

MARC LYNCH

# THE ARAB UPRISING

THE UNFINISHED REVOLUTIONS  
OF THE NEW MIDDLE EAST



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T H E   A R A B  
U P R I S I N G

THE UNFINISHED REVOLUTIONS  
OF THE NEW MIDDLE EAST

MARC LYNCH



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*For Lauren, Sophia, and Alec*

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## INTRODUCTION

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ON FEBRUARY 10, 2011, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak stepped before the TV camera for the third time since the January 25 revolution began. Massive crowds in Tahrir Square quieted. President Barack Obama and his closest advisers turned up the television volume on al-Jazeera English. After weeks of escalating protests, tense clashes in the streets, turmoil in the ruling elite, and fierce international pressure, virtually everyone expected Mubarak to announce his resignation.

Instead, casting himself as “a father to his sons and daughters,” he delivered a meandering, condescending address. He assured, paternalistically, that “as a president I find no shame in listening to my country’s youth”—but showed no sign of having actually done so. He laid out a time line for the transition of power over seven months, which made clear that he had no intention of immediately stepping down. The hundreds of thousands of Egyptians gathered in central Cairo roared with rage.

Seconds after the speech ended, I received an e-mail from one of President Obama’s top advisers on his way to a meeting in the Situation Room: “What do you make of *that*?” This book is in part my attempt to answer his question, and my own, about the dramatic changes that have unsettled so many assumptions and certainties in the Middle East.

It is commonly said that nobody predicted the upheavals in the Arab world that began in December 2010 and defined the following year.<sup>1</sup> But that does not mean that nobody saw them coming. The crumbling foundations of the Arab order were visible to all who cared to look. Political systems that had opened slightly in the mid-2000s were once again closing down, victim to regime manipulation and repression. Economies failed to produce jobs for an exploding population of young people. As the gap between rich and poor grew, so did corruption and escalating resentment of an out-of-touch and arrogant ruling class. Meanwhile, Islamist movements continued to transform public culture even as Arab regimes used the threat of al-Qaeda to justify harsh security crackdowns.

Regional politics was equally stalled. The Israeli-Palestinian peace process, which remained central to Arab political identity and discourse, had long since gone on life support. Arab states seemed indifferent to its collapse, though, and even cooperated openly with Israel on the enforcement of the blockade of Gaza. In the spring of 2010, the Arabs were unable to even organize a single Arab summit meeting to discuss the problems of Palestine and Lebanon due to the bickering of the competing regimes, as Egyptian and Saudi leaders declined to travel to Doha in support of Qatari initiatives. A debilitating “cold war” between America’s autocratic allies and the forces of *muqawama* (resistance), such as Iran, Hamas, and Hezbollah dominated the official agenda of regional international relations, spreading in its wake a nasty Sunni-Shi’a sectarianism that divided many Arab societies. To many Arabs, the behavior of their leaders contributed to the perennial failures of the Arab order. The need for change had grown urgent and painfully obvious to frustrated youth who had long since given up any hope that their leaders might themselves change.

All of these frustrations festered at a time of radical, revolutionary change in the information environment. Perhaps the Arab regimes had always been bickering, incompetent, corrupt. But now, thanks to satellite television stations like al-Jazeera and the spreading presence of the Internet, their follies were on full display to a skeptical Arab public. Arab leaders could no longer go about their business in private while crushing any sign of discontent. Their people now had access to information and an ability to express their opinions publicly far beyond anything the region had ever before known. When Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire in Sidi Bouzid in protest over abusive police on December 17, 2010, the Arab world was ready to respond.

I have been deeply immersed in the evolution of what I call a “new Arab public sphere” for well

over a decade. My 2006 book *Voices of the New Arab Public* had focused on al-Jazeera and the satellite television revolution that had shattered the Arab regimes' ability to control the flow of information or the expression of opinion. Most of my academic writings have focused on the impact of new communications technologies and their effects on political and social action. I had written about Egyptian bloggers and their political activism, as well as how Internet activism was changing the perspectives of young members of the Muslim Brotherhood. I had written about how al-Qaeda and radical Islamists used the new media, including Internet forums, to spread their narratives and the propaganda. I had written about al-Jazeera's talk shows and news coverage, and how they spread both a pan-Arabist identity and a political orientation highly critical of the authoritarian status quo. All of these writings pointed toward the evolution of a new public sphere that would inevitably challenge the pillars of Arab authoritarian domination.

I also played an active role in the Arab public sphere through my own blog, "Abu Aardvark." While written in English (like many of the more influential Arab political blogs), Abu Aardvark was deeply immersed in Arab political debates and discourse. I tried to translate the debates in Arabic for a Western audience, while engaging personally in the contentious debates that consumed Arab discourse. When political discourse moved onto Twitter, so did I (you can find me at @abuaardvark). In the spring of 2010, I helped to launch the Middle East Channel on [ForeignPolicy.com](http://ForeignPolicy.com), where I solicited and personally edited hundreds of essays by leading academic experts as well as commentators from the region. My dual personalities had never felt more intertwined than on January 25, 2011, as I watched the Egyptian revolution unfold in real time on Twitter, while sitting on a stage moderating an academic panel discussion about the Tunisian revolution.

Through my own blogging and research, I got to know many of the leading Arab Internet activists personally, both through online engagement and during my travels to the region. I followed in real time over the course of a decade the struggles, travails, and successes of the new public. I saw them fail to force immediate political change, but argued repeatedly that they were nonetheless driving a generational revolution in expectations and attitudes. I struggled with the moral hazard inherent in encouraging their political activism while leaving them at the tender mercies of state security. And I struggled every day with the vast chasm that separated their views of America and the Middle East from what I heard every day in Washington.

I also became deeply involved in debates about American foreign policy. In the years following 9/11, I urged the Bush administration to take Arab opinion seriously and to engage more effectively with the emerging Arab public sphere through a reinvigorated public diplomacy. I challenged the neoconservatives aligned with the Bush administration to reconcile their avowed support for Arab democratization with their adoption of policies and rhetoric that infuriated exactly the people they claimed to want to empower. In the fall of 2008, I warned a congressional audience (and later, in private, the CENTCOM strategic review team tasked by General David Petraeus for the incoming Obama administration to review the foundations of America's strategic presence in the Middle East that the crumbling Egyptian state and steadily closing political space would be unsustainable version of which I published on the blog).<sup>3</sup> My involvement with these policy debates sharpened my sense of urgency in translating academic expertise into real impact on these issues about which I cared so deeply.

I moved to Washington, D.C., in the summer of 2007 to join the new Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University, and signed on as a Middle East policy adviser to the then long-shot presidential campaign of Barack Obama. I worked as one of the small core group of policy advisers to the campaign on Iraq and the Middle East until election day. I opted not to go into government service after the election, but remained close to many administration officials. When the Arab uprisings began, I found myself consulting frequently and intensely with administration officials

from across the agencies. I attended dozens of off-the-record working groups and expert engagement sessions, spoke privately with administration officials at all levels, and debated Egypt policy with President Obama himself.

From these multiple vantage points, I can say from deep experience that many of us in the community of scholars warned of the crumbling foundations of Arab authoritarian rule. The canard that liberals or Middle East experts did not believe in Arab democracy could not be farther from the truth—if anything, these communities were too quick to identify with popular movements and too instinctively suspicious of the intentions of ruling elites. But I would not pretend to be anything other than stunned by the enormity or speed of the Arab uprising that finally came. I had anticipated a slower, generational transformation. It was the difference between seeing structural change happening below the surface and watching the chaotic reality of politics.

The Tunisian uprising and its aftermath demonstrates the radical reality of contingency and randomness in politics. The course of events in each country could easily have gone differently at crucial moments: a panicked soldier in Tahrir Square could have opened fire and started a stampede; the Bahraini crown prince might have struck a reform deal before the Saudis lost patience and rolled back in their troops; Syrian president Bashar al-Assad might have decided not to try to crush protests in Deraa. But beneath the random turbulence and human agency, there were deeper forces at work. The Tunisian uprising would have been impossible without factors like generational change, new technologies, American leadership, and the regional military balance of power, all working together.

This book seeks to make sense of what happened and to offer a guide to what is to come. What we have seen in the first year of the uprisings, I argue, are only the very earliest manifestations of a deeper transformation. And understanding the implications of those changes will require us to move beyond stale ideological debates and outdated theories in order to grapple with the new realities of an empowered but far from triumphant Arab public.



## THE ARAB UPRISINGS

*Why does every nation on Earth move to change their conditions except for us? Why do we always submit to the batons of the rulers and their repression? Didn't the Palestinians resist with stones and knives? Didn't Marcos and Suharto and Milosevic and Barri fall? Did the Georgian people wait for the Americans to liberate them from their corrupt President? How long will Arabs wait for foreign saviors?*

—TALK SHOW HOST FAISAL AL-QASSEB  
AL-JAZEERA, DECEMBER 23, 2001

THE UPRISINGS that have profoundly shaped the Middle East began in a remote outpost of southern Tunisia on December 17, 2010, with the self-immolation of an unknown young man named Mohammed Bouazizi in protest against abusive and corrupt police. His act could have been yet another well-meant but meaningless protest in an obscure region, accomplishing little. Yet something was different this time.

Within a month of this event and the first, small Tunisian protests, hundreds of thousands of young protestors had taken to the streets in almost every Arab country. Protestors in different nations chanted the same slogans—“The people want to overthrow the regime!”—and waved the same banners. They fed off each others' momentum and felt the pain of each others' reversals. Within less than a year, three Arab leaders, long in power, had fallen and others faced mortal challenges.

The rapid spread of protests across the entire region transformed what had begun as a fairly typical bout of turmoil on the periphery of the Arab world into a revolutionary moment—a fully-fledged Arab uprising. Even before Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali's flight from his country on January 14, 2011, almost everyone with a stake in Arab politics was already focused on who was next. Every government declared that it was not another Tunisia. Every citizen in the Arab world seemed to hope that it was. Over the next few months, protests did indeed break out in most Arab countries— attracting very different responses from regimes and from outside powers, and producing very different outcomes.

Protests spread so quickly and powerfully from the margins of Tunis because they took place within a radically new Arab political space. A new generation of Arabs had come of age watching al-Jazeera, the Qatari satellite television station; connecting with each other through social media; and internalizing a new kind of pan-Arabist identity. They had protested together virtually in real time in support of the Palestinian Al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000 and against the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. They had watched together as Lebanese rose up against Syrian occupation in 2005 and then suffered Israeli bombardment in 2006. They had complained publicly about their leaders, stalled economies, and stagnant politics after long decades of keeping quiet—and had noticed the common concerns across the region. Virtually every Arab anywhere in the region could imagine herself in the shoes of these suddenly mobilized Tunisians.

The Arab uprising unfolded as a single, unified narrative of protest with shared heroes and villains, common stakes, and a deeply felt sense of shared destiny. Many of the upheavals after the one in Tunisia became known by the date of their home country's first protest or else of a pivotal moment of escalation or repression, used as a hashtag on Twitter or a promotional spot on al-Jazeera. The rhythm of revolt synchronized across the entire region, with each Friday's "day of rage" seeming to bring the region closer to fundamental transformation. At that moment, anything seemed possible and even the Arab population could hope for immediate, peaceful change. The unified Arab world of which generations of pan-Arab ideologues had dreamed had never felt more real.

Then the tight interconnections of regional politics worked in the opposite direction. After the relatively peaceful departure of Egypt's president, Hosni Mubarak, and Ben Ali, the other Arab dictators refused to go peacefully. Brutal attacks on peaceful protestors in Bahrain, Yemen, Libya, and Syria signaled the beginning of the play's second, darker act. An empowered Arab public could force itself onto the stage, but it could not always survive when suddenly threatened dictators unleashed the full force of their violence. The magical images of a unified people peacefully forcing Mubarak from power gave way to gut-churning videos of unarmed protestors gunned down in the streets.

After intervening to prevent an impending massacre by Libyan president Moammar Qaddafi's forces, American and NATO warplanes were bombing Libya by March. A harsh sectarian crackdown against protestors in Bahrain risked sparking a new regional proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Yemen's regime teetered between peaceful protest and renewed insurgency with nobody able to find a path out of stalemate. Syria's incredibly courageous protestors were met with horrifying massacres and a paralyzed international community. Saudi Arabia emerged as the center of counterrevolution, spreading wealth and political support to conservative regimes across the region. Meanwhile, even the supposedly triumphant revolutionaries in Egypt and Tunisia found their own victories incomplete as they struggled with resurgent Islamist movements and opaque interim military regimes. Through it all, traditional rivals Israel and Iran sat nervously on the sidelines, and the United States struggled to balance its hopes for democratic change with fears for its vital interests.

What are the Arab uprisings? Clearly the events of 2011 in the Middle East are not yet a story of democratic transitions. Nor are they yet clearly revolutions. *Arab Spring*—a term that I may have unintentionally coined in a January 6, 2011, article—does not do justice to the nature of the changes. The uprisings are an exceptionally rapid, intense, and nearly simultaneous explosion of popular protest across an Arab world united by a shared transnational media and bound by a common identity. Those uprisings are playing out very differently across the region and are likely to produce new, very mixed regional politics—some new democracies, some retrenched dictatorships, some reformed monarchies, some collapsed states, and some civil wars. They will likely intensify regional competition, drive new alliances and rivalries, and change the nature of power politics.

I believe that these world-shaking events, from the peaceful revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt to the brutal, grinding battles in Bahrain, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, are but the first, early manifestations of changes still to come. They are driven in part by a generational change, as a frustrated young population confronts hopeless economies, rampant corruption, blocked politics, and indifference to abusive state institutions. Their grievances took form within a genuinely structural change in the very nature of regional politics: the rise of what for over a decade I have referred to as the "new Arab public sphere."<sup>3</sup> This change will fundamentally challenge the power of Arab states and force them to respond to the demands, interests, and concerns of an engaged public onto every political agenda. That challenge will sometimes be peaceful, but will too often be bloody as regimes jealously cling to their accustomed power.

The fate of particular dictators is therefore the least interesting part of a much bigger story. The Arab uprisings are only the very earliest manifestations of a powerful change in the basic stuff of the

region's politics. Regional and foreign powers alike will continue their competition within these more turbulent arenas, intervening where it suits their interests and turning a blind eye when it does not. New rules and norms will emerge to govern regional interactions. Perhaps, if things go well, it will become commonly accepted that rulers who massacre their own people will lose their legitimacy; perhaps, if they do not, more cynical patterns will take hold in which humanitarian intervention will target enemies while the same infractions by friends go unremarked. The Palestinian issue will continue to occupy a central place in Arab identity but, with the fading hopes of a two-state solution, may adopt very different forms. The Arab people have been empowered. From now on, they will play an ever greater role in regional politics. And everyone with a stake in the region's future will be forced to adapt.

The transformation that led to the Arab uprising starts with new information and communication technologies, including satellite television, the Internet, and cheap mobile phones. The widespread dissemination and use of such technology has radically reshaped the way information, ideas, and opinions flow through Arab society. The role of social media and the Internet in the Arab uprising has often been exaggerated, with too much emphasis on Facebook or Twitter rather than on the underlying political struggles. But this generational, structural change in the nature of political communication represents the most fundamental and significant real effect of these new media.

There were three great effects of this new media environment. First, the free flow of information and the explosion of public discourse and open debate have shattered one of the core pillars of the authoritarian Arab systems that evolved over the 1970s and 1980s: their ability to control the flow of ideas and to enforce public conformity. Second, it has given today's activists and ordinary citizens new skills, expectations, and abilities. They operate within a radically new information environment, expect different things from their states and societies, and are able to act in new ways to demand change from them. Finally, it has unified the Arab political space, bringing together all regional issues into a common narrative of a shared fate and struggle. This new Arab public sphere is highly critical of most ruling regimes, extremely pan-Arabist in its orientation, and self-consciously celebratory of the power of a long-denied Arab street.

These effects of the new public sphere matter more in the Middle East than in other parts of the world because Arab regimes depended so heavily on their ability to dominate and control the public sphere. Today, it is difficult to recall what a black hole the Arab media was only two decades ago. Arab information ministries tightly and ruthlessly controlled the flow of information and opinion. State television stations offered a monotonous, toxic brew of official pronouncements and glorification of presidents and kings. Editorials were often written directly by intelligence agencies and were rigorously censored so as to uphold the government's talking points. Many Arab state media outlets, from Egypt to Saudi Arabia, became so good at managing the media that in 1990, they were able to suppress information about the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait for days while regimes struggled to formulate a response. Today, such an invasion would be televised, blogged, tweeted, and posted on YouTube within minutes of the troops crossing the border.

Arab authoritarianism depended on iron control of the public sphere. The regimes ultimately rested on violence and fear, smoothed by patronage, but even the most brutal of them made some effort to legitimize their rule.<sup>4</sup> These systems depended on near-total public conformity, with extensive networks of intelligence services and oppressive policing of what Arabs typically call "the red lines" governing politically safe public discourse. As Middle East scholar Lisa Wedeen demonstrates in her brilliant dissection of the Syrian cult of personality surrounding then-president Hafez al-Assad, the operation of state power can be seen most thoroughly in its ability to enforce public compliance with ideas and rhetoric that almost all know to be false. In Wedeen's classic example, educated Syrian professionals would agree to pretend in public that their president was the country's greatest dentist-

not because they believed it, but because the regime demonstrated its power by compelling them to say so.<sup>5</sup>

The new generation instead openly mocked their leaders. Al-Jazeera talk shows in the early 2000s made sport of the 99 percent electoral victories that once symbolized the unchallengeable power of the “presidents for life.” Online forums circulated wickedly funny cartoons of the formerly infallible leaders. Before anyone could even remark on the changes, the most fundamental pillar of Arab authoritarianism in its deepest form had simply collapsed. But even as the information environment changed in such fundamental ways, as governing institutions crumbled and publics raged, the authoritarian regimes of the Arab world attempted to maintain their absolute control. After limited political openings in the middle of the 2000s, many Arab regimes became more repressive in the latter years of the decade, even as their people grew more impatient and more capable of expressing dissent.

There was something else unique about the Arab world. More so than in any other part of the world, the Arabs were integrated within a shared political space, united by a common identity, a shared narrative, and a coherent set of debates, issues, and concerns. The Arab world had always been more tightly connected than any other region in world politics, linked by a common language and a politically constructed but very real sense of shared fate. In the 1950s, thousands of Arabs had poured into the streets to protest Western imperialism and demand Arab unification at the behest of incendiary Egyptian radio broadcasts. This had faded in the 1970s and 1980s. But in the early 2000s, driven in large part by al-Jazeera and the new media, the Arab space began to reunify. In this emerging reality, all Arabs cared about Palestine or about Iraq—and, indeed, caring about such things was part of what defined them as “Arab.” Satellite television and the Internet made those connections more intense and more intimate, faster and more focused than ever before.

This was a generational change. This rising generation of young people had spent their formative years on the Internet, plotting their next protest rather than hiding from politics. Most could not even conceive of the world of the 1970s and 1980s, when authoritarian regimes dominated every aspect of public life and citizens bowed down to personality cults. As one older pundit marveled over the summer, “I feel optimistic when I see the youth speaking on the satellite television programs, surpassing their elders in their thoughts and analyses, for they are liberated from the censor whose knife was at the throat of their elders.”<sup>6</sup> The Arab public was transforming into something much more participatory, much less deferential to authority, much less patient, much less susceptible to regime propaganda, and much more able to connect and communicate across distances and to acquire information of all sorts. But their political systems failed to evolve to accommodate their new demands, even as economic hardship and a litany of political failures fueled popular alienation.

The combination of rising public challenge and a unified Arab public sphere rapidly rewired the game of regional politics. Over the first decade of the 2000s, the rhythms of televised and wired protest almost imperceptibly became the normal state of regional affairs. When massive protests marched simultaneously through Cairo, Rabat, and Sanaa in 2000 over the Palestinian-Israeli war and in 2003 over the American invasion of Iraq, al-Jazeera almost single-handedly united these disparate protests into a single coherent narrative of regional rage. Lebanon’s “Cedar Revolution,” following the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005, offered the spectacle of a single country’s mass protests dominating the political agenda of an entire region. Egypt’s Kefaya movement demanding political reform through the middle of the decade became the regional template for wired networks online and offline youth activists. Meanwhile, the spirit of protest and challenge spread far beyond these highly visible youth activists. In Egypt alone, the last few years of the 2000s saw thousands of labor strikes as well as protests by pillars of society such as judges and lawyers. Tribes marched against the government in Jordan and Kuwait, workplace strikes proliferated through Tunisia and Algeria, and Palestinians experimented with new forms of nonviolent protest against Israel.

occupation. This was a wide and deep wave of popular mobilization.

The new public sphere shaped the generation now rising to positions of leadership in their societies and changed the nature of Arab national identity. In the 1950s, Arabs had been energized by the urgent popular appeal to erase colonial borders and unite as a single great nation. In those days, even mentioning a concern for one's own country might be taken as treason to the higher cause of Arab unity. But by the 1980s, increasingly entrenched authoritarian regimes had made great headway in promoting a narrower state-centric patriotism. Where President Gamal Abdel Nasser told all Arabs to unify in the pursuit of a common good, two decades later President Anwar Sadat told Egyptians to revel in the return of the Sinai peninsula as the reward for making peace with Israel. In that moment Fouad Ajami, a Lebanese-American scholar, decisively informed a generation of analysts that pan-Arabism had died.

But this new Arab public sphere simply sees no contradiction between their quest for freedom at home and their support for Palestinians. They saw Mubarak's support for the blockade of Gaza as part and parcel of the contemptuous autocracy he exercised at home in Egypt. They are not looking for a new Nasser, a powerful state to lead them; instead, they judge all regimes by whether or not they effectively serve causes that they themselves define and lead. They see the fates of Palestinians, Yemenis, and Egyptians as deeply, necessarily intertwined. As one Twitter activist explained, "Media should focus on every Arab revolution equally, martyrs should never fall unnoticed #Yemen #Syria #Libya #Bahrain #Egypt #Tunisia."<sup>7</sup> Upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, Yemeni protest leader Tawakul Karman declared: "This is a message that the era of Arab dictatorships is over. This is a message to this regime and all the despotic regimes that no voice can drown out the voice of freedom and dignity. This is a victory for the Arab spring in Tunis, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Yemen."<sup>8</sup>

The new Arab public sphere is driven by a generation that has gained the platforms and the mechanisms to engage in sustained argument, debate, and discussions about their common concerns. For some, that took the form of political activism, but for many, it simply transformed the way they experienced their lives. That engagement radically expanded their competencies to organize outside and against the state as well as their expectations from politics, themselves, and others. And they gained those new horizons, expectations, and skills precisely as economic opportunities disappeared, corruption escalated, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict festered, and democratic channels of participation closed. The rise of this generation, with all of those new hopes and capabilities, is what makes the regional status quo finally unsustainable. When Bouazizi's act of desperation started the regional cascade, they were ready.

Many will want to reduce this vibrant new public to easy stereotypes—whether a rising Islamist menace or a liberal youth rejecting their elders. Making such generalizations about an Arab public that spans dozens of countries is dangerous. There are extremely significant variations in national politics, cultures, political histories, ethnic and sectarian distributions, and orientations toward key issues. We must be *attentive to internal debates and contestations*. There is no essence of Islam or of Arab culture that will provide a key to the elusive Arab street. Arabs are people. They are internally divided, sometimes confused, often brilliant, and always capable of holding more than one thought at the same time. Karman, the Nobel Laureate, could without difficulty be simultaneously a leading member of the Islamist party al-Islah, a feminist icon, and a tireless advocate for democracy and human rights. Any attempt to reduce such restless energy to a single stereotype, or to appropriate it for a political cause, will fail.

This is especially the case for Americans, who too often project their own prejudices, fears, and hopes onto the Middle East rather than being willing to take it on its own terms. September 11 created an American audience conditioned to accept the most absurd claims about Islam and the Arab world. Many quickly succumbed to the fear that Osama bin Laden commanded the allegiances of a wide

swath of the Arab and Muslim world. He did not. But only a few years later, many Americans—indeed, often the same ones—allowed themselves to believe that “silent majorities” of Iraq and the Arab world secretly supported the United States and secular-liberal values. Neither the fears nor the hopes were helpful guides. Too often Americans take one side in a hotly debated internal issue—whether the definition of jihad or the nature of the Egyptian revolution—as the authentic, authoritative statement of the entire community. This is wrong. As publics become ever more strategically important, we can no longer afford lazy generalizations, ill-informed speculation, or misleading polemics. Nor can we afford to treat Arab publics as a barely relevant nuisance, as an object to be manipulated, or as a tool to be wielded or discarded as our political needs of the moment merit.

We should remember that as we try to discern who now speaks for the Arab public. Articulate liberals may not speak for the Arab world any more than does al-Qaeda. The people who are the most fun at bars in tony areas of town or who have 20,000 followers on Twitter are not necessarily the ones with influence over or a firm understanding of their own societies. The test of the ballot box may prove cruel to those who emerged from revolution claiming to represent their people. Within weeks of the success of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, analysts were warning of attempts to monopolize revolutionary legitimacy.<sup>9</sup> Often, leading activists are far out of touch with the mainstream views in their society—a reality that has deeply shaped the postrevolutionary political drama in Egypt, especially, as impatient youth activists have confronted the limits of their sway and have struggled to retain popular support for their activism. Many of the conventional narratives about the Arab upheaval neglect the role of more traditional actors such as labor and trade unions, working class and poor neighborhoods, and Islamists of various stripes. If Muslim Brothers, trade unionists, and angry football fans fought in Tahrir Square alongside liberal and leftist online activists, why should the latter monopolize claims to speak for the Egyptian revolution? As postrevolutionary politics revolve around claiming the mantle of revolutionary legitimacy, these narrative battles have real political stakes.

Understanding this newly empowered public and its effects on the region’s power politics will be one of the major challenges for policy and scholarship in the coming years. The best guides to the emerging era in the Middle East may have actually been written decades ago: *The Arab Cold War*, by Malcolm Kerr, and *The Struggle for Syria*, by Patrick Seale. Both recount an era in the 1950s in Arab politics in which ideologically powerful states competed by jockeying for influence in the domestic politics of their weaker neighbors. Syria in those days was not a regional power, in large part because of how open its politics were to these competitive mobilizations. Egypt amassed power through incendiary broadcasting and masterful ideological appeals to Arab unity, while conservative regimes sought foreign support and tried to counter with appeals to Islam. The emerging Arab order may have a lot in common with the classic days of the Arab Cold War.

The intense power politics of the 1950s, in which powerful states sought to exploit and capture genuinely popular movements, has many echoes today. The Arab uprisings erupted within the context of a decade-long cold war that polarized the region into a “resistance axis” led by Iran and including Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas as well as a broad swath of public opinion, and a “moderate axis” aligning the United States with Israel and most of the other Arab states. That new cold war came to define all regional interactions in classic bipolar fashion, giving regional strategic meaning to local events and bringing together unlikely coalitions.

The early Arab uprisings clearly hoped to transcend that regional cold war. Yemeni and Bahraini protestors challenging Saudi-backed regimes angrily denied accusations of Iranian support, while Egyptians in Tahrir pointedly rejected Iranian claims to be leading an Islamic Awakening. Arab activists have simply dismissed the appeals of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to ignore his domestic repression because of the value of his country’s resistance to Israel. Iran has been almost

invisible, despite the best efforts of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and their allies to blame their problems on Tehran's meddling. Its 2009 crushing of the Green Movement protesting a fraudulent presidential election badly harmed Iran's image with the new Arab public regardless of its "resistance" credentials. Instead, new lines of division have appeared that do not neatly map onto the previous ones: "revolution against counterrevolution" rather than "resistance and moderation." But the turbulent environment created new opportunities for all would-be regional powers to advance their interests, and it would be deeply out of character for them to decline such openings. Competitive meddling, from Egyptian elections to Syrian insurgency, would become the new normal.

The regional cold war found the United States in an awkward position of trying to be on what the Obama administration considered the right side of history, aligning with the Arab public in demand for democratic transformation, while also attempting to mollify traditional allies such as Israel and Saudi Arabia that feared and detested the revolutionary wave. The Obama administration genuinely wanted to support the Arab uprisings as an irresistible, inevitable change driven by the fact that "the people of the Middle East and North Africa had taken their future into their own hands." President Obama had placed the U.S. firmly on the side of democratic transitions, declaring "that America values the dignity of the street vendor in Tunisia more than the raw power of the dictator."<sup>10</sup>

But at the same time, strategic realities imposed ever more heavily. Israel worried about its peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan and feared that the turbulence would reach the Palestinian areas. Iran sought to take advantage of the turmoil to break the tight containment built by the Obama administration in the previous two years, and to exploit the weaknesses of its recent adversaries such as Egypt. Saudi Arabia raged at American infidelity, complaining to all who would listen that Obama had discarded Mubarak "like a used Kleenex" at the first sign of trouble.<sup>11</sup> And even as its traditional friends fumed, the U.S. gained few friends with the newly empowered Arab public, which always saw U.S. efforts as too little and too late, and which refused to overlook American support for Israel and favor its efforts on behalf of democratic change.

How will this all end? Conventional accounts explain the end of the original Arab Cold War through the discrediting of the key pan-Arabist powers such as Egypt after the 1967 war exposed their military weakness and political failures. But that was only part of the story. The key structural change came with the oil-fueled growth of the smothering internal power of Arab states. Indeed, the Arab authoritarianism being challenged today was in many ways a direct product of the turbulence and ideological meddling prevalent during the Arab Cold War of the 1950s and 1960s. The massive state security institutions that came to dominate these states existed in large part to block that kind of competitive mobilization of domestic forces and inciting of military coups. The leaders who survived the Arab Cold War were determined to never again face such threats from within, and shaped the domestic regimes and foreign policies toward that overriding goal of staying on their thrones. It would be tragic if this wave of turbulence ends in the same sort of dictatorial retrenchment.

The Arab uprisings have loosened that control, at least temporarily, and opened more countries to such competitive meddling. That, alongside the independent mobilization of the activists and the unification of the Arab political space, is going to change the way regional power politics operates. In the emerging system, states will of course still derive power from their military capabilities, size, and wealth (especially the last). But three other dimensions matter more than the traditional reality focused on guns, bombs, and dollars would acknowledge.

First, the *ability to credibly align with the Arab public on its core issues and to shape those convictions will become an ever greater source of power and influence*. Put simply, real strength flows from being associated with popular ideas in such an environment. The appeal of the "resistance bloc" in the 2000s derived in large part from Iran's championing of the Palestinian cause and its presentation of itself as the chief rival to a widely unpopular American hegemony. The Islamic system

of government in Tehran commanded little admiration, but Iran could credibly claim to be resisting broadly despised regional order. In the newly emerging Middle East, “swing states,” such as Qatar and Turkey, that enjoy decent relations with the U.S. but have in recent years become more independent in their foreign policy in order to appeal to the new Arab public will be well positioned. Thus, after long years of Turkish-Israeli alliance (and Turkey’s irrelevance to the politics of the Middle East), Turkey’s Prime Minister Recep Erdoğan shrewdly played to this new public by challenging Israel over its actions in Gaza and, for his efforts, was received as a hero in Egypt and Tunisia in the fall of 2011.

Those political movements and regimes that hope to survive and prosper will be more responsive to public attitudes. For instance, Egypt’s then-foreign minister Nabil al-Araby quickly signaled shortly after the revolution that his government wanted to normalize relations with Iran, downgrade but not sever ties with Israel, and ease the Gaza blockade—all popular positions that the Mubarak regime had rejected to its own ultimate detriment. But memories may be short. Egypt’s new military rulers did not follow through on these (and many other) promises, and soon lost public confidence. When Erdoğan, with a half-hearted Syria policy, failed to live up to the expectations of the public, it felt no qualms about turning on him. Libyans grateful for extensive Qatari support during their war against the Qaddafi regime quickly grew resentful of perceived meddling in their postliberation politics.

Finally, there will be far less room for rulers to play a double game of saying one thing to their own people and then doing the opposite abroad. The new public sphere relentlessly hunts down information about such transgressions and spreads it through all channels to hold the regimes accountable. Leaders accustomed to quietly cooperating with the U.S. and Israel while saying the opposite in public will find their room for such maneuvering considerably reduced. It won’t stop them from doing so, of course, but it will make it more difficult. This will inevitably impose at least short-term costs for the United States, Israel, and other status quo powers.

The intense competition to capture the mantle of the Arab public and to shape the trends in Arab public opinion of the last decade will become even more intense as the stakes go up. Qatar’s media empire, especially al-Jazeera, has become an ever more potent instrument of power. When Qatar was a minor player in regional affairs in the late 1990s and early 2000s, al-Jazeera’s claims to simply represent the Arab street rang true. But as Qatari clout grew, so did the temptation in the palace to use its popular television station in the service of its foreign policy. As the regional cold war polarized with a Saudi-fueled media campaign promoting a “moderate” bloc against an alleged Iranian-led “resistance bloc,” al-Jazeera found it harder to carve out a position as a neutral voice of the Arab public. It became increasingly identified with the resistance bloc because of its refusal to sign on to the Saudi-led campaigns and because of its sympathetic coverage of Hezbollah’s war with Israel in 2006 and of Gaza in 2008—even if that reflected the views of the vast majority of the Arab public with which it identified.

Over the course of the 2011 upheavals, al-Jazeera unabashedly supported some rebellions (Syria, Libya) while ignoring others (Bahrain). In 2011, for the first time since the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, it suspended its trademark talk shows in favor of round-the-clock news coverage. Where the suspension in 2003 had lasted only six weeks, this one extended for more than six months—abdicating al-Jazeera’s role as the central node for public discourse and debate at arguably the most crucial moment for such discussions in recent Arab history. Many complained that it had veered from journalism into advocacy, and from independence into openly serving the Qatari interest. Such moves likely served Qatari foreign policy goals in the short term, but undermined al-Jazeera’s status over the longer term. Other states will likely stand up additional competing Arab television stations in pursuit of such power.

Second, *the unified political space will increase the linkage between issues across the region*. The



unification of Arab political space is certainly not new; indeed, the shared identity and political references have for many decades been a distinctive characteristic of Arab politics.<sup>12</sup> Palestine has long been a common concern for almost all Arabs, of course, and Iraq became a similarly shared issue over the 1990s and 2000s. But the growing power of the transnational media makes this even more intense and more politically salient. This generation of Arabs sees all of the region's revolutions as part of a single, shared narrative, with a common set of heroes and villains. Crowds came out into the street in almost every Arab country in response to the successful revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt. Moroccans and Yemenis shared a common response to events in Tunisia, while the brutal violence in Libya captured on al-Jazeera generated a historically unprecedented Arab demand for Western intervention. When Qaddafi lost control of Tripoli, Yemeni protestors surged. Common arguments against "linkage" between, say, the Israeli-Palestinian issue and Iran's influence in the Gulf will become ever harder to sustain as the role of publics and the unification of political space increase.

Issues such as Palestine will be that much more difficult for regimes to shunt to the margins in such an environment. Such linkage is of course not new. The Palestinian Intifada that broke out at the end of 1987 offered one of the most comprehensive examples of popular social mobilization anywhere, inspiring Arabs across the region. But the regional interactions are far more intense this time, with every national challenge taking its place within a common narrative. This is why in March 2011, the Obama administration was right to take seriously the demonstration effect of a successful military response by Qaddafi in Libya, and why its failure to push forcefully for serious reforms in Bahrain hurt it far more than it anticipated. Linkage across issues, diffusion, and demonstration effects, and a regionally integrated narrative are likely therefore to be long-lasting characteristics of regional politics.

Third, *the ability to intervene in the domestic politics of rivals and to prevent penetration of one's own domestic arena will determine whether the state is a player or an arena within which the great powers wage their proxy wars.* Just as Syria's domestic weakness in the 1950s made it a playing field for the great powers of the day, so will certain kinds of regimes be more or less vulnerable. Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon, for instance, have been arenas for competition between the regional powers in the 2000s and will likely remain so. The Arab uprisings will open more and more states to such external involvement—as has already been seen from Saudi and Iranian competition in Bahrain and Qatari arming of rebels in Libya. As the columnist Mustafa al-Zayn put it in March 2011, "every large Arab country is now acting in its close neighbors, Egypt is busy in Sudan and Libya, Syria is busy in Lebanon, Saudi is busy in Bahrain."<sup>13</sup>

The weakening of states at home has clear consequences for their external power. Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain join Lebanon and Iraq as arenas rather than actors, despite their size, wealth, and material power. Calculating the balance of power will therefore require looking deep inside states. Will a more diverse range of regime types have predictable and systematic effects on power? Will those countries that evolve democratic systems, such as Egypt, prove to be highly susceptible to external penetration by way of covert support to political parties and movements? Or will they be largely immune to such manipulation as voters focus on domestic issues? Will monarchies continue to be more resilient in the face of popular challenges than nonmonarchical regimes?

This is true entirely independently of the question of whether or not the uprisings lead to democracy or true revolution. The rise of publics does not mean that the state has faded away or that democracy will inevitably follow. During the dark days of Arab authoritarianism, a robust literature developed that explained the failures of democracy in the region. Those arguments focused upon "the strength, coherence and effectiveness of the state's coercive apparatus"—core competencies that remain potent even in the face of turbulent popular protests.<sup>14</sup> The rising body counts in Libya, Syria, Bahrain, and

Yemen should put paid to any thought that Arab states would easily relinquish their power. Should democratic transitions stall, or economic problems not be dealt with effectively, the Arab liberation movement may give birth to a resurgent populism focused on identity, resentment, and externally directed rage. Such an outcome would likely please the remnants of the old order, which would find a comfortable place in a recast authoritarian hybrid.

Nor should we assume that the forces behind the uprisings will always push toward liberal democratic outcomes. The passions of an empowered public could even prove destructive, particularly if effectively institutionalized democracies do not quickly emerge. The episodic outbursts of virulent Sunni-Shi'a sectarianism are only one example of the dangerous directions an empowered public might pursue. The turn from relatively peaceful uprisings to the violent civil war environments of Syria and Libya increases the risk of sectarian or ethnic polarization. And even in countries where regimes have already fallen, such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, empowered publics may quickly lose patience with the compromises and uncertainties of democratic political life. Angry protestors will likely still be trying to seize Tahrir Square ten years from now, regardless of whether Egypt has had successful democratic elections or remains under military rule.

Empowered publics will reduce the *predictability* of regional politics, as new faces replace old leaders and domestic considerations trump the demands of the status quo. This will have particularly important consequences for Israel, which has seen its carefully constructed regional security architecture crumble. Protests against the Israeli Embassy in Cairo and in Amman in September 2011 demonstrated clearly the continued potency of Arab anger with Israel, the United States, and their own governments. Arab regimes will have to take this more into account than in the past. The very real hostility toward Israel could force governments into dangerous, provocative rhetoric and behavior that could trigger the kind of spiral toward war that took place in 1967—even if nobody sets out intending such a war.

The uprisings corresponded with the looming end of the decades-long peace process between Israel and Palestinians aimed at achieving a two-state solution. While it is of course conceivable that the fortunes could be reversed, it does not seem likely. The steady shift of Israeli politics to the right, its growing international isolation, and its lack of confidence in the Palestinian leadership have reduced its willingness to push for peace with the Palestinians. The division between the West Bank and Gaza has become ever more entrenched, leaving no Palestinian entity actually capable of negotiating on behalf of Palestinians. The steady expansion of Israeli settlements makes a territorially unified, viable Palestinian state more distant than ever. The Palestinian push for recognition in the United Nations and other international institutions, along with spectacular challenges such as the flotillas to Gaza, might have had little impact on the ground, but did refocus attention on the issue even as it further poisoned Palestinian relations with the United States and Israel. The rise of a Palestinian nonviolent protest movement self-consciously aligned with broader regional trends will force the U.S. and others to directly confront contradictions they would prefer to blur. The ever more intense interconnection among issues, and the centrality of Palestine to Arab identity, ensure that these will have significant regional fallout.

The spiraling conflict in Syria that began in March 2011, should be ample evidence of the possibility of sudden, highly significant, and unpredictable change. The Syrian regime considered itself—and was seen by most outsiders—as immune to the kinds of popular challenges faced by Mubarak or Ben Ali. The initial protests were small and received little media coverage. But a series of poor decisions, including the massive use of violence against small protests and a badly received offer of minimal reforms by President Assad, gave life to protests that soon consumed the country. Soon al-Jazeera was heavily covering the violence and regional powers became increasingly involved. Syria's collapse into civil war or the emergence of a new regime aligned against rather than with Israel

would fundamentally change the regional balance of power. Such a change would be as dramatic, not as sudden, as the Iraqi revolution of 1958, which at a stroke toppled the most powerful member of the conservative alliance system in the region. The changes sweeping the Middle East today make such sudden, massive shocks far more likely.

This does not mean that we should panic. The uncertainty and passions associated with empowered publics are not unfamiliar terrain outside the Middle East. In most of the world, the U.S. has long had to deal with complex domestic politics in other important countries. America became far too comfortable dealing primarily with Arab dictators, though. And this all takes place at a time of global rebalancing, with America in relative decline, especially since the 2008 financial crisis. America has less appetite for the projection of military power after the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; even the humanitarian intervention in Libya was a painfully negotiated and often politically tenuous multilateral affair. Instead, there is a more crowded strategic landscape of consequential players—not only Europe, Russia, and China but new rising regional powers such as India, Turkey, and Brazil. These realities constrain America's response to the changes, while creating new opportunities for an effective international response.

There has already been meaningful change, not only within individual states such as Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia but in the Arab regional order itself. For instance, the simple idea that Arab regimes should not kill their own people has taken root in profoundly new ways. In decades past, Arab regimes routinely resorted to brutal violence to crush their domestic opponents. The Charter of the League of Arab States, agreed upon in 1945, protected state sovereignty and national independence and allowed no exceptions by which regimes might lose their legitimacy through their internal behavior. And that is easy to understand, given how horrifically most of them treated their people. But over the last year the Arab League suspended not one but two of its members—Libya and Syria—for the excessive use of violence against protestors, and the Gulf Cooperation Council involved itself in Yemen's crisis over the escalating violence. The core norms of the Arab regional order are changing then, in response to the outcry of the empowered public sphere, the ambitions of leading states such as Qatar, and the prodding of international actors such as the United Nations, the International Criminal Court, and the United States.

We are all struggling to understand these changes. Their historical novelty, dizzying pace, and rapid reversals have proven challenging to Arabs and outside observers alike. This book aims to lay out a pragmatic but theoretically and historically informed framework for understanding what really matters in the rush of events. It cannot hope to capture every nuance of individual countries, or anticipate every twist and turn to come. At the time of this writing, major events loom on the horizon such as the first parliamentary elections in Egypt and the Syrian response to its suspension from the Arab League, where different outcomes could tip the regional dynamics in very different directions. But I believe that the underlying structural changes associated with an empowered Arab public sphere and the changing nature of power in regional politics are clear enough.

Some of the most prominent interpretations of the changes in the Arab world do not hold up well to scrutiny. Early enthusiasts for the Arab revolutions, for instance, hoped that the absence of anti-American slogans in Tahrir Square meant that Arab publics would now focus on their own domestic affairs and leave regional issues such as Palestine behind. This has already proven to be shortsighted. These Arab publics see such regional issues as intimately related to their own struggles at home. America's role in maintaining the old Arab status quo has not been forgotten and will not be ignored in the coming era.

Many others have complained that the Obama administration has not demonstrated sufficient leadership during these unfolding crises, that it has been "leading from behind," in the unfortunate phrase popularized by *The New Yorker*. Such critics insist that Arabs yearn for a more aggressive

vocal American role in supporting the revolutions and that Obama has missed key opportunities. That too is almost certainly mistaken. Obama correctly saw from the start that these Arab revolutions neither wanted nor needed American leadership. They were truly authentic forces from within and would look poorly on American attempts to claim ownership. As detailed throughout this book, the low American profile served an important political and strategic purpose, even during the military intervention in Libya, where the U.S. intentionally took a backseat to NATO, Britain, and France. Had Obama tried to stamp the Arab uprisings with an American label, it would have provoked a fierce backlash.

On the other side of the debate, many observers have gloomily concluded that the Arab uprisings have been largely detrimental to American (and Israeli) interests. They mourn the loss of cooperative autocrats, who fought terrorists and cooperated with Israel against Iran. How, they demand, could Obama have thrown these longtime allies under the bus and “lost” the Middle East? Again, this badly misreads the situation. The U.S. did not create these uprisings and could not have stopped them had so desired. The best that any U.S. leadership could have done was to shape the new environment in ways conducive to American interests and values—which, I argue, the administration has tried to do.

The fiercest denunciations of the Arab uprisings come from those who see them not simply as compromising friends but as actively empowering Islamist enemies. These critics see the rise of Islamist forces in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya as a sign of the rapid advance of radical Islam. While it is true that Islamists will do well in more open political spaces, this critique is almost completely mistaken. It wrongly conflates different strands of Islamism, imputing to them a unity of purpose that they simply do not possess. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or el-Nahda in Tunisia cannot be equated with al-Qaeda. Their inclusion in emerging democracies will be necessary to create genuine, stable, representative political systems. What is more, Islamist-dominated regimes are not likely to form a unified Islamist regional bloc any more than pan-Arabist regimes cooperated in the 1950s; they are more likely to become fierce competitors as they bid for the leadership of the Islamist camp. Turning against Arab democracy out of a misguided fear of Islamists would be a tragic error for America.

THE BOOK THAT FOLLOWS attempts to put all of these tumultuous events into perspective. It begins by returning to history, since we cannot understand the current uprising without looking at those that have come before—namely, the Arab Cold War of the 1950s and 1960s, the aborted democratization of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the turbulence and change of the 2000s. Particularly in the immediate antecedents of the Arab uprising, the mobilization and potential of the emerging regional public sphere become visible.

A narrative of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions kicks off the uprising in its most familiar form. Chapters 5 and 6 capture the highs and the lows: the dizzying days following those revolutions when anything seemed possible, and then, immediately afterward, the grim days of counterrevolution that launched in the middle of March. Chapter 7 looks at the new era of intervention and civil war most clearly embodied by Libya to Syria. And then, in a final chapter, I step back from the region to consider the implications for America’s place in the region. Understanding the forces behind these uprisings and how they intersect with other powerful factors in regional politics will be vital for effectively responding to the rush of events to come. That will often mean discerning when to ignore bad advice to act boldly in the name of leadership and when it is time to take a firm stand. It will mean distinguishing between rash, snap judgments about winners and losers and credible forecasts about important trends. And it means having no illusions about the challenges to come—or about the real opportunities that might still be seized.

### THE ARAB COLD WAR

**WE CAN EASILY FORGET** that 2011 was not the first time Arab politics have been driven by mass mobilization and protest. Massive numbers of Arabs have risen up before. During the Arab Cold War of the 1950s, millions routinely flooded the streets to protest against their regimes, instigated by radio broadcasts and political agitation from abroad. Broadcasts on Gamal Abdel Nasser's Voice of the Arabs radio station nearly brought down governments in Beirut and Amman, put constant pressure on Damascus and Riyadh, and contributed to the bloody revolution that toppled the pro-Western regime in Baghdad. During these decades, governments routinely fell, through military coups or popular uprisings, while all political actors engaged fiercely in a political battle that crossed national boundaries.

The wave of massive popular mobilization that took place between 1954 and 1963 has come to be known as the "Arab Cold War." Crowds demanding Arab unity (or militaries sympathetic to the idea) overthrew the Iraqi monarchy (at the time, the strongest force for counterrevolution), destabilized key American allies, and seized power in Syria and drove its short-lived unification with Egypt. The competition among Arabists such as Nasser and the Ba'ath Party seeking the political unification of the Arab world and conservative regimes aligned with the West led to a debilitating proxy war in the mountains of Yemen. Power lay in the ability to mobilize the street, to wield the rhetorical weapons of pan-Arabism, and to navigate the treacherous field of factional and conspiratorial politics.<sup>1</sup> The period ended only with the 1967 war between Israel and Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, and with the death of Nasser in the midst of the "Black September" crisis when the Arabs stood by passively as Jordanian troops slaughtered Palestinians and expelled the Palestinian Liberation Organization from the kingdom. Afterward, the Arabs ended up not with democracy but with the most brutally repressive regimes they had ever faced, with the ideas of pan-Arabism discredited and the Arabs deeply divided. Popular upheavals in the Arab world have not historically pushed toward more liberal political orders.

The popular movements of the 1950s and the late 1980s each brought huge numbers of people into the streets and into the political realm. They forced dramatic political change, focused the regional and international agenda, and shaped political identities and strategies. Now the question becomes: What do these earlier regional protest waves have to tell us about the current period? A great deal. Each featured intense ideological disputes in a fully integrated Arab media space, relatively weak states, highly mobilized publics, and an uncertain American foreign policy in the midst of a changing international structure.

The fate of the earlier protest waves should be sobering, however. *None* of those democratization initiatives offered under popular pressure led to lasting transitions. The Arab Cold War of the 1950s ended in the ruthless consolidation of authoritarian rule across the region and decades of enforced public slumber. The 1980s were no kinder. Algeria's push for democracy led to a military coup and a bloody civil war. Sudan's popular uprisings ended in a brutal military dictatorship. Jordan's and Tunisia's faded under relentless, incremental reassertion of regime authority. These results offer crucial lessons for postrevolutionary Tunisia and Egypt today, as hopeful publics struggle to redeem the democratic promises of their revolutions.

Each wave ended with the reassertion of authoritarian state control. Indeed, much of what we know

about Arab politics is actually based on the repressive, authoritarian state structures that developed ~~in response to the turbulence of the Arab Cold War~~. The tight control over information, careful management of public political opinion, and massive “coup-proof” security services were all designed to blunt the power of transnational radical appeals. The Egyptian-Saudi-American alliance, quietly linked to Israel, that has dominated Arab politics for decades was the product of Egyptian president Anwar Sadat’s strategic decision to take his country out of the Arab Cold War and join the conservative, pro-Western camp that Egypt once lambasted. Will this grim history repeat, or are there reasons to believe that the rise of the new Arab public will make things different this time?

The Arab uprising can be seen as the cresting of a powerful third wave of mobilization that began around 2000 in response to the outbreak of the second Palestinian Intifada, the violent uprising that erupted with the failure of peace negotiations. Many of today’s activists point to these protests as the moment of their own political awakening and the seed of future mobilization. Ironically, authorities in countries such as Egypt allowed these rallies as a way to let off steam and divert popular anger from domestic concerns. When the protests over Palestine shifted toward resistance to the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, regimes went along with slightly more hesitation, given their own private cooperation with that campaign. But in both cases, the diversionary principle applied, with the regime permitting and even exploiting mobilization around foreign issues while forbidding domestic protests. The massive protests across the Arab world from 2000 to 2003 revealed enormous pent-up anger, but did not in themselves challenge any of the basic operating principles of the regional order.

The revolutionary change came when the activist groups, particularly in Egypt, turned inward against the regimes that protestors held responsible for allowing systematic foreign and domestic failures. The Kefaya movement challenged the Egyptian regime’s efforts to hand power from Hosni Mubarak to his son Gamal. The Lebanese Cedar Revolution brought a million people to Beirut to demand justice for the assassinated Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and the departure of Syrian troops from their country. Bahraini activists demanded human rights and democracy. Those internal, focused movements laid the foundations for the Arab uprisings of 2011. But once again, most stalled by the end of the decade, as authoritarian regimes devised new methods of control and repression and old political divides splintered nascent new coalitions.

These earlier historical periods offer at least a suggestive guide to the coming period of high diverse regimes, ideological polarization, mobilized publics, and transnational media. The structure of international politics may be different, as is the world-historical moment. The 2000s saw new information technologies such as satellite television and the Internet establish themselves as potent challengers to state-dominated media. Arab publics and states alike have different tools at their disposal, different political horizons, and different identities. Islamist movements are far stronger today, and organized Arab nationalist parties far weaker. But for all those differences, it is well worth recalling that this is not the first period of massive regionwide Arab popular mobilization and partial defensive democratization.

# THE ARAB COLD WAR

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The Arab Cold War pitted powerful states with distinct ideological visions for the region against one another. It played out primarily in the battlefield states of Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan, though it spilled into the frontiers of Yemen and into Iraq, the very heart of the conservative Middle Eastern order.

The cold war grew out of the long struggle against Western colonialism and the state system constructed after World War I, and the contested process of forming modern nation-states from the remnants of the Ottoman Empire. For decades, popular mobilization in many Arab states had focused on the demand for independence from direct or indirect colonial rule. In Egypt, the Wafd Party and the Muslim Brotherhood had each challenged British indirect rule within a formally democratic system. In Algeria, a popular and increasingly bloody insurgency challenged French rule.

This unrest began to take on a more urgent character on July 23, 1952, when a coup led by Gamal Abdel Nasser and Egypt's Free Officers finally overthrew the British-backed monarchy in a nearly bloodless coup. The Egyptian revolution of 1952 soon helped to spark the wave of popular mobilization that defined the Arab Cold War. This did not take form overnight. For several years Nasser and his fellow officers had tentatively reshaped Egypt's domestic order, while carefully exploring new international and regional alliances, including a long flirtation with the United States. By 1954, Nasser had consolidated power at home and began the foreign policy reforms that would drive regional politics for the next decade. These had mainly to do with two powers: Israel and the Soviet Union. A bloody Israeli raid on Gaza, designed in part to humiliate and intimidate the new Egyptian leader, backfired badly. On September 27, 1955, Nasser announced a Czech arms deal with the Soviet bloc, to great public acclaim across the region but with devastating effects on Egypt's relationship with America. With this move, the Arab Cold War began in earnest.

Nasser's challenge won widespread support around the entire Arab world, fueled in part by the Voice of the Arabs radio broadcasts that could reach the farthest corners of the region through newly available, cheap transistor radios. Nasser's pan-Arabism set the agenda for the region, even as the West sought to shore up its alliances against the Soviet Union in an escalating global Cold War. The conflict broke down into two major blocs: a pan-Arabist bloc led by Egypt, enjoying widespread popular and party support across the region but few state allies; and a conservative, pro-Western bloc led by Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Britain and France, the major colonial powers, and the Arab regimes aligned with them bore the immediate brunt of this anti-Western sentiment. The United States, which had temporarily made popular by its intervention against Israel, the U.K., and France in the 1956 Suez crisis that forced its allies to withdraw from the territory captured in the initial attack, squandered its popularity by battling Nasser. American efforts to enlist Arab regimes in anti-Communist schemes such as the Baghdad Pact and the Eisenhower Doctrine consistently backfired.

As in the 2011 uprising, the Arab public was intimately involved in power politics. In the 1950s, the public was more an object to be mobilized and deployed by Egypt rather than an independent force of its own (though in 2011, many Arabs would complain that Qatar hoped to use al-Jazeera in the same fashion as Nasser had used Voice of the Arabs). But Arab publics moved in force that relatively young and weak regimes struggled to contain. Between 1954 and 1958, millions of Jordanians, Lebanese, Syrians, and Iraqis routinely came out into the streets protesting in the name of Arab unity. The Jordanian monarchy tottered, forcing the young King Hussein to hand over considerable power to a pan-Arabist prime minister. Syria's government changed hands nearly a dozen times. Lebanon's confessional system, which distributed power among the sectarian groups while preserving the leading position of pro-Western Christians, required an American military intervention to avoid collapse. An

in 1958, the core of the conservative pro-Western bloc in Arab politics collapsed when a revolution toppled the Hashemite king of Iraq. The fall of the Iraqi monarchy in 1958 shifted the balance of power dramatically, if momentarily, in favor of the Arabist camp, and the battle shifted to the political direction of Iraq and then to a civil war in Yemen. The Arabist regimes could not cooperate, however, and Egyptian-Iraqi rivalry quickly returned, despite the new revolutionary orientation in Baghdad.

The Arab Cold War was a battle of ideas more than a battle of arms, with intense ideological polarization between opposites: Should government be a republic or a monarchy, oriented toward the West or the Soviet Union, nationalistic or pan-Arabist? Those ideas were deployed in the service of regional great powers and, as the 1960s ground on, took on overtones of the global struggle between the West and the Soviet bloc. But there could be no question about the importance of Arab public opinion in this era. The sheer level of popular mobilization, which brought down some governments and kept every other potential target on perpetual edge, made the answers to these questions the fundamental currency of political power.

These ideological battles played out in a genuinely transnational media space. Voice of the Arabs brought Arabist ideas to every corner of the Arab world. Most other states and political movements countered by launching their own radio stations, turning the regional airwaves into a dense arena for political battle. The ability of regimes and political movements to credibly align with the norms of pan-Arabism became a fundamental source of power, available to some and withheld from others. None could avoid engaging with the prevailing ideas and arguments, no matter how distant their own behavior or identity might be from the current trend.

In such an environment, the ability to control the domestic front and prevent external involvement became a key element of the balance of power.<sup>3</sup> States that were unable to control the flow of ideas and mobilization within their own borders became the arenas for regional competition. Those with relatively closed political systems gained strength. Egypt enjoyed a relative power advantage over potential rivals such as Iraq and Syria because of its greater ability to destabilize their domestic arenas. Military coups were the primary mechanism of change, even within a highly mobilized political arena. In addition, most political players sought help abroad when available.<sup>4</sup> The heavy-handed authoritarianism that fell over the region in the 1970s responded directly to this pattern of permeability, as ambitious rulers set out to ensure that they would never again be threatened or weakened by such machinations.

Syria is the prototypical example of the importance of internal strength in making a state an actor rather than a plaything for others. Under Hafez al-Assad, who seized power in a military coup in 1970 and ruled with an iron fist, Syria was a powerful player in regional affairs. But, like Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Syria in the 1950s lay wide open before powerful foreign actors, unable to control its territory or the loyalties of its own people. As long as it remained internally weak, Syria was an arena for regional conflict, not a serious player.

Syrian leaders in this period faced challenges from all sides, and foreign rivals had many instruments by which to meddle in their affairs. The hyper-politicization of the Syrian officer corps turned the military coup into the preferred vehicle for change. Meanwhile, popular mobilization intensified in the early 1950s, channeled through the Ba'ath Party, the Communist Party, trade unions, and the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>5</sup> Through the early 1950s, social protest focused on rural violence against landowners, but over time, the unrest moved into the cities. In February 1954, parliamentary life was restored, creating openings for political movements that had previously been mobilizing popular support. Over the course of the summer, there was a dramatic uptick in strikes and labor actions, political protests, and electioneering.

The rising popular mobilization destabilized each succeeding government. In June 1954, a nation



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