roughly 23 percent from October 2011 to February 2013. Meanwhile, support for secular democracy declined by 7 points. The clear difference from Egypt is likely linked to the strategies pursued by Ennahda compared to those of Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Ennahda joined forces with other parties to form the Troika government and did not take actions to seize power. This more moderate governing strategy helped maintain levels of support for democracy with Islam despite the many hardships faced by Tunisians.

**Conclusion**

Regardless of whether domestic, regional or international factors are the cause, Islamist democrats are becoming more rare throughout the Middle East and North Africa. On the whole, Arabic publics are turning away from this political system and looking to alternatives to meet their demands for better and more inclusive governance. In fact, unlike in both previous waves of the Arab Barometer, in no country does democracy with Islam represent the plurality of public opinion in the third wave.

Although informed speculation has been offered about some of the domestic causes underlying this change,
regional factors, at least in part, surely explain some of the variance as well. The Arab Spring offered Islamists a number of political openings, but, generally speaking, it appears that Arab publics did not look favorably on the performance of Islamists in power. Although the assignment of blame is contested, or at least debatable, Egypt slipped into greater instability and the economic situation of many citizens suffered under Morsi’s government. Morsi’s ultimate response was to seize vast powers and to declare himself above the law. Frustration over these political developments meant that within a year of his election, huge numbers of Egyptians were demanding his resignation.

Libya’s infighting and general instability can also be attributed in part to the role that Islamist actors have played in that country. If nothing else, Libya’s turbulence and instability certainly does not represent a model for those in other countries.

Even in Tunisia, where Ennahda did share power with other parties, the economy continues to struggle and security remains a challenge. The Troika government was replaced by a technocratic government that has fared somewhat better in public opinion. As such, Tunisia’s limited progress under Ennahda hardly looks like a successful example to citizens in other countries in the region.

There has been no clear example of the success of combining political Islam with democracy, which presents a challenge for its adherents. Although there has not been a significant corresponding uptick in support for authoritarianism with Islam among publics at large, it is unsurprising that some Islamist leaders across the region may conclude that this is the only means by which they can exact the change they envision. The overthrow of a democratically elected president in Egypt led Islamists to conclude, perhaps not only in Egypt, that they would never be given a fair chance to govern. More radical groups taking root across the region may therefore actually benefit from the decline of Islamist democrats across the region, as those who believe Islam and politics are fundamentally related lose faith in the democratic process as a means to realize their goals.

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Table 1. Summary of Political System Preferences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demography, whatever its limitations, is better than any other political systems</th>
<th>Strongly Agree/Agree</th>
<th>Disagree/Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree/Agree</td>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>Democratic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>with Islam</td>
<td>Secular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree/Agree</td>
<td>“Authoritarian”</td>
<td>“Authoritarian”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>with Islam</td>
<td>Secular</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Table 2. Political System Preferences in Eight Arab Countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Political System Preference</th>
<th>AB1</th>
<th>AB2</th>
<th>AB3</th>
<th>AB1-AB3 difference</th>
<th>AB2-AB3 difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>Democratic Secular</td>
<td>40.9%</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
<td>43.3%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>-1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Democratic with Islam</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
<td>37.8%</td>
<td>-6.6%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Authoritarian Secular</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>-0.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Authoritarian with Islam</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>-0.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palestine</td>
<td>Democratic Secular</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>49.1%</td>
<td>50.3%</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Democratic with Islam</td>
<td>45.1%</td>
<td>35.1%</td>
<td>30.6%</td>
<td>-14.5%</td>
<td>-4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Authoritarian Secular</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Authoritarian with Islam</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>-1.0%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>Democratic Secular</td>
<td>35.1%</td>
<td>64.7%</td>
<td>60.4%</td>
<td>25.3%</td>
<td>-4.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Democratic with Islam</td>
<td>48.0%</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>-28.0%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>5.3%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>-2.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Authoritarian with Islam</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>Democratic Secular</td>
<td>75.4%</td>
<td>70.3%</td>
<td>78.1%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
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<td>Democratic with Islam</td>
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<td>12.0%</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Authoritarian with Islam</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>-0.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td>Democratic Secular</td>
<td>35.4%</td>
<td>30.5%</td>
<td>37.1%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Democratic with Islam</td>
<td>44.2%</td>
<td>51.8%</td>
<td>35.8%</td>
<td>-8.4%</td>
<td>-16.0%</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>7.7%</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Authoritarian with Islam</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq¹</td>
<td>Democratic Secular</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
<td>43.1%</td>
<td>45.5%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Democratic with Islam</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
<td>43.7%</td>
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<td>-12.9%</td>
<td>-13.7%</td>
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<td>Authoritarian Secular</td>
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<td>14.2%</td>
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<td>5.1%</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Authoritarian with Islam</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
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<td>2.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>Democratic Secular</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>Democratic Secular</td>
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<td>Democratic with Islam</td>
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<td>1.4%</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Footnotes)

¹ Data for the first wave comes from the World Values survey conducted in 2006.
The Project on Middle East Political Science

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by the Carnegie Corporation and the Henry Luce Foundation. For more information, see http://www.pomeps.org.