

The 2011 uprisings in the Arab Middle East: political change and geopolitical implications

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The political upheavals in the Arab world during 2011 have irrevocably transformed the Middle East. Yet, as the year draws to a close and the euphoria subsides, it is clear that comparisons of the ‘Arab spring’ to the end of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989 were premature. There has been—and there will be—no serial collapse of authoritarian regimes leading to a democratic future. Instead of ‘revolution’, the talk now is of ‘uprising’, ‘revolt’ or even simply ‘crisis’.

One reason for the disagreement on how to label the events of 2011 is the inclination to think of the ‘Arab world’ as a unified entity. Arab societies and polities do indeed have tight interconnections and share at least some important characteristics. The potent myth of the Arab nation and the common public space pervaded by the idea of ‘Arabism’ has had complex effects since the beginning of the modern state system in the Middle East. It has been cultivated by powerful media, such as the satellite television channel Al-Jazeera. The contagious nature of the uprisings that started in Tunisia in December 2010 and spread to a number of other Arab states, helped by these media (among other factors), is confirmation that the component parts of the ‘Arab world’ are linked by strong internal bonds.

Nevertheless, thinking in terms of ‘Arab’ events—or even *an* Arab event—may also constitute a set of blinkers. First, by compelling us to search for common trends and characteristics, it prevents us from seeing the profoundly different causes, contexts and outcomes of the developments of 2011—from seeing that each uprising was different, focused on domestic, national issues and comprehensible in its own light. Second, it stops us from placing these developments in other, possibly equally relevant, contexts of crisis and contestation. One such context could be the Mediterranean and more widely European—even global—protests which also unfolded in 2011. Another is the Middle Eastern context, which would locate the Arab uprisings alongside the post-2009 Green movement in Iran. Although the Arab framework is important, other perspectives can also yield invaluable insights.

A series of interconnected yet diverse events

The self-immolation of Muhammad Buazizi on 17 December 2010 in the Tunisian city of Sidi Bouzid has achieved mythical importance as the symbolic start of the uprisings. Buazizi set himself on fire in desperate protest against humiliation by

the police and the feared loss of his livelihood. Demonstrations erupted and spread to neighbouring cities, leading to repression but a slow political response from Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali's regime. Popular mobilization in Tunisia was largely spontaneous, but sections of the country's main trade union, the Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens (UGTT), and professional associations subsequently played a part in organizing it. Police repression increased but then receded by 10 January 2011, as the army signalled it would not take action against the protesters. As a general strike unfolded on 14 January, Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia.¹

Within days, a temporary president and national unity government were in place in Tunisia. The latter included opposition members but was headed by the incumbent prime minister, Muhammad Ghannouchi. He was too close to the old regime, however, and political and popular opposition led to his resignation on 27 February. He was replaced by Beji Caïd Essebsi, who had no links to Ben Ali. On 5 April the 'Instance supérieure pour la réalisation des objectifs de la révolution, de la réforme politique et de la transition démocratique' was formed. Comprising representatives of a wide range of political and social forces, except the extreme left, it acquired a central role in driving the transition process.² On 4 July Ben Ali was summarily tried and convicted, in absentia, for a number of criminal offences. After two postponements, elections were held on 23 October for a Constituent Assembly to rewrite the constitution. The largest party, the previously banned Islamist al-Nahda, formed a coalition government headed by Hamadi Jebali, a former political prisoner.

The overthrow of Ben Ali in Tunisia galvanized popular political action in Egypt. Demonstrations organized for 25 January by civil society and opposition groups unexpectedly brought out around 20,000 participants. Protests spread in Cairo and throughout the country. They gradually snowballed, gathering speed after calls for a 'day of rage' on 28 January. On 29 January President Hosni Mubarak announced a new government. To show that his son Gamal would not succeed him, he appointed Omar Suleiman, head of the General Intelligence Service, to the vice-presidency. However, protesters were by then demanding Mubarak's resignation. As the civilian police and gendarmerie withdrew from the streets, the army moved in, becoming as of 29 January 'the country's effective authority' and receiving an enthusiastic welcome from the protesters.³

The Mubarak regime mobilized counter-demonstrations. Mubarak's announcement, on 1 February, that he would not contest the September 2011 presidential elections took the wind out of the protesters' sails, albeit temporarily. Demonstrations around the country, and the occupation of Cairo's Tahrir Square, were followed by widespread wildcat strikes. Mubarak's final speech to the nation on 10 February indicated that he was losing his authority, and on the same day the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF)—previously convened only in

¹ International Crisis Group (ICG), *Popular protests in North Africa and the Middle East (IV): Tunisia's way*, Middle East report 106 (Brussels: ICG, 2011), pp. 3–6.

² ICG, *Tunisia's way*, pp. 12–21.

³ ICG, *Popular protest in the Middle East and North Africa (I): Egypt victorious?* Middle East report 101 (Brussels: ICG, 2011), p. 5.

wartime in 1967 and 1973—issued its first communiqué, ‘endorsing the people’s legitimate demands’. On 11 February Mubarak resigned and transferred his powers to the military.⁴ Six months later he was put on trial, with his sons and key regime figures. Constitutional amendments—including restricting presidential terms of office, limiting anti-terrorism and emergency legislation, and strengthening judicial supervision of elections—were approved by referendum on 19 March. Between November 2011 and March 2012 parliamentary and presidential elections will take place and a new constitution will be written.

Events in Tunisia and Egypt jolted the rest of the region. A few days after Mubarak’s fall, protests against Muammar Qadhafi broke out in Benghazi, Libya’s second largest city, and quickly spread ‘across the whole of the east and to some parts of the west’, although they remained relatively small-scale in the capital, Tripoli.⁵ The rebellion was led by the National Transition Council (NTC). The UN Security Council sanctioned military intervention by NATO from March, but this did not trigger a popular uprising in the West; outside intervention may even have hardened the attitude of some pro-regime loyalists.⁶ However, by early September 2011, after months of apparent deadlock and a war which cost tens of thousands of lives (the figures are as yet unverified), Qadhafi’s regime imploded and he himself was brutally killed on 20 October.

In Bahrain, which faced longstanding political conflict between the Sunni monarchy and a Shi’i majority, protests erupted on 14 February resulting, a few days later, in the police storming Manama’s Pearl Square, which was occupied by protesters, and killing seven of them, some asleep in tents. Demonstrations restarted on 21 February, but were met by even bigger pro-government events. Repression radicalized the movement, which called for a republic and a march on the royal palace on 11 March. King Hamad invited Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) forces, led by Saudi Arabia, into the country on 14 March to help suppress the uprising and declared a state of emergency.⁷

In Yemen, following Ben Ali’s ouster from Tunisia on 14 January, small-scale demonstrations demanded President Ali Saleh’s removal. After Mubarak’s fall a month later, protests grew, now being led by a new group of youth and civil society activists. They acted independently of the formal political opposition parties—loosely organized in the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), a coalition which included the Islamist *Islah* and the Yemeni Socialist Party—which had initially demanded reform rather than Saleh’s overthrow. The JMP started to support the youth protesters’ more radical demands but, unlike them, remained open to negotiations with the regime, which continued. On 18 March the killing by snipers of 60 protesters alienated many Yemenis. Nevertheless, Saleh used a combination of repression, counter-mobilization, economic enticements, and promises of

⁴ ICG, *Egypt victorious?*, p. 13.

⁵ ICG, *Popular protest in the Middle East and North Africa (V): Making sense of Libya*, Middle East report 107 (Brussels: ICG, 2011), pp. 1, 3.

⁶ ICG, *Making sense of Libya*, p. 28.

⁷ ICG, *Popular protest in the Middle East and North Africa (III): The Bahrain revolt*, Middle East report 105 (Brussels: ICG, 2011), pp. 2–9; ICG, *Popular protest in the Middle East and North Africa (VIII): Bahrain’s rocky road to reform*, Middle East report 111 (Brussels: ICG, 2011).

political compromise and reform to hang on to power.⁸ Injured in an attack on 3 June, he fled to Saudi Arabia, but returned on 23 September. Saleh has agreed to hand over power but will continue to be a political player, particularly as his family retains control in the military and security apparatus. In the meantime the threat of open conflict is palpable, as an array of internal forces is precariously balanced across Yemen's many fault-lines.

In Syria, the uprising started in March in the southern city of Deraa. Bashar al-Assad's regime responded harshly, initiating a vicious cycle of repression and further protests and organizing counter-demonstrations. It sent out feelers to Islamist opinion leaders and some minority communities, such as the Kurds, but unrest continued to spread. Political concessions appeared always too little, too late, and the interspersing of ruthless violence with further reforms gave the impression of incompetence and division.⁹ Support for the regime declined as its brutality increased, with casualties reportedly having reached possibly 5,000 by December 2011, the highest in any country of the region except Libya.

The six cases of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria, where popular uprisings led either to the overthrow of dictators or to serious internal fracturing and contestation, are separated by a sharp divide from the rest of the region, which experienced comparatively minor fallout from those events. In Morocco and Jordan, ruling monarchs diffused pressures by announcing reform measures. With the exception of Bahrain, very limited protests occurred in the GCC states (although in Oman it was significant that they occurred at all). In Saudi Arabia, where protests were primarily confined to the eastern province and some bigger cities, the regime boosted social welfare spending and resorted to renewed repression.¹⁰ In Algeria, which had experienced the trauma of internal conflict in the 1990s, protests in January 2011 did not coalesce into a significant movement for change. Lebanon, Iraq and the Occupied Palestinian Territories remained mired in their own webs of internal and geopolitical problems which isolated them from developments in the Arab region.

A continuum of causes and consequences

Uprisings occurred in some Arab states in 2011, and not in others. When they did occur, they developed in distinct ways in particular places. While it is for future research to produce detailed evidence, it is possible now to offer some tentative suggestions as to why this was so.

An explosive mix of socio-economic problems and widespread and deepening political grievances constituted a common causal thread behind all the uprisings.

⁸ ICG, *Popular protest in the Middle East and North Africa (II): Yemen between reform and revolution*, Middle East report 104 (Brussels: ICG, 2011), pp. 1–9.

⁹ ICG, *Popular protest in the Middle East and North Africa (VI): The Syrian people's slow-motion revolution*, Middle East report 108 (Brussels: ICG, 2011), and *Popular protest in the Middle East and North Africa (VII): The Syrian regime's slow-motion suicide*, Middle East report 109 (Brussels: ICG, 2011).

¹⁰ Amnesty International, 'Saudi Arabia: protesters and reformers targeted in name of security', 1 Dec. 2011, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/saudi-arabia-protesters-and-reformists-targeted-name-security-2011-12-01>, accessed 13 Dec. 2011.

Poverty in absolute terms does not take us very far by way of explanation,¹¹ but relative deprivation and a clash between expectations and reality played a role. The longstanding structural problems afflicting the Arab world came to a head prior to 2011 through a combination of persistently high unemployment, especially among youth (and educated youth at that), rampant corruption, internal regional and social inequalities, and a further deterioration of economic conditions because of the global 2008 financial crisis and food price increases.¹² Tunisia encapsulated many of these problems. Though its economy was robust in many ways, it did not create enough new jobs: recorded unemployment remained high, reaching 16 per cent in 2011 by some estimates. Internal regional inequalities were pronounced. Corruption was endemic and, in the case of Ben Ali's immediate family, brazenly offensive, as ordinary Tunisians struggled with rising basic commodity prices, inflation and slower growth rates from 2008.¹³

The socio-economic grievances described briefly above were inextricably linked with and fuelled political demands. More than anything else, the rebellions were a call for dignity and a reaction to being humiliated by arbitrary, unaccountable and increasingly predatory tyrannies. The slogan in Tunisia was: 'We can live on bread and water alone but not with RCD [Ben Ali's ruling party].'¹⁴ In Bahrain, the uprising was dominated by the Shi'i majority which, even more than the country's Sunnis, suffered repression and discrimination despite the promise of democratic reform by King Hamad ten years before. In Egypt, one of the organizers of the 25 January demonstration was the 'We are all Khaled Said' group, named after a young man beaten to death by police officers in Alexandria the previous June.¹⁵

Grievances are ubiquitous; rebellion is not. The question confronting observers of the 2011 Arab uprisings is how and why, at that particular moment, the socio-economic and political grievances in the Arab world were channelled into such forceful and purposeful collective action. At this preliminary stage, two possible explanations can be suggested, although neither of them is fully convincing. The first is that pre-existing civil society and political opposition groups had prepared the ground for the rebellions and were able, when the time came, to coordinate them. The second is that the unprecedentedly widespread use of social media and other means of communication made the rebellions possible and increased their strength and inclusiveness.

¹¹ Yemen's upheavals may be linked to the fact that it is the poorest Arab nation. In the GCC, political mobilization was averted because rentier systems continued successfully to deliver the goods. However, Tunisia and Libya, where serious rebellions occurred, are classified as 'upper middle income' countries by the World Bank. See World Bank Development Indicators database, <http://data.worldbank.org/country>, accessed 13 Dec. 2011.

¹² On these structural problems, see e.g. Marcus Noland and Howard Pack, *Arab economies in a changing world* (Washington DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2007); International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and World Bank, *The road not traveled: education reform in the Middle East and North Africa*, MENA Development Report (Washington DC, 2007); and the more dated but still relevant United Nations Development Programme, *Arab human development report 2002* (New York: UNDP, 2002).

¹³ Figures from Economist Intelligence Unit, *Country report: Tunisia* (London: EIU, Nov. 2011), p. 17.

¹⁴ Kaouthar Larbi, 'Resignations rock Tunisia government', Agence France-Presse (AFP), 18 Jan. 2011, <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gbonwSPbPnzoNk93IDUimkVbhrow?docId=CNG.364de1da251ab2f76e561bcf4a3dce18.7c1>, accessed 13 Dec. 2011.

¹⁵ On the story of Khaled Said and the activist group which arose in his memory, see <http://www.elshaheed.co.uk/home-khaled-said-full-story-background-truth-what-happened-torture-in-egypt-by-egyptian-police/>, accessed 13 Dec. 2011.

Middle East analysts and activists frequently bemoaned the weakness of civil society and political opposition in the Arab Middle East prior to 2011.¹⁶ Recent events invite us to re-examine this judgement. In Egypt's case, there appears to be a continuum between an increasingly active civil society and labour activism in the 1990s and 2000s and the insurrection of 2011. The 'We are all Khaled Said group', the 6 April Movement (established in 2008 in relation to labour protests), Muslim Brotherhood youth, the group around presidential hopeful Muhammad el-Baradei, the 'new left', human rights and other civil society activists, striking workers: all played a role in Mubarak's overthrow. In Bahrain, political and civil society groups which had become powerful in the second half of the 2000s—including the al-Haqq Movement for Liberty and Democracy (more rejectionist than the Shi'i Islamist al-Wifaq and the left-leaning, non-sectarian Wa'ad groups) and the human rights movement, centred on the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights—played a vital role in the rebellion.¹⁷

A second explanation of how grievances were channelled into collective action in 2011 emphasizes the role of the media in allowing the revolts to spread across borders and bringing people out onto the streets. The Qatari-based Al-Jazeera satellite channel continued to air reports on protests in Egypt and Tunisia despite the regimes' pleas to the Qatari government to stop it.¹⁸ Social media such as Facebook and Twitter, and of course mobile phones, were widely used to organize the revolts and link the protesters to each other and the outside world. Perhaps more crucially, media played a role in preparing for the rebellions over a number of years and even decades, by facilitating the circulation of ideas in national and global spaces and challenging state monopolies of information.¹⁹

Future research will throw light on the complex question of the relationship between the rebellions and the pre-existing opposition structures and social media (as well as other issues such as the particular roles of young people and women). However, it appears to this observer at least that neither of these factors can fully account for the rebellions. Pre-existing civil society and opposition groups may have made important contributions in organizing the rebellions, but they were not the protagonists. In Egypt, millions unexpectedly poured onto the streets. In Bahrain, despite their power of example, organized groups were not 'entirely responsible for drumming up the massive February 2011 demonstrations'.²⁰ In some cases, as in Yemen, there were tensions between established parties, in the

¹⁶ One example of an extensive literature is Sean L. Yom, 'Civil society and democratization in the Arab world', *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 9: 4, Dec. 2005, pp. 14–33.

¹⁷ ICG, *The Bahrain revolt*, pp. 14–20. On the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, see p. 16.

¹⁸ Alanoud al-Sharekh, 'Reform and rebirth in the Middle East', *Survival* 53: 2, April–May 2011, p. 57. The Saudi-sponsored al-Arabiya satellite channel was more circumspect, however.

¹⁹ See Barrie Axford, 'Talk about a revolution: social media and the MENA uprisings', *Globalizations* 8: 5, 2011, pp. 681–6; 'The Arab Spring' series of articles, *International Journal of Communication* 5, 2011. For a wider perspective on this process, see Dale Eickerman and Jon Andersen, *New media in the Muslim world: the emerging public sphere*, 2nd edn (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003); Nadja Christina-Schneider and Bettina Graf, eds, *Social dynamics 2.0: researching change in times of social media and convergence* (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2011).

²⁰ Cortni Kerr and Toby C. Jones, 'A revolution paused in Bahrain', *Middle East Report Online*, 23 Feb. 2011, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero0223011.html>, accessed 13 Dec. 2011.

form of the JMP, and young protesters.²¹ The hype which has surrounded the use of social media obscures the fact that enormous popular mobilizations in the past were achieved using much more basic methods of communication and organization. It also overlooks the fact that social media are used by conservative as much as by progressive and revolutionary forces, and that governments used them for their own purposes or simply shut them down. For instance, in the weeks leading up to the fall of Mubarak internet access was often blocked in Egypt.

Ultimately, we may have to accept that the rebellions were spontaneous popular events whose immediate causes and timing will never be explained fully and satisfactorily even with hindsight (and certainly could not have been predicted beforehand). Thinking along the lines of the 'butterfly effect', to borrow a term from a very different field, can help us see that the extraordinary dimensions that collective protests assumed in some countries in 2011 may have been the result of a series of events whose connections and causal mechanisms will remain unfathomable.

We are better able, however, to explain why some rebellions succeeded in overthrowing their governments, while others did not, at least until the time of writing (December 2011). To do so, we must look in each case beyond the momentum and inclusiveness of the rebellion to the type of regime it confronted and the nature of the latter's response. While in some cases regime reaction put a stop to the rebellion, in others it fuelled it (blurring the distinction between causes and consequences). The rebellions' success or failure also depended on whether regimes managed to retain the loyalty of their key allies, most crucially the army and security services, and important sections of the citizenry.²²

The regime leaders' reaction to the rebellions, which was partly about personal choice and character, was crucial in determining how they developed. The response of Ben Ali was slow and weak, possibly because he was taken by surprise: he appeared for a televised speech only on 28 December and then, again belatedly, on 10 January. In contrast, Qadhafi's regime reacted quickly and decisively, which increased its chances of survival (though it also raised the level of violence and invited outside intervention). However, while toughness and determination may be effective, an excessive reaction can have the opposite result. In Bahrain demonstrators were incensed early on by police repression. This contributed to the marginalization of moderate forces within both regime and opposition, represented respectively by Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa and al-Wifaq, which impeded compromise. In Syria, regime violence 'almost certainly has been the primary reason behind the protest movement's growth and radicalization'.²³

²¹ Nadia al-Sakkaf, 'The politicization of Yemen's youth revolution', *Arab Reform Bulletin*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 27 April 2011, http://www.carnegieendowment.org/arb/?fa=show&article=43735&utm_source=Arab+Reform+Bulletin&utm_campaign=439d2ae97c-ARB+Weekly+%28English%29&utm_medium=email, accessed 13 Dec. 2011.

²² Eva Bellin accounted for the robustness of authoritarianism in the Middle East by focusing on the army and security services: Eva Bellin, 'The robustness of authoritarianism in the Middle East: exceptionalism in comparative perspective', *Comparative Politics* 36: 2, 2004, pp. 139–57.

²³ ICG, *The Syrian regime's slow-motion suicide*, p. 11.

Regime behaviour was a matter of choice by the leadership but also reflected deeper, structural realities: first, whether the regime was differentiated from other state institutions or was totally identified with it;²⁴ and second, the position and choices of those state institutions, particularly the army and security forces. In Tunisia and Egypt, where the regimes were overthrown without outside intervention (as occurred in Libya), the security services stood aside and did not attempt to crush the protests—for reasons which are still obscure—while the army was impelled by popular mobilization to move against the president. In Tunisia, the army refused to open fire on the demonstrators and was instrumental in pushing Ben Ali out. Subsequently, it retreated from the political scene. In Egypt, the army's position during the protests was ambivalent, but it eventually opted to remove Mubarak. As the crisis intensified, by early February 2011 the ministry of the interior and the businessmen and politicians associated with Gamal Mubarak and the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) had weakened and the army emerged as the only solid institution.²⁵

A number of factors explain the Egyptian army's decision to remove Mubarak. The army's position was paramount in a regime which originated in a military coup in 1952, but it had experienced growing political isolation following the defeat of 1967 in the war against Israel. Despite the many social privileges and economic benefits enjoyed by its officer class, the army's political 'sterilization', combined with its inability to project power outside Egypt, led to malaise and an identity crisis, compounded by the emergence of an elaborate web of internal security forces. For many years before 2011 it was clear that the top echelons of the regime did not identify with the army: though originally military men, Mubarak and Suleiman no longer represented it as an institution.²⁶ In deciding to push Mubarak out and take over the role of guarantor of the post-Mubarak phase, the army sought both to maintain stability in Egypt and to protect the privileges of its officer corps.

In contrast to the Tunisian and Egyptian cases, the continuing ties between the Alawite regime and the army and security forces in Syria—and the security forces' exercise of elaborate mechanisms of control over state institutions and society—explain al-Assad's ability to hang on to power, at least until December 2011. Although defections are currently being reported, dissent within the army and security apparatus on which al-Assad has relied to suppress the rebellion has not reached a critical level.²⁷ In two very different cases from those already mentioned, Yemen and Libya, internal fracturing and conflict are partly attributable to the relationship between the regime and the army and security forces. In Yemen a strong central authority capable of monopolizing the means of coercion over militias and military splinter groups is absent. In Libya, internal division was partly due to fragmentation within the army—a weak institution—and within the paramilitary and security organizations.²⁸

²⁴ This important insight was also offered by Lisa Anderson, 'Change in the Middle East? Democracy, authoritarianism and regime change in the Arab world', public lecture, London School of Economics, 13 July 2011.

²⁵ ICG, *Egypt victorious?*, p. 7.

²⁶ Hazem Kandil, 'Interview: revolt in Egypt', *New Left Review*, no. 68, March–April 2011, pp. 28–34.

²⁷ The status and strength of the 'Free Syrian Army' are not altogether clear at present.

²⁸ Private communication with Dirk Vandewalle, London, Nov. 2011.

Finally, the regimes' ability to withstand popular pressure depended on whether they retained significant allies in their respective societies. In Egypt, protesters represented a wide range of social classes, excluding only the wealthy elite associated with the regime, the very poor urban sub-proletariat and the peasantry.²⁹ The Tunisian uprising was also the product of wide consensus against the regime, a symptom of the shrinking of the latter's support base during the 2000s.³⁰ In contrast, Libya, Syria, Bahrain and Yemen were divided, with important social and political entities continuing to support the regimes. Yemen's regime was 'less repressive, more broadly inclusive and adaptable', better able to coopt the opposition using an extensive patronage network and to keep open avenues for participation, dissent and negotiation. These factors, and the opposition's fragmentation,³¹ explain why Saleh held onto power for so long, albeit at the risk of civil war, which may still come about. In Syria, even as ruthless repression continued in late 2011, areas with strong minority concentrations, the business community and, most crucially, the major metropolitan centres of Damascus and Aleppo remained ambivalent and did not appear to have turned against the regime in wholesale fashion. The opposition to al-Assad has only recently begun to overcome its serious internal disunity. In Bahrain, the uprising was characterized by the deep rift between Shi'i and Sunni, despite the fact that Sunni liberal elements also opposed the regime's authoritarianism, at least in the first stages. In Libya, Tripoli, the capital city and heart of the regime, did not experience major protests until the very end of the civil war which finally overthrew Qadhafi. Libya's dictator retained at least the acquiescence of significant social and political elements, and his overthrow might not have been possible without foreign intervention.³²

The prospects for democratic change

The Middle East has been described as immune to the waves of democratization which have transformed other regions, with the Arab states being identified as particularly lacking in this regard.³³ Focusing attention on democracy in the Middle East has been criticized for many reasons, not least as reflecting the priorities of western and in particular American political science.³⁴ Be that as it may, it will be interesting to see how this debate changes following the 2011 events. In terms of the prospects for democratic change it is clear, to this observer at least, that the consequences of the rebellions will be mixed, and that thinking

²⁹ Kandil, 'Interview: revolt in Egypt', pp. 20–8.

³⁰ Michelle Penner Angrist, 'Old grievances and new opportunities: understanding the Tunisian revolution', unpublished paper, Middle East Studies Association annual conference, Washington DC, 3 Dec. 2011.

³¹ ICG, *Yemen between reform and revolution*, p. ii.

³² Although this point is, of course, one of judgement, the last stages of the war and the takeover of Tripoli are well documented. See 'Libya', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/04/28/news-from-libya/1hhu>, accessed 13 Dec. 2011. For a perspective which highlights Libya's internal divisions see ICG, 'Libya: achieving a ceasefire, moving toward legitimate government', press release, Brussels, 13 May 2011.

³³ Alfred Stepan and Graeme Robertson, 'An "Arab" more than a "Muslim" democracy gap', *Journal of Democracy* 14: 3, 2003, pp. 30–44.

³⁴ Lisa Anderson, 'Searching where the light shines: studying democratization in the Middle East', *Annual Review of Political Science* 9, 2006, pp. 189–214.

in terms of a 'transition' to democracy is wrong and simplistic—signifying, as it does, that this involves societies following a one-way street to a uniform result.

Whatever the demands or hopes of their participants (and the hard facts about these are still lacking), most rebellions will not lead to democracy in any shape or form in the near future. In Syria, violent confrontation and the threat of civil war make democratization unlikely. In Yemen, weak state institutions, unable to sustain the rule of law, do not bode well for the emergence of a democratic system. In Libya, the dictator was overthrown, but not as a result of a unified internal movement for change. The longstanding weakness of state institutions and civil society in that country, as well as the presence of numerous armed militias and the current absence of a strong central authority following the civil war, do not bode well for democratization. In Bahrain, civil war is not on the agenda at present, but the suppression of the insurrection and the shrinking of the middle ground have extinguished any prospect for meaningful democratic reform. Following a ferocious crackdown on Shi'is and some Sunni liberal activists (which included mass arrests, the destruction of Shi'i places of worship, arbitrary detention and torture, and the dismissal of hundreds of protesters from their jobs), the state of emergency was lifted on 1 June and the regime initiated a process of national dialogue. This did not prevent further repression, however, and scheduled elections have been described as 'panels in Bahrain's democratic veneer'.³⁵

As already noted, in the case of Jordan and Morocco protests were relatively minor but ruling monarchs initiated reform to pre-empt any more substantial challenge. On 1 February 2011, as the troubling events in Tunisia and Egypt were unfolding, King Abdullah of Jordan dismissed the unpopular government of Samir Rifai and instructed Marouf al-Bakhit to form a new one, with the declared purpose of reform. In August the king proposed a number of constitutional amendments. The Moroccan king, Muhammad VI, also appointed a committee of experts to change the country's constitution, and the new document was overwhelmingly approved by referendum on 30 June.

Although these moves may seem a step in the right direction,³⁶ and could have unforeseen consequences in diluting monarchical authority, they are in fact further manoeuvrings by 'liberalized autocracies' seeking to secure their hold on power.³⁷ The king of Jordan frequently dismisses his government and sets up a new one with a 'reform' mandate, which is never quite implemented. In both monarchies, the manner in which the recent constitutional amendments emerged—proposed by royal fiat, their contents decided by panels appointed by the king—has caused much dissatisfaction (the '20 February' protest movement in Morocco rejected them for this reason). The changes to the Moroccan constitution opened up the political system to a degree and included some important

³⁵ Laurence Louër, 'Bahrain's national dialogue and the ever-deepening sectarian divide', *Arab Reform Bulletin*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 29 June 2011, <http://carnegieendowment.org/arb/?fa=issue&issueDate=06/30/2011>, accessed 31 July 2011.

³⁶ Marwan Muasher, 'Jordan's proposed constitutional amendments: a first step in the right direction', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Commentary, 17 Aug. 2011, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/08/17/jordan-s-proposed-constitutional-amendments-first-step-in-right-direction/4rmv>, accessed 13 Dec. 2011.

³⁷ Daniel Brumberg, 'The trap of liberalized autocracy', *Journal of Democracy* 13: 4, 2002, pp. 56–68.

reforms, for instance strengthening parliament and making Amazigh (Berber) an official language. In the case of Jordan, the amendments would strengthen the judiciary and the protection of civil and political rights. However, in both cases, the kings' executive powers remain undiminished and they retain the right to appoint the prime minister.³⁸

While Jordan and Morocco have seen only limited changes, granted from above, in Tunisia and Egypt, where mass popular movements conquered fear to peacefully overthrow well-entrenched rulers, prospects for democratization are brighter. Of the two—and indeed of all the Arab states, by a wide margin—Tunisia has the potential to go the furthest in terms of democratization. It is a country with longstanding, effective state structures and institutions.³⁹ Ben Ali's oppression emasculated political opposition parties and enfeebled civil society for 23 years. Nevertheless, Tunisia's resilient political class—which may not have been as fully coopted as it seemed to have been by the regime—and its historically vibrant institutions are resurfacing. The UGTT, human rights activists, journalists and professional associations, as well as pre-existing political organizations, secular and Islamist, are the source of real political alternatives. The tension between continuity and change in Tunisia is palpable.⁴⁰ The dictator may have been toppled but large parts of his regime remained in place, even after the elections of 23 October 2011. However, a degree of continuity will *enhance* the prospects for democratic change in Tunisia. A more profound upheaval overthrowing the political and social order would have led to internal conflict and violence, external war, widespread recrimination and possibly a return to authoritarian government, albeit of a different hue. Such was the pattern of fully fledged revolutions in, for example, France in 1789, Russia in 1917, China in 1949 and Iran in 1979.⁴¹

Egypt's prospects in terms of democratic reform, compared to Tunisia, are much more mixed. There will be improvements in three areas: political contestation, freedom of speech and police accountability. However, although the worst excesses of the previous regime may be reduced, change will be limited, much more so than in Tunisia. The dominant position of the army following the overthrow of Mubarak is an advantage in terms of continuity and stability but could pose a serious threat to the prospects of democratic reform. Only a short time after the overthrow of Mubarak, there were already complaints against the continued gagging of the media and the referral of journalists to military courts, and concerns that police were returning to the old practices of violent and arbitrary behaviour. In September 2011 the SCAF expanded the emergency laws. Although much has

³⁸ Paul Silverstein, 'Weighing Morocco's new constitution', *Middle East Report Online*, 5 July 2011, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero070511>, accessed 13 Dec. 2011; Marina Ottaway, 'The new Moroccan constitution: real change or more of the same?', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Commentary, 20 Jun. 2011, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/06/20/new-moroccan-constitution-real-change-or-more-of-same/51>, accessed 13 Dec. 2011.

³⁹ For a *longue durée* analysis of Tunisia which expounds on this view more fully, see Katerina Dalacoura, *Islam, liberalism and human rights: implications for International Relations* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2003).

⁴⁰ ICG, *Tunisia's way*, pp. 12–18.

⁴¹ See e.g. Theda Skocpol, *States and social revolutions: a comparative analysis of France, Russia and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

been made of the changing nature of political activism in Egypt,⁴² and elsewhere in the Middle East, it will be tough to translate these new forms of activism into solid checks and balances on authority. The profound depoliticization of Egyptian society over a period of decades seemed to be spectacularly reversed in 2011, but popular protest does not automatically translate into the ability to form sustainable political groups or institutions.

One further area to watch, because it is linked to long-term prospects of democracy in Egypt and the region more widely, is the shift against neo-liberal policies following the 2011 insurrections. From the early 2000s in Egypt, a neo-liberal group emerged around Gamal Mubarak, a section of the NDP and the cabinet of Ahmed Nazif, appointed in 2004. Although neo-liberal reforms led to economic growth—with 7 per cent growth in GDP between 2005 and 2008, for instance—and some streamlining of bureaucratic obstacles to investment, they were marred by cronyism and corruption. In one of his first attempts to stymie the revolt against him, Mubarak fired ministers associated with neo-liberal policies: in his speech of 29 January he announced a new ‘government without businessmen’, led by Ahmed Shafiq, and on 5 February the NDP’s six-member politburo, including Gamal Mubarak, resigned.⁴³ With Mubarak’s overthrow the trend away from neo-liberal policies intensified. The interim government led by the army—whose own economic privileges, such as large numbers of employees, separate budgets and interests, and social benefits, do not incline it to favour neo-liberal policies—came under pressure to increase salaries and subsidies and take other welfare measures. Developments in Egypt may be mirrored elsewhere in the region, where the trend against neo-liberal reforms could intensify as insecure governments resort to populist measures to balk further unrest. If economic liberalization and economic prosperity are a *sine qua non* of democracy—admittedly a controversial point—the 2011 uprisings may have, paradoxically, a negative impact on its long-term prospects.⁴⁴

The Islamist factor

None of the 2011 uprisings in the Arab Middle East was led by Islamist movements or had a predominantly Islamist agenda. In Tunisia this was inevitably so because the major Islamist group, al-Nahda, was banned. In the case of Egypt, however, many young Muslim Brothers joined the protests, initially against the wishes of their leadership, which was reluctant to participate until it became clear that the movement was unstoppable. In other parts of the region, the role of Islamist groups varied. In Yemen the JMP, of which the Islamist Islah was an important member, eventually became active in the protests. However, it did maintain a conciliatory attitude towards the regime and Islah’s conservatism was disliked by

⁴² Mona el-Ghobashy, ‘The praxis of the Egyptian revolution’, *Middle East Report* 41: 258, Spring 2011, pp. 2–13.

⁴³ ICG, *Egypt victorious?*, pp. 5, 10 (n. 98).

⁴⁴ It is impossible to summarize the complex debate on political and economic reform, oil, welfare, the rentier state and neo-liberal reforms in the Middle East, but one might usefully consult Clement Moore Henry and Robert Springborg, *Globalization and the politics of development in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

some young activists.⁴⁵ In post-Qadhafi Libya a complex array of Islamist entities, many forming or reforming in the process, will play an important role, although what this will be is not yet clear in what remains an open-ended situation. In Syria there is a strong Islamist element in the anti-Assad rebellion, despite the vicious suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood since the 1980s.⁴⁶

The absence of a strong Islamist presence does not mean that alternative ideologies or groups dominated the rebellions, which on the whole appeared to be post-ideological and patriotic in nature.⁴⁷ If anything, love of country seemed to fire the protesters—who can forget the sea of Egyptian flags in Tahrir Square? Even in Bahrain, with its deep division between Shi'i and Sunni, the protesters claimed that they stood against sectarianism, chanting 'No Shi'a, no Sunnis, only Bahrainis'.⁴⁸ Although it is hard to generalize, pro-Palestine, anti-Israeli and anti-American slogans were not particularly visible in the protests either. If, indeed, the uprisings were firmly focused on domestic, national issues, to which the rival concerns of Arabism and Islam were secondary, Islamist movements will need to adjust their ideological message in this direction.⁴⁹

Despite their limited role in the uprisings, Islamist movements will benefit from them politically. Prior to 2011 one could observe the spread of a personal, apolitical religiosity throughout the Middle East. This trend may now be reversed. The upheavals enabled or forced Islamist movements to re-engage with mainstream politics.⁵⁰ The existing, effective structures of the organized Islamist groups (only one element in the complex phenomenon we call 'Islamism') will enable them to capitalize on more open political processes. This has already occurred in Tunisia, where the Islamist al-Nahda party, legalized in March 2011 after 20 years, won 40 per cent of the vote and 89 out of 217 seats in the 23 October elections. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood established a political party, Justice and Freedom, which was legalized alongside the moderate Wasat. It is doing very well in the parliamentary elections which started on 28 November, although it is not certain whether it will secure an outright majority. This development frightens secularists, who are wary of the Islamists' latent conservatism and authoritarianism. Be that as it may, Islamist participation is essential for democratization to move forward: excluding such a significant political force, which potentially commands the loyalty of large segments of the electorate, would undermine the legitimacy of the political process. In the long run, democratization could result in the emasculation of

⁴⁵ Al-Sakkaf, 'The politicization of Yemen's youth revolution'.

⁴⁶ ICG, *The Syrian regime's slow-motion suicide*, p. 8.

⁴⁷ Comment attributed to Hicham Ben Abdullah, Consulting Professor at Stanford University and founder of the Moulay Hicham Foundation, 'From political activism to democratic change in the Arab world conference report', Stanford University, email communication, 12–13 May 2011.

⁴⁸ Kerr and Jones, 'A revolution paused in Bahrain'.

⁴⁹ This observation is linked to the rival roles of the Iranian and Turkish Islamist models, discussed in the next section.

⁵⁰ Nathan J. Brown, 'Islamists: politics beckons once again', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Commentary, 22 Feb. 2011, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/02/22/islamists-politics-beckons-once-again/y2>, accessed 13 Dec. 2011. In Jordan and Morocco, where Islamist movements have always been careful to work within the system, changes are occurring, albeit in a limited fashion. Brown notes that in Jordan the Muslim Brotherhood has been toying with the idea of pressing for a constitutional monarchy. In Morocco, the constitutional reforms proposed by the king were backed by the Islamist Justice and Development Party.

Islamist groups, as the poverty of their political programme—concentrated on social and ‘moral’ issues and lacking in concrete solutions to major institutional and socio-economic challenges—becomes apparent through political contestation.⁵¹

The potential normalization, through political participation, of mainstream Islamist parties as a result of the uprisings—not just in Tunisia and Egypt but possibly also in Libya and Syria when the situation stabilizes—has tipped the balance further against the various strands of violent Islamism in the Middle East, which also received a symbolic blow with the assassination of Al-Qaeda’s leader, Osama bin Laden, in May 2011. In Egypt, in the culmination of a process predating the overthrow of Mubarak, the leaders of Gamaa Islamiya, having renounced violence, claimed to have accepted democracy and formed the Construction and Development Party (which was, however, denied a licence). Salafis, fundamentalist Islamists who had hitherto remained apolitical in Egypt, formed the al-Nour party which is contesting the elections. However, the Egyptian uprising has also opened up space for extremist groups and tendencies, causing an upsurge in sectarian violence. On 7 May 2011 a Christian church in Cairo’s Imbaba neighbourhood was attacked, causing twelve deaths and scores of injuries. On 9 October the army and security forces turned on Copts demonstrating in Maspero, again in Cairo, leading to 25 deaths.⁵²

Geopolitical implications of the uprisings

All three major Middle Eastern powers, Turkey, Iran and Israel, scrambled over the past year to adjust to the new realities created by the Arab rebellions. The policy of Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) of ‘zero problems’ towards the country’s neighbours was thrown in the air as Arab populations challenged their governments, leaving Turkey searching for a coherent response. Turkey’s prime minister, Recep Tayip Erdoğan, supported the Tunisian and Egyptian popular revolts; however, he initially opposed military intervention in Libya, although his government did eventually recognize the NTC as its legitimate government in early July and offered it active support. The case of Syria is perhaps the most difficult one for Turkey, given the considerable investment of the AKP government in building good relations with Bashar al-Assad over the past decade.⁵³ Turkey tried to encourage reform and maintained channels of communication—Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu visited Damascus in early August at the height of the Syrian crisis—but by late 2011 al-Assad’s continuing severe repression had turned Turkey firmly against his regime. The crisis in Syria has even

⁵¹ Katerina Dalacoura, ‘The Brotherhood will soon be left behind’, *Financial Times*, 21 March 2011; Olivier Roy, *The failure of political Islam* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1994).

⁵² Mariz Tadros, ‘Egypt’s Bloody Sunday’, *Middle East Report Online*, 13 Oct. 2001, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero101311>, accessed 13 Dec. 2011. On Egypt’s Islamists more generally, see Marina Ottaway, ‘Egypt’s democracy: between the military, Islamists and illiberal democrats’, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Commentary, 3 Nov. 2011, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/11/03/egypt-s-democracy-between-military-islamists-and-illiberal-democrats/6lzl#>, accessed 13 Dec. 2011.

⁵³ Meliha Benli Altunışık and Özlem Tür, ‘From distant neighbours to partners? Changing Syrian–Turkish relations’, *Security Dialogue* 37: 2, 2006, pp. 217–36.

more profound implications for Iran. The possibility of al-Assad's overthrow, and the odious violence meted out by his regime against the people, are embarrassing for its Iranian supporters and for their common ally, Hezbollah.⁵⁴

In the long term, the 2011 Arab rebellions may signify the decline of one Islamist model (Iran's) and the ascent of another (Turkey's). Iran initially attempted to applaud the rebellions as an expression of popular opposition to secular tyrants, but it quickly transpired that protesters were not clamouring for an Iranian-style polity. On the other hand, the AKP was upheld as a useful Islamist model, both by Tunisia's al-Nahda leader, Rachid Ghannouchi (who claimed his ideas inspired the AKP), and Saad el-Katatni, the head of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's new party, Freedom and Justice.⁵⁵

Israel has been negatively affected by the Arab uprisings, at least in the short term. Notwithstanding its depiction, by itself and its allies, as the beacon of democracy in the Middle East, Israel seemed uneasy with the prospect of democratic change in the region. The government of Benjamin Netanyahu feared instability including, ironically, the possibility that Israel's old enemy, the al-Assad regime, might fall. This was not wholly because of the immediate effects of the crisis, for instance Syria's encouragement of Palestinians to enter the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights in May 2011 as a diversion from its internal problems.⁵⁶ Israel fears that Syria may descend into civil war or that an even more bellicose regime will replace al-Assad's. On its southern border, Israel watched Mubarak's overthrow with trepidation, anxious that a more democratic government might give vent to popular anti-Israeli sentiment. The Hamas–Fatah *rapprochement* in May 2011, condemned by the Netanyahu government, was partially the result of Mubarak's overthrow.

Finally, the Arab revolts have had a multifaceted impact on western interests and policies in the Middle East, while western actors influenced the 2011 events in diverse ways. France's initial support for Ben Ali was a *faux pas*; in the words of one analyst, 'As mainly Muslim crowds called for liberty and equality, France had its own interpretation of the compatibility of democracy with Islam, offering Ben Ali's failing regime "the expert assistance of our security forces".'⁵⁷ A few weeks later, Britain, France and Italy were instrumental in initiating military intervention in Libya, spurring the US administration of Barack Obama into action. The response towards Syria has been more equivocal, however, because the web of historical, political and economic relations which ties it to Europe, and its sensitive geopolitical position, make al-Assad less expendable than Qadhafi.

Barack Obama's policy towards the Arab uprisings attracted a good deal of criticism. The perennial clash in US foreign policy between the national interest

⁵⁴ Iran's position has also been affected by Mubarak's overthrow. It could mean closer relations with Egypt, but also potentially greater rivalry in the long run, if Egypt re-enters the Middle East arena as a more powerful player than hitherto. See Elham Fakhro and Emile Hokayem, 'Waking the Arabs', *Survival* 53: 2, April–May 2011, p. 25.

⁵⁵ Fakhro and Hokayem, 'Waking the Arabs', p. 24.

⁵⁶ ICG, *The Syrian regime's slow-motion suicide*, p. 26.

⁵⁷ Serge Halimi, 'The Arab wall begins to fall: the impossible happened', *Le Monde Diplomatique* (English edn), 4 Feb. 2011.

and democratic values intensified during the crisis. As usual, wildly different interpretations of US actions were on offer. The Saudi leadership allegedly watched in horror as Obama 'abandoned' Mubarak and other friendly leaders. For those who believed that the United States had a duty to help democratic forces, on the other hand, the US administration fell short in delaying taking a stance against Mubarak and then Omar Suleiman, himself a vital ally. In the case of Bahrain, where the US Fifth Fleet is stationed and there is fear of Iranian meddling, Obama called for 'reform' but failed to publicly condemn the regime's repression.

Many on the right of the US political spectrum bemoaned Obama's lack of robust leadership and his reluctance to assume the moral mantle of the Arab uprisings, especially as they appeared to lack any particular anti-US animus. These critics would have favoured strong rhetorical support for democracy along the lines of that expressed by his predecessor, George W. Bush. They argued that the 'democratic revolutions' occurring in the Middle East in 2011 were a vindication of Bush's post-9/11 democracy promotion agenda.⁵⁸ However, Obama's judgement, that the Bush policy of democracy promotion (inextricably tied to the Iraq debacle and longstanding suspicion towards US designs in the region) had backfired, was sound. He also rightly perceived that the 2011 uprisings were unconnected to US policy. Obama's instinct that he was powerless to shape events and that a forceful intervention would, if anything, delegitimize pro-democracy forces was correct, as it had been during the Iranian Green movement's uprising in 2009. The decision to go along with military intervention in Libya was a diversion from this line, a response to criticism of his alleged inaction towards Tunisia and Egypt.⁵⁹

The consensus in Washington from the 1990s onwards, and particularly since 9/11, has been that democratization will lead to the emergence in the Middle East of regimes which are credible interlocutors or even supportive of the United States. Whatever transpires in the long run, the Arab uprisings will have more immediate geopolitical implications. Internal changes are reshaping bilateral relations and affecting regional balances of power. The fall of Mubarak is increasing the pressure on Israel, as we saw, but the ouster of al-Assad, should it occur, will weaken Iran and Hezbollah. Washington is particularly concerned that, if Saleh's regime in Yemen is overthrown and civil war or state collapse ensues, Al-Qaeda will expand further in the country. However, the relationships between the United States and its key allies, namely Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Turkey and even Egypt (where the military will remain an important player), are still fundamentally unscathed. US policy in the Middle East is defined by larger issues centring on Iraq and the Afghanistan–Pakistan conundrum. The Arab uprisings may affect the balance of power between the United States and Iran, but will not challenge the core tenets and concerns of US policy in the Middle East.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ See e.g. Charles Krauthammer, 'From freedom agenda to freedom doctrine', *Washington Post*, 10 Feb. 2011.

⁵⁹ Lisa Anderson, 'Change in the Middle East?'

⁶⁰ For a useful analysis of the Obama administration's policy towards the uprisings and their implications for the United States, see Middle East Institute, *The Arab spring: implications for US policy and interests* (Washington DC, 2011); 'Symposium: the Arab uprisings and U.S. policy: what is the American interest?', *Middle East Policy* 18: 2, Summer 2011.

Conclusion

The Arab uprisings of 2011 were a series of diverse albeit interconnected events. In Tunisia and Egypt, mass civic insurrections led to the ousting of dictators but only a partial overthrow of authoritarian regimes. In Bahrain, the uprising was severely suppressed. In Libya, the regime was toppled following civil war and outside military intervention. In Syria, the bloody confrontation between the regime and significant parts of society is continuing. In Yemen, crisis is simmering. More violent conflict and even civil war are not off the agenda in any of the latter three cases. Other parts of the Middle East have experienced less turbulence, while in Jordan and Morocco monarchs offered limited reforms to pre-empt a greater political challenge. It is difficult to establish unifying causal factors behind such disparate events. Focusing on the reasons for and the mechanisms of popular mobilization is not enough; the manner of regime response was equally important in explaining outcomes. This response was determined by the relationship in each case between regime and state institutions, including the army and security services, and the ability of the regime to retain the support of significant societal allies.

Just as the events themselves have been diverse in their causes and outcomes, so their impact on the region is also varied. Tremendous uncertainty surrounds the Arab Middle East at present. In geopolitical terms, internal political changes in the Arab world will cause shifts in the balance of power across the region, which will affect Iran, Turkey, Israel and the West. With regard to US foreign policy, the impact of the uprisings will be complex but will not profoundly alter its parameters. In ideological terms, the uprisings are a confirmation that the appeal of the Iranian Islamist model is declining. None of the uprisings was led by an Islamist movement or posited a demand for an Islamist state; if anything, they were post-ideological, patriotic and 'introverted' in the sense of being focused on internal national politics. In those cases where Islamists may benefit directly from the unfolding political changes, as in Tunisia and Egypt, they look for inspiration to the success of Turkey's AKP rather than to Iran. The inclusion of Islamist groups in more openly contested political processes may weaken them in the long term, as it reveals their lack of distinct and effective political programmes.

A major question is whether the uprisings will lead to the democratization of the Arab Middle East and the dislodging of the longstanding authoritarianism which has bedevilled its political life. How far this will happen, if at all, will vary in each case and, although the region overall has been profoundly affected, there will be no wholesale democratization as a result of the uprisings. In some instances, as in Morocco and Jordan, the regimes have introduced reforms to ensure regime survival: *plus ça change* ... In other cases, such as Libya, Syria, Bahrain and Yemen, the situation is too fluid, contested and outright violent for future prospects to be properly assessed. In the most hopeful instances, Egypt and above all Tunisia, a degree of democratization and political liberalization will occur. Paradoxically, the lack of profound upheaval bodes well for partial positive political change in these two countries, because the risks of violent backlash will be averted: if a revolution has not occurred, it cannot be betrayed.

