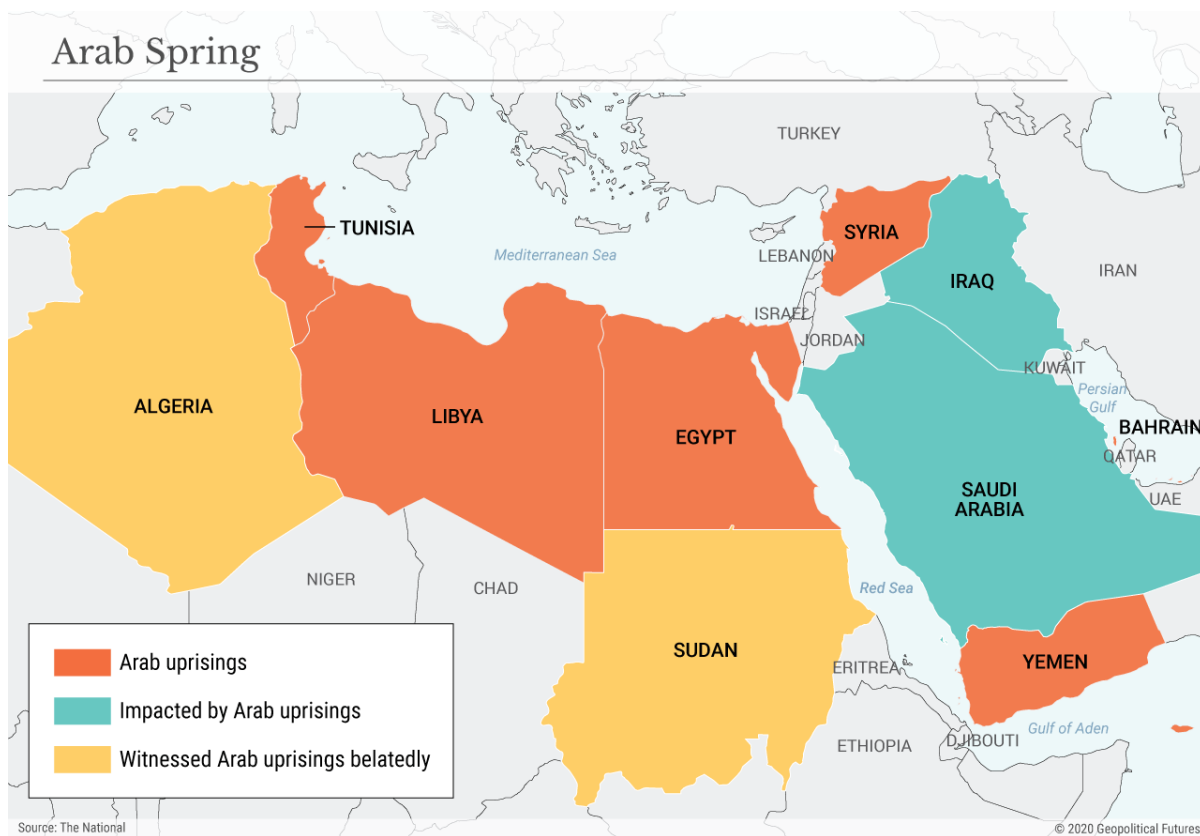


# Why Uprisings in the Middle East Fail

by Hilal Khashan - October 27, 2021

The uprisings in 2010-11 against autocratic Arab regimes stunned the world. The region's ruling oligarchs were known for systematically suppressing even the slightest manifestations of public discontent. When the uprising in Tunisia occurred in December 2010, it spread almost instantaneously, from Morocco on the Atlantic Ocean to Bahrain on the Persian Gulf. Amazed political commentators talked about the rise of the dormant Sunni tiger and the dawn of democracy throughout the region. But the euphoria didn't last long. The Arab deep state, with its machinery of coercion and network of local allies, cracked down on the protests and crushed any attempts to overthrow the regimes. Foreign meddling and a lack of shared vision from Arab activists also helped guarantee that the public unrest would not threaten regime survival.



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## Machinery of Coercion

Between the 1930s and 1960s, staging a successful coup in the Middle East was relatively easy. Even a small group of army officers could topple a regime; they just needed to command enough troops to seize the presidential or royal palace, ministry of defense and ministry of communication to control the joints of the political system. In Iraq, there were six coups in the 1930s, one (a failed pro-Nazi putsch) in 1941, and several more in the 1950s and 1960s. Syria saw three coups in 1949 and more in the 1950s through 1970. Egypt and Libya each had one coup in 1952 and 1969, respectively.

But in 1970, the era of government subversion came to an end – except in Sudan, which experienced a coup in 1989. Arab military rulers had finally learned how to prevent attempted overthrows by tightening their grip over the military and society. In Egypt, the officers who staged the 1952 coup established the Revolutionary Command Council under the leadership of Gamal Abdel Nasser. In subsequent years, it grew more sophisticated, adopting the title of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. In Syria, President Hafez Assad purged the military and placed in commanding positions fellow Alawite officers, who controlled the armed forces and appointed loyal officials to control the political system. In Iraq, Saddam Hussein, who came to power in a 1968 coup, brutally eliminated all opposition within the ruling Baath Party by the late 1970s and relied exclusively on the support of Sunni Arabs from his hometown of Tikrit to maintain control. Like other Arab rulers, Saddam created a special force, called the Republican Guard, that became the most potent and trusted component of the military. In Libya, Moammar Gadhafi, who toppled the monarchy in 1969, created the Gadhafi regiments to prevent countercoups and militant religious uprisings.

In Iran, after inspiring the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini did not trust the military and ordered its top commanders executed and many others dismissed. Khomeini questioned the loyalty of the army, which had abandoned the shah after killing thousands of demonstrators in what became known as Black Friday in September 1978. Khomeini thus focused his attention on forming an elite unit of the armed forces called the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as well as the Basij militia, a branch of the IRGC – both of which are responsible for defending the regime from foreign and internal threats.

The region's rulers had struck a bargain with their people: The government would provide basic needs for the public in exchange for their willingness to stay out of political life. Citizens were essentially promised low-cost housing, subsidized staple food items, free medical care and education through college. Those who didn't agree to the arrangement, however, faced severe

punishment. In this way, they were coerced into allowing regimes to maintain ultimate power virtually unchallenged.

Arab republican regimes also established solid domestic alliances to help contain any potential unrest. In Syria, Hafez Assad coopted the Sunni business class in Damascus and Aleppo and gave them a free hand in running the economy. He placed Sunnis in prominent government positions, albeit under the watchful eye of Alawite loyalists. His son Bashar carried on his legacy, coopting the Sunni Arab tribes in the Jazeera region to keep the Kurds at bay and lend legitimacy to his regime. He also liberalized the Syrian economy and partnered with the Sunni business class. In Egypt, President Hosni Mubarak allowed the armed forces to get involved in the economy. The signing of the Camp David Accords in 1978, the end of the war with Israel and President Anwar Sadat's assassination by renegade army troops convinced Mubarak to preoccupy the army with economic matters to prevent it from scheming to overthrow him. Even in Saudi Arabia, the regime turned a blind eye to officers undertaking business opportunities and earning commissions. In Iran, the ayatollahs competed with the bazaar business class without evicting them from the market. They also introduced food subsidies, even as the economy suffered under U.S. sanctions.

Over the past few years, however, the region's economic stagnation has reduced the range of government welfare systems for most Middle Eastern countries, often leading to public unrest. The regimes compensated for their reduced capacity to provide for their populations by increasing their use of coercion tactics to unprecedented levels.



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## Divided Opposition

The region’s authoritarian leaders – be they republican, monarchical or Islamic revolutionaries – destroyed their countries’ civil societies, finding various justifications for their repression of the opposition. Arab and Iranian leaders accused dissenting voices of acting on behalf of Western imperialism and Zionism. After Egypt’s crushing defeat in 1967, Nasser clamped down on all criticism, saying that no individuals should distract from efforts to liberate occupied territory. In Iraq, Saddam portrayed Shiite dissenters as Iranian agents. Then, when pro-Iranian militias seized power following the U.S. invasion in 2003, they dismissed Sunnis’ demands for an equitable power-sharing arrangement, calling them agents of the U.S., Zionism and radical Islamic movements.

At the same time, the forces of opposition failed to present themselves as a united bloc. In Iran, reformists articulate different agendas. In Iraq, those calling for change cut across the political spectrum to include communists, nationalists, mainstream Sunni Arab groups and Sadrists, supporters of Iraq’s maverick Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. Sadr takes issue with the pro-Iranian

militias but is also careful not to antagonize Tehran – suggesting that many Shiite movements are being supported by Iran.

Shortly after the beginning of the Syrian uprising, groups opposed to the regime began organizing in Europe and Turkey, holding numerous meetings there to try to agree on a new form of government to replace Assad's regime, if it collapsed. In the end, they failed to agree on anything. In Egypt, the movements that participated in the uprising to overthrow Mubarak had little in common. This paved the way for the military to facilitate Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohammad Morsi's election, so that it could expedite his eventual ouster. The army was intent on getting rid of him, believing that his worldview was inconsistent with its vision for Egypt. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces rallied all civil society movements against Morsi in July 2013 and overthrew him. It then silenced these movements, turning against the liberals and secularists.

Initially, it seemed that the uprising in Tunisia was the only successful one in the Arab states. In due time, however, it too failed to spark any real change. The political forces that emerged in the country after the fall of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's government gained strength, taking political space away from Ennahda, the first party to form a government after the protests. Eventually, Tunisian politics hit an impasse, and the public grew disenchanted with party politics. Even the politically independent president, Kais Saied, pursued a path that resembled those of previous autocratic rulers.

## **Foreign Intervention**

The final factor that led to the demise of the Arab uprisings was foreign meddling. In Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were alarmed by the fall of Mubarak and the rise of the Brotherhood. After Morsi was toppled, they gave Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi billions of dollars to shore up his regime. In Syria, the U.S., Israel and the UAE did not want to see the collapse of the Assad regime. In fact, their Syria policies differed little from those of Russia and Iran, whose support ensured that Assad's government remained in power. In Libya, NATO airstrikes destroyed Gadhafi's military machine, but foreign meddling by Russia, Egypt, the UAE and Turkey kept the country divided and in turmoil. In Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the UAE helped defeat an uprising and then waged a war against the Houthi rebels, whom they initially enabled before turning against them. Odds are that Yemen would have slipped into anarchy even without foreign intervention, but its Arab neighbors certainly added fuel to the fire. In Bahrain, the oppressed Shiite majority led an uprising in February 2011, which was quelled by the Saudis. They distorted Bahrainis' demands for fairness and justice by presenting them as part of an Iranian ploy to destabilize the country.

The region is far from ready for successful uprisings, and political communities with a sense of national vision have yet to emerge. Resolution of the region's outstanding interstate problems, such as the Kurdish and Palestinian questions, must precede any domestic change. Understandably, countries aspire to use their economic and technological capabilities to wield influence. However, political ideology draped in religious determinism is a recipe for perpetuating conflict and stalling the prospects for economic and political development.

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