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## A Model of Regime Change: The Impact of Arab Spring throughout the Middle East and North Africa

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A MODEL OF REGIME CHANGE: THE IMPACT OF ARAB SPRING  
THROUGHOUT THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

By

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April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2021

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## ABSTRACT

Bizuru, Omar Khalfan, M.A., International and Comparative Politics Graduate Program, School of Public and International Affairs, Wright State University, 2021. A Model of Regime Change: The Impact of the Arab Spring Throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

This study examined the catalysts for social movements around the globe; specifically, why and how the Arab Spring uprisings led to regime change in Tunisia, why they transformed into civil war in some countries of the Middle East and North Africa (Syria), and why they did not lead to significant change at all in other places (Bahrain). The overall results of the study confirmed that political and socio-economic grievances caused the Arab uprisings in Tunisia, Bahrain, and Syria. Tunisian protesters succeeded in regime change because of a united and structured social movement leading to an effective transitional democracy in the country, whereas Syria and Bahrain used their coercive apparatus, with the help of foreign intervention, to suppress demonstrators. Thus, on the Syrian side, protests transformed into civil war.

**Keywords:** *Arab Spring; Bahrain; Middle East and North Africa; Protests; Regime change; Social Movements; Syria; Transition Democracy; Tunisia.*

## Table of Contents

<b>Chapter One .....</b>	<b>1</b>
General introduction.....	1
Background .....	2
Problem statement and research questions.....	4
Hypotheses .....	5
Assumptions .....	6
Research design and methodology.....	6
Research design.....	7
Research methodology .....	9
Significance of the study.....	9
Conclusion .....	11
<b>Chapter Two.....</b>	<b>13</b>
Theory and literature review.....	13
Introduction .....	13
The theories of social movements and their conceptual framework.....	13
Aggregate psychological theories.....	15
The systems/value-consensus theory.....	16
The political conflict perspective .....	16
Deprivation or relative deprivation theory (DT/RDT) .....	17
Resource mobilization theory (RMT).....	18
Political process theory (PPT) .....	18
The structural strain theory.....	19
The Arab Spring as an action of social movements .....	20

The Middle East and North Africa region in the aftermath of World War I.....	23
Great Powers Patronage and their respective influences toward the Middle East and North Africa .....	25
Structural realism.....	26
Offensive realism and maximizing power.....	27
Is International trade conditioned to the stability of the Middle Eastern region?.....	27
External influences in the Middle East and North Africa region.....	29
Russia and China as the US major challenger at international level.....	36
Israeli politics toward its neighboring Middle Eastern countries and its response to the Arab Spring .....	37
The concept of waves of democratization.....	39
Democracy, political and economic incentives in the Middle East and North Africa ..	43
Democratic institutions and other key elements of democracy.....	44
Conclusion.....	50
<b>Chapter Three</b> .....	<b>52</b>
Bahrain’s historical overview and political governance .....	52
Introduction.....	52
Power patronage, regional major powers’ ties and rivalries in Bahrain .....	57
U.S. military ties with Bahrain and Iranian policies towards Bahrain .....	62
Bahraini civil liberties and political rights .....	63
Political pluralism and participation.....	65
Inclusiveness, political rights, and electoral opportunities.....	66
Functioning of government and corruption.....	66
Freedom of association, CSOs and rights of organizations.....	67
Rule of law, individual rights .....	67

Bahrain’s economy.....	68
Conclusion.....	71
<b>Chapter Four.....</b>	<b>73</b>
Syria’s historical political governance.....	73
Introduction.....	73
Sunni and Shia Alawite rivalries.....	75
Syrian post independence era.....	77
The reasons for the Syrian uprising and civil war.....	80
Was the Syrian economic crisis the cause of the Syrian civil war? Are socioeconomic grievances the root cause of the Syrian uprising?.....	80
Syrian civil liberties and political rights .....	81
Functioning of government .....	82
Transparency, freedom, and fairness of elections .....	83
Political pluralism and participation.....	83
Freedom of association and freedom of expression .....	84
Rule of Law .....	84
Conclusion.....	84
<b>Chapter Five.....</b>	<b>86</b>
Tunisia’s historical political governance .....	86
Introduction.....	86
Historical overview .....	87
Radicalization that occurred in between the 1980s and 2000s.....	87
Tunisia’s security challenges and issues .....	93
The Salafist issues in Tunisia’s politics.....	95

Ennahda gained power with its Islamist moderation stance.....	97
Tunisia’s economy .....	102
The growth of disadvantaged social groups .....	103
Laws related to Commerce and international partners .....	105
Tunisia’s social contract .....	106
Tunisian civil liberties and political rights.....	109
Recent political developments in Tunisia.....	109
Political processes in Tunisia post-Arab Spring.....	110
Functioning of government .....	111
Rule of law.....	111
Transparency, freedom, and fairness of elections .....	111
Political pluralism and participation.....	112
Freedom of association.....	112
Conclusion.....	113
<b>Chapter Six.....</b>	<b>114</b>
The Arab Spring: failed and successful revolutions and the path to the transitional democracy.....	114
Introduction.....	114
Causes of revolutions and protests in the MENA .....	116
Protests in Tunisia.....	117
Tunisia’s military stance in politics.....	120
Protests in Bahrain .....	122
Bahrain’s demonstrations, foreign blame, containment and securitization by receiving military support under GCC protocols .....	123
Protests in Syria.....	126

Opposition and Weapons Suppliers.....	129
The Assad Regime’s Reaction to Mass Protests .....	130
Russia’s influence in the MENA region .....	135
Foreign Intervention in the Syrian Civil War.....	136
Last (2019) Key Battleground Development in Syria.....	138
Peace Efforts .....	139
The Tested Hypotheses .....	141
Hypothesis 1. ....	141
Hypothesis 2. ....	142
Hypothesis 3. ....	143
Hypothesis 4. ....	146
Hypothesis 5. ....	147
Conclusion.....	148
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>154</b>

## **List of Figures**

Figure 1: Mutually reinforcing determinants of how independent variable affects dependent variable through actors (causal mechanisms).....	8
Figure 2: Aberle's Four Types of Social Movements.....	19
Figure 3: Social Contract .....	107

## List of Tables

Table 1: Selected cases .....	7
Table 2: Cases: Bahrain, Syria and Tunisia .....	9
Table 3: Civil liberties and political rights in Bahrain.....	65
Table 4 : Civil liberties and political rights in Syria.....	82
Table 5: Civil Liberties and Political Rights in Tunisia .....	110
Table 6: Syrian Peace Talks Initiatives.....	139
Table 7: Current Peace Talks Progress .....	141
Table 8: Summary of hypotheses.....	150

## Abbreviations

AFP	<i>Agence France-Presse</i>
APIA	<i>Agence –Tunisienne- des Investissements Agricoles</i>
APII	<i>Agence –Tunisienne- de Promotion de l’Industrie et del’Innovation</i>
ARP	Assembly of the Representatives of the People
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CEPEX	<i>Centre de Promotion des Exportations de la Tunisie</i>
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
DDT	Relative Deprivation Theory
DT	Relative Theory
DV	Dependent Variable
Eurasia	Largest Continental area on Earth [Europe and Asia]
EZDK	Ezz Steel Plant [Egyptian steel company]
FSA	Free Syrian Army
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IDF	Israeli Defense Forces
IISS	International Institute for Strategic Studies
IP	Industrial Policies
IS	The Islamic State
IV	Independent Variable
MB	Muslim Brotherhood
MENA	Middle East and North Africa

MTI	Islamic Tendency Movement
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDF	National Defense Forces
NDP	National Defense Policies
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
ODCO	<i>Office de Développement du Centre Ouest</i>
ODNO	<i>Office de Développement du Nord Ouest</i>
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
OPEC	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
PPT	Political Process theory
PYD	[Kurdish] Democratic Union Party
RCD	Constitutional Democratic Party
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
SNC	Syrian National Council
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UGTT	<i>Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail</i> -- الاتحاد العام التونسي للشغل
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US	United States
USA	United States of America
UTICA	<i>Union de l'Industrie, du Commerce et de l'Artisanat</i>
WTO	World Health Organization

## **Acknowledgments**

I have to recognize my incredible journey at WSU, my first higher learning institution in the United States, in which I gained an unparalleled academic experience, both in an American education system (learning and teaching) and in how to conduct research. I would not have achieved this great goal without the university's very strong academic team members. In this regard, I want to thank the entire College of Liberal Arts, and in particular the School of Public and International Affairs (SPIA), for giving me the opportunity to be an ICP program student, as well as offering me funds to cover some coursework.

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## **Dedication**

To all public and private institutions that fund graduate students for a better research environment and outcome.

To all the people who dedicate their time doing research in a bid to promote democracy and well-being in a free world.

To my wife and kids.

## Chapter One

### General introduction

#### Introduction

This study has showed how and why the Arab Spring --in the form of social movements -- affected Arab nations with varying outcomes. The Arab Spring did not just happen; it had driving factors. Peoples from Tunisia, Syria, and Bahrain felt that socio-economic and political injustices had been inflicted upon them and became frustrated and alienated. The Arab countries either lacked the political will or the ability to adopt policies that should have aimed at transforming existing institutions into transitional democracies. Confronted with consequences from authoritarian regimes, citizens in the Arab nations had to endure the social unrest that caused the Arab Spring when a Tunisian, Mohammad Bouazizi, triggered the situation late in 2010.

One common goal of the Arab Spring was regime change. Tunisia, in the entire Arab world, was the only success story in transitioning from dictatorship to democracy. The Arab Spring in Egypt succeeded in overthrowing President Hosni Mubarak, but because of the lack of organized opposition to the former government of Mubarak, and with the nature of how the protests erupted, at the end of the demonstrations, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), as the long-time organized movement in the country, profited from the disorganized *Tahrir Square* movements and grabbed the reigns of the Arab Spring victory, which brought the nation to general elections in 2012. Ultimately, the election was won by Mr. Morsi of the MB, the first ever democratically-elected president in Egyptian history.

Because the Arab Spring affected the majority of North African nations, Libya wasn't spared from protest. Although former Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi was ousted from power, Libya ended up spiraling into civil war, which ravaged the country from the beginning of the Arab Spring to the international military intervention. Similarly, Syria and Yemen are other examples of failure to the extent that they have been transformed into the battlefields of various armed movements and foreign military interventions. The Arab Spring, although it did not bring about total change in most Arab countries, brought forth some change and caused some superficial reforms in countries such as Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco, Oman, and Saudi Arabia.

### **Background**

This study focuses on how social movements erupt and, in some cases, become the “domino effect of democratization.” The aim of any social movement is to bring total change -- “regime change” -- to modify the current social order in response to the need for protests; and then, to begin the exercise of transitional democracy. As we shall see in the literature review in Chapter 2, social movement theories attempt to understand the origins of social movements and why they occur. These theories can be used to explain some prominent social movements. For instance, the deprivation theory was used to explain the birth of the civil rights and the feminist movements in the United States. The resource mobilization theory demonstrated how modern electronic technologies (like the internet and cell-phones) helped in the mobilization of human resources in the anti-WTO demonstrations that were organized in various cities around the world, Anindya and Ömer (2016); and thus they had been used in most of the Arab Spring of 2010-2012. These electronic technologies were effective tools in the Arab Spring uprisings, as the

protestors used them to communicate not only within their respective countries but also to network with the diasporas and international backers of the protests; this led, to some extent, to the success of protests in Tunisia and Egypt.

The Arab Spring, which was in the form of social movements, began at the end of 2010 in Tunisia, and continued in early 2011 in Libya, Egypt, Bahrain, Syria, and other parts of the Middle East and North Africa. The Arab Spring was caused by various types of political regimes, economic grievances, and the responses of Arab governments to a variety of the people's needs. In examining the economic and political failures in the MENA region, despite the number of Middle Eastern countries which have petrol oil and gas, the ability of states to implement social justice measures and guarantee economic security has plunged over the decade(s) in most Arab nations. Being a "rentier state" does not guarantee continual economic progress if the state does not set up other strong economic measures that do not rely only on petrol oil and gas. As someone who lived almost a decade in Egypt in the 1990s, I have witnessed the declining quality of degraded life that has affected the Arab citizens' basic dignity<sup>1</sup>, or *Al Karamah Al-assassiyah* as they call it. The lack of respect of *al-Karamah al-Assassiyah* ignited protests and has been a critical factor in animating the Arab Spring, beginning with Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in Tunisia.

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<sup>1</sup>الكرامة الأساسية: *Al Karamah Al-assassiyah* Basic dignity:

Although some scholars have agreed on the effectiveness of economic grievances as a sufficient factor for people to take to the streets against a government, a number of other scholars have contended that the disgruntled citizens who joined demonstrations have not necessarily become political protesters. In the Arab Spring, the principal beneficiary has been political Islam, the perennial factor of the Arab world (Henry and Ji-Hyang 2012). However, Arab regimes and their international backers often have the specter of Islamic extremism to justify authoritarian practices, and oftentimes, these regimes have abused human rights.

### **Problem statement and research questions**

The study examines how and why social movements erupt and protests begin; how and why the Arab Spring, in the form of protests, has caused the fall of authoritarian regime(s) in some countries; how, at the end of the protests, the situation in some countries returned to their previous status, or even worse; and how and why some revolutions failed to create political change altogether. This study investigates why and how the Arab Spring has been able to change regimes in Tunisia; why the protests transformed into civil war in some places (Syria); and why the Arab Spring did not change things at all in other places (Bahrain).

Exploring the case studies, I propose analyzing them to explain why the protests were able to successfully oust dictators in Tunisia and achieve regime change in the country but transformed into civil war in Syria. Moreover, this study also examines what motivated protesters to stop demonstrations in Bahrain.

This study is designed to answer the following questions:

- What motivates social movements to take place?

- How and why have some of the Arab Spring's protesters been able to reach their political goals -regime change - while other demonstrators in the same region, with similar demands and cultural beliefs, have failed to do so?
- Are economic and political incentives offered by some Arab countries key to quelling demonstrations or silencing protesters calling for regime change?
- What was the role of great powers in the Arab Spring?

### **Hypotheses**

The study of the impact of the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa will attempt to test the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1.

The more accumulated political and socio-economic grievances, the more people are likely to experience dissatisfaction and to begin forming and joining social movements with the aim of changing the current social and political order to satisfy their needs.

Hypothesis 2.

The more structured and united the leadership of a social movement, the more likely it is to gain success.

Hypothesis 3.

The more unified the coercive apparatus of the state, the more likely it is to repress protests and allow it to survive with its illegitimate status.

Hypothesis 4.

The more government offers in payouts, the less likely protests will lead to change.

## Hypothesis 5.

Support of the state by an outside great power increases the resilience against regime change. By contrast, support of state's opponent [protesters] by an outside great power increases the chances of regime change.

### **Assumptions**

The assumption behind these hypotheses is that social movements are assumed to be rational as they aim to change social order by establishing new regimes or achieving partial changes. For social movements to occur, there should be reasons compelling in the direction of protests such as political and socio-economic grievances; and for a success of social movements there should also be a well structured and unified leadership leading all involved organizations in the protests. However, it is assumed that in some cases, demonstrators encounter hindrances in achieving targeted goals [changing the current regime] once the government offers payouts as a form of government's willingness to partial changes. Moreover, when the government gets support from an outside great power, it increases its chances to survive and hence, it resists against regime change. By contrast, it is also assumed that when opponents [protesters] receive support from an outside great power, it does increase the chances to change the current political and social order.

### **Research design and methodology**

This thesis uses the comparative case method. As Table 1 shows, the cases for this study are selected with variation on the dependent variable. Tunisia provides a case of success in regime change, Syria provides a case of protests leading to civil war, and Bahrain illustrates a case of protest failure to lead to change, see table below.

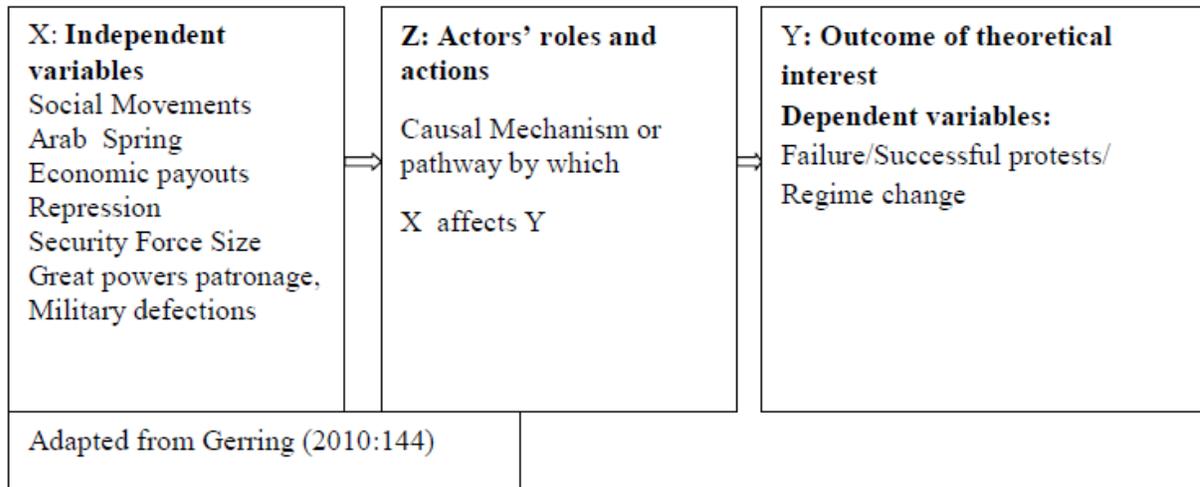
Table 1: Selected cases

<b>Case(s)</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Status</b>
Case of Success	Tunisia	2010-2011: Revolution succeeded to regime change: New Government: stability.
Case of Failure: Protests turned into civil war	Syria	From 2011 to the present: Protests [Mostly Sunni Muslims against Shia <i>Alawites</i> in power. Revolution failed and turned into civil war. Foreign countries intervened on both sides: Assad regime and Protesters then Rebels.
Case of Failure: Relative Stability	Bahrain	From 2011: Protests failed and they have been cracked down on by government security and military forces supported by the Saudi military and other GCC member states' armed forces. Bahraini government uses coercive apparatus to maintain relative stability in the country.

### **Research design**

The research has established a study plan with theories, a conceptual framework, and methods that will be used to assess the overall relationships between the independent variables and dependent variables. There are two factors of IVs (internal and external). *Internal factors*: army defections, government payouts, youth associations, university members, syndicates, labor unions, religious organizations, and civil society organizations; there are also *external factors* such as the patronage, as in the political or military role played by the United States, France, the U.K., and Russia. The patronage of great powers entails supporting social movements financially, politically, and/or militarily to achieve their goals, but also great powers such as Russia have played a role to maintain the incumbent in power in Syria.

**Figure 1:** Mutually reinforcing determinants of how independent variable affects dependent variable through actors (causal mechanisms).



According to Gerring’s basic causal diagram which the researcher has adopted, social movements/Arab Spring/ mass demonstrations, economic payouts, repression, security forces, great power patronage, military defections are all independent variables [IVs] an ‘X’ in the figure 1; and they have contributed to (1) successful protests of Arab Spring and regime change [in this study, the case of Tunisia; (2) failed revolution and partial reforms because of resistance from the current government’s security forces and foreign interventions, [the case of Bahrain]; and (3) the revolution which transformed social movements into civil war, the case of Syria, which is considered by some scholars as a case between failed and success revolutions, pending the outcome of the civil war. The causal mechanism or pathway of theoretical interest, a ‘Z’ in the figure one is the roles and actions of different actors. And an outcome of theoretical interest or dependent variable [DV], is a ‘Y’ in the figure one. In other words, dependent variables are the

results of successful protests, on one side; regime change, partial reforms, and civil war on the other.

The table below explains each case among three cases of the study

Table 2: Cases: Bahrain, Syria and Tunisia

<b>Bahrain</b>	<b>Syria</b>	<b>Tunisia</b>
Bahraini security forces cracked down on protests. The Revolution did not reach its goal of regime change. It failed.	Mass protests transformed into civil war. The Syrian case is positioned between failed and successful revolution pending the outcome of the civil war, despite the Assad regime advancing toward victory to regain the entire Syrian territory from the armed rebel groups.	Tunisia, a unique success story in the study, but also the only successful one in the Arab Spring that has become a transitional democracy, and it is still performing well in terms of its political institutions.

Compiled by the Researcher 2021

### **Research methodology**

The study used qualitative methods to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations for the Arab Spring and how it spread across the Arab world from North Africa to the Middle East. Moreover, this study used a comparative case method to compare the Arab Spring in different countries with the aim of discovering why mass demonstrations have worked in one country by bringing about total change, but did not have the same result in other countries. This has been assessed by taking into consideration different compelling situations. Furthermore, existing literature on the Middle East and North Africa have also been a source for this study.

### **Significance of the study**

This study seeks to discover the reasons behind social movements in general and the impact of the Arab Spring throughout the Arab world in particular. In order to

thoroughly examine this impact in the Arab nations, I examined three cases: Bahrain, Syria, and Tunisia, as the latter started transitional democracy, although it met some political challenges as a novice in the democratic process. In the summer of 2013, the Tunisian transition seemed on the verge of collapse. However, Tunisia is doing well in terms of inclusive political governance. The disastrous turn of events in Egypt persuaded Ennahda leaders (a political party that aligns itself with the Islamic faith and culture) to make painful compromises to prevent a similar authoritarian reversal in Tunisia. This has included compromises in the text of the constitution, the timing of elections, and the agreement to cede power to a government of “technocrats.” The Egyptian precedent, in other words, convinced Ennahda leaders to “play the long game” (as Egypt’s Morsi had refused to do) and thus keep the democratic experiment moving forward (Bellin 2018).

In contrast, the Syrian protests have resulted in civil war, and the country has faced unprecedented political crises between different factions (Alawites in power and Sunnis as the government’s opposition). Likewise, despite the fact that the Kingdom of Bahrain’s protests were not transformed into civil war, the Shiite majority challenged the ruling family to the extent that the protests would have overthrown the government if the Saudi military had not stepped in, followed by Bahraini security forces moving in to crack down on the demonstrators and clear the Pearl Roundabout and other streets. The MENA’s deep involvement in international power struggles and patronage, because of its endowment with oil and gas resources, and because it is a geographic nucleus of Islamic radicalism and terror, signals that democratization will continue to face international challenge more often than support. Tunisia is relatively rent-poor, unlike Syria and Bahrain (Bahrain having more resources than Syria) Tunisia, being “resource-cursed,”

encounters special challenges in attempting democratization. The experience of the Arab world has important lessons for conceptualizing democratization as well, even if the outcome of the Arab Spring has been far more disappointing than originally hoped.

This study shows, importantly, that the Arab world has failed to endorse previous waves of democracy and that the Arab Spring has contributed, to a small degree, in bringing changes to the region. This *de facto* situation in the Middle East and North Africa, for some scholars, stems from Islamic cultural beliefs and from the influence of power patronage on the region and this continues to encourage some rulers to impose policies that will cause citizens to hate and oppose Western-styled democracy. The study aims to reflect on the lessons/findings that the Bahraini, Syrian, and Tunisian examples offer concerning the possibility of future democratization in the Arab world. The study findings will help provide understanding as to why the Arab Spring protests resulted in only one country, Tunisia, enjoying success; why Syria's protests transformed into civil war; and how Bahrain successfully used a coercive apparatus to silence its Shia community opposition to the al-Khalifa family. Another important element in this study is the examination of how Arab nations have fallen behind other parts of the world when it comes to embracing democratic governance.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter presented a core basis of the research and its study objectives. As explained in this chapter, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

- What are the root's causes of social movements?
- How and why have some protesters in the era of the Arab Spring been able to harness political momentum in changing regimes, while other demonstrators in

the same region, with identical needs, similar cultural beliefs, and in the same period, have failed to do so?

The study of the impact of the Arab Spring throughout the Middle East region investigates how the Arab Spring effect has brought transitional democracy to Tunisia; however, it also examines how the protests in Syria were not able to realize their goals of regime change and why this country ended up descending into civil war. Furthermore, the study explores the factors that led to silencing protesters in Bahrain. The *independent variables* in this study are economic payouts, repression, coercive apparatus, the patronage of great powers, and military defections. The process of transitional democracy that started in Tunisia is a democratic exercise that continues to go well. The *dependent variables* in this study are the successes of social movements and the effectuation of regime change (success story: Tunisia; unsuccessful failures: Syria and Bahrain. The latter has successfully used security and military forces to quell demonstrations, but a part of its citizenry (the Shiite community) is still demanding changes. In the following Chapter Two, I have surveyed and analyzed the literature related to theories of social movements, the patronage of great powers and their respective foreign policies in the MENA region, politics and economics in the region, and the coercive apparatus.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Theory and literature review**

#### **Introduction**

The literature review is organized under broad thematic areas. The first area is the conceptual framework and theories of social movements. The second area examines how the Arab Spring has shaken the Arab world, and how the protesters were able to completely change regimes and topple their rulers from power; this thematic area will deal with countries being able to initiate transitional democracy. The third thematic area is premised on how some Arab countries halted the advancement of protests and promised some economic and political reforms. However, most governments in the Middle East have resisted the protests and responded by offering economic incentives to citizens in order to prevent or stop the spread of revolution as it has represented a major threat to their regimes.

#### **The theories of social movements and their conceptual framework**

I begin with the conceptual framework and theories of social movements that will help test successes and failures of the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa. The Theory of Social Movements: Social movements bring about change, and/ or cause reforms. According to Foweraker (1995, p.2), "Theory is shaped by society and the historical context of each place and region." In other words, "the story of social movement theory can be told only together with the story of social movements themselves" (Garner in Garner & Tenuto 1997:1). For this theory to be applicable, it is assumed that there should be compelling political or socio-economic reasons or other existing problems in a society to push citizens to form (or join existing) societal

movements to start demonstrations against an oppressive regime. The main objective is either total political change or to at least cause some reforms. Social movements sometimes fail to achieve their ultimate goal, which is to transform the society with a total regime change.

Some scholars have used the term “collective action theories” to describe social movements because of the persistent nature of their collective behavior. Social scientists have developed many classic and modern theories; but in this section, the focus is on the following:

Little *et al.* (2013) see resource mobilization theory as the strategic element that is required by social movements to successfully garner support, challenge adversaries and other social movements, and present political arguments to the state. They further explained that “framing theory focuses on the way social movements make appeals to potential supporters by framing or presenting their issues in a way that aligns with commonly held values, beliefs, and commonsense attitudes” (2013, p.p. 657-58). And they also defined “new social movement theory” as “the specific qualities that characterize the Green, feminist, peace, and other post-materialist social movements” (2013, p. 658).

In order to understand the trends of revolutions and how they can succeed in changing “incumbent” political momentum, I pose the following question: why do revolutions succeed in some societies and fail in others, even when they occur in the same time period and for the same reasons? According to Skocpol (1994), the answer is found in one of the following three approaches: Aggregate psychological theories explain revolutions by looking into how and what pushes people to engage themselves in political

violence or what motivates them to join opposition groups. On the other hand, systems/value-consensus theories explain revolutions as aggressive reactions of an ideological movement to instability in a social system. Political conflict theories consider competition for political power between government and opposition groups as something that must be given special attention.

### **Aggregate psychological theories**

Aggregate psychological theories describe why people engage in political violence or join oppositional movements. Systems/value-consensus theories explore ideological movements and the violent reactions that occur as a result of social imbalances. Political conflict theories focus on the political conflicts between government and organized groups vying for power. Schwartz (1972) has noted that aggregate-psychological theorists operate under the assumption that revolutions originate in the human mind (Schwartz 1972 as cited in Skocpol 1994:100). Skocpol (1994) has further argued that the root cause of violent conflict, according to aggregate-psychological theories of revolutions, is discontent. Skocpol supported this premise by examining psychological theories that link violence and aggression to frustration.

Skocpol (1994) has argued that frustration-aggression theorists typically view revolution, normally defined as foundational psychological change achieved through violence, as just one potential form of furtive, violent political action prompted by a *certain frame of mind*. (Gurr 1970, cited in Skocpol 1994:101) has added that revolution includes guerrilla wars, coup d'états, riots, and rebellions. Davies (1962, 1969); Feierabend and Feierabend (1972); the Feierabends and Nesvold (1969, 1973); and Gurr (1968a, 1968b, 1970) have led the approach. Skocpol (1994) has asserted that, in contrast

with frustration-aggression theorists, who view mass discontent as the critical explanation for revolutions, systems/value-consensus theorists cite revolutionary ideology and systemic crises as the crucial factors for revolutions. This perspective has been advocated most prominently by the sociological theorist Talcott Parsons (1951).

### **The systems/value-consensus theory**

The systems/value-consensus theory most notably applies to the definition of political revolution by Chalmers Johnson (1966). Johnson (1966) has defined revolution as “a special kind of social change, one that involves the intrusion of violence into civil social relations” (cited in Skocpol, 1994:105). While both Gurr (1970) and Skocpol (1994) have included violence as an essential factor in their definitions, Johnson (1966, cited in Skocpol, 1994) has not. Instead, Johnson has argued that violence is not an emotional reaction leading to destructive action, but rather a logical strategy meant to effect change through social reconstruction. Skocpol (1994) has further explained that authorities have the option to revise existing standards and institutions (resynchronization); however, they may need to use coercion to stave off successful revolution, typical in non-democratic countries. However, Johnson (1966) has argued that suppressing protests through coercion is not a long-term solution, and that insurrection is sometimes unavoidable. Indeed, Johnson, in the vein of systems/value-consensus theory, has asserted that governments must mollify the citizenry and their value standards to avoid revolution.

### **The political conflict perspective**

Oberschall (1969, 1973); Overholt (1972); Russel (1974); and Tilly (1969, 1975) (the latter as the prolific spokesperson for this perspective) have emphasized the role of

organized group conflict to achieve political goals (Skocpol 1994:108). This counters the views of aggregate-psychological and system/value-consensus theorists who focus on discontent, disorientation, and the relegation of institutions and organizations to intervening factors.

The political conflict perspective emerged as a response to the discontent and societal disintegration explanations of political violence. Tilly (1975) has rebuked Gurr, Davies, Johnson, and Smelser for their failure to recognize political violence as a consequence of pervasive political conflict among organized groups and governments that exert control over resources. Tilly has further placed political conflict as the central focus; it should be analyzed along with the general model of governments and contenders for power. Tilly has likewise argued that a revolution begins when two or more distinct entities make effective claims on a government previously under the jurisdiction of a single sovereign polity.

### **Deprivation or relative deprivation theory (DT/RDT)**

McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald (1988) and Opp (1988) have noted that Deprivation or Relative Deprivation Theory (DT/RDT) refers to social movements which emerge when people or groups in a society believe they have been deprived of certain goods, services, or resources. Deprivation theory can be divided into two distinct branches: absolute deprivation and relative deprivation. The absolute deprivation camp asserts that the affected group's grievances exist in isolation from the position of the group within the society. Conversely, proponents of relative deprivation look at the disadvantageous standing of the group compared to other groups in the society. In other

words, as Anindya and Ömer (2016) have argued, the emergence of a social movement relies on the presence of other factors in addition to deprivation.

### **Resource mobilization theory (RMT)**

Dobson (2001); Foweraker (1995); McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald (1988); and Phongpaichit (1999) have discussed Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT), which highlights the important role of resources in social movement development. These resources are essential in the success of social movements. RMT thus posits that when certain groups or people in a society have grievances, they may be successful in mitigating those grievances by harnessing necessary resources, such as money, labor, social status, knowledge, and support from media and political elites. While RMT offers compelling arguments as to why some grievances may lead to successful social movements, the theory has been criticized for its emphasis on material resources. It should be noted that some social movements have emerged despite the scarcity of material resources.

### **Political process theory (PPT)**

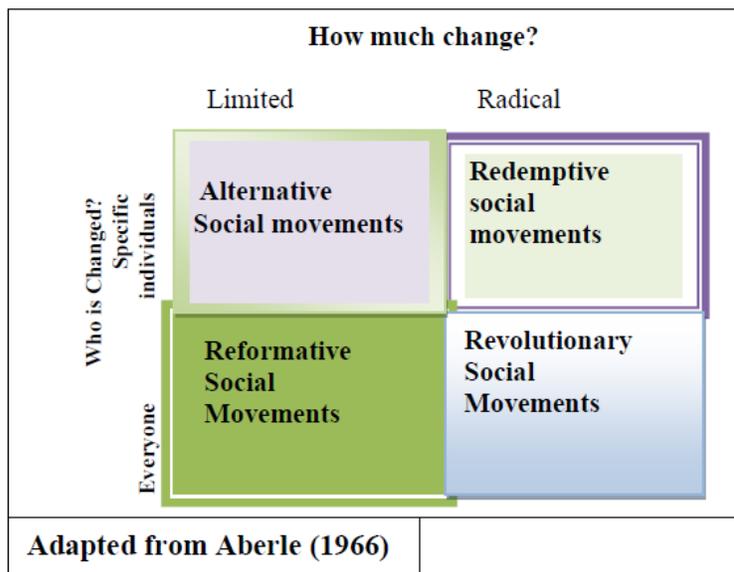
Tilly (1978); Foweraker (1995); Phongpaichit (1999) and Dobson (2001) have explained that Political Process Theory (PPT) views social movements within the context of political opportunities. In other words, PPT examines social movements in comparison to the power of the state. If the government in charge has a firm grasp on power and uses this power to suppress, there is a high probability that a social movement will be unsuccessful. However, if the government is weak or more tolerant of dissent, then there is a greater chance for the social movement to succeed.

## The structural strain theory

Smelser (1965) has proposed the structural strain theory, which argues that emerging social movements need six factors to flourish: a problem people in a society are experiencing (deprivation); recognition of the problem by people in the society; identification of an emerging, influential ideology claiming to provide a solution to the problem; a critical event or series of events that transform the ideology into a bona fide social movement; “the society and its government are receptive to change; resources are mobilized as the movement continues to evolve” (cited in Anindya and Ömer 2016, p.128).

The following figure 2 illustrates the prototypes that help understand how social movements on different stages differ from outcomes and reform and revolutionary movements which fall under this study will be discussed below.

Figure 2: Aberle’s Four Types of Social Movements



Social movements can occur on the local, national, or even global stage. Are there other prototypes or categorization that can help to understand them? Sociologist Aberle (1966) has addressed this question by categorizing social movements according to the specific changes and the degree of changes desired. Little *et. al.* (2013) has asserted that reform movements are attempts to reshape aspects of society while stopping short of completely transforming society. Reform movements occur only in democratic societies where people are free to exercise their rights including that of criticizing institutions. Revolutionary movements attempt to replace social/political systems by deposing existing systems. While reform movements seek to correct deficiencies in existing social systems, revolutionary movements attempt to eradicate the systems themselves and to create new ones. When reform movements are thwarted, revolutionary movements thrive, as they represent the only alternative available. The Arab uprisings that spread across the Arab nations have caused the outcome of regime change in Tunisia; but failed to do so in other Arab countries such as Bahrain and Syria. The below section explains how the Arab Spring erupted in Tunisia and spread across North Africa and the Middle East region.

### **The Arab Spring as an action of social movements**

Most Middle Eastern countries exercise authoritarian regime systems. Soon after demonstrations began in Tunisia, they spread across the northern African region and in many Middle Eastern countries. This is the case of the so-called Arab Spring, which overwhelmed the region and surprised the world with the aim of creating winds of change.

Unexpectedly, the Arab Spring erupted in late 2010 and early 2011. It was characterized in the beginning by huge and largely peaceful popular protests in a number

of Arab countries against long-standing entrenched regimes. According to Haas and Lesch (2017, p.1) “Arab Spring began in Tunisia, where an ordinary Tunisian fruit vendor in abject anger set himself on fire and his action was borne of frustration and disillusionment over the socioeconomic malaise and political repression in his country.” In the end, the researchers agreed on the economic issues and political turmoil that brought Tunisians to the street to change their social and political order.

Haas and Lesch (2017, p.3) have observed that “youth bulges, general frustration with the status quo, and socioeconomic difficulties caused by the 2008 global financial crisis played a critical role in the proliferation of protests throughout the Arab world”. Herve *et al.* (2014) noted that some protesters have enjoyed more success than others. In Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen, protesters managed to overthrow governments or expel current rulers. Only with the assistance of massive foreign military aid were Libyan rebels also successful. Demonstrations in Bahrain and Syria have not led to successful outcomes for protesters, and protest movements in Saudi Arabia have had almost no meaningful traction. While early successes of the Arab Spring became inspirations for people to hold demonstrations in other countries, negative outcomes, particularly in Libya and Syria, dissuaded people from mobilizing in other states. Nevertheless, the government of President Blaise Compaoré of Burkina Faso was overthrown by youth protesters, reminiscent of the Arab Spring model. Otherwise, Sub-Saharan African countries experienced minimal influences from the Arab Spring movement.

Clement and Jang (2012) have reported that the overwhelming majority of Arab countries escaped mass protests, with Algeria, Morocco, Lebanon, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Oman, UAE, and Palestine experiencing sporadic protests. None of these

countries experienced the widespread, mobilized, regime-threatening protests like those in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Yemen, and Syria. Haas and Lesch (2017) have explained that when a country's military is composed of minorities with ethnic, religious, or kinship bonds (as with the Assad government and military in Syria, dominated by the minority *Alawite* sect; likewise, many Saudi military personnel are members of the royal family), it is far more likely that the military will remain loyal to the regime and even fire on fellow citizens engaging in political protests. In fact, this occurred in Syria. Haas and Lesch (2017) also noted that the events of the Arab Spring have proved that the "tyranny-anarchy loop," a term coined by political scientists, is accurate. The "tyranny-anarchy loop" describes the fluctuation between tyranny and anarchy in many societies. Societies often find it difficult to establish stable democracies and exit the cycle.

Bayat (2017) has asserted that the Arab uprisings led to more discouraging outcomes than other revolutions, causing many to question the decisions to foment these uprisings in the first place. For example, Syria descended into civil war, and the revolution in Bahrain was thwarted by Saudi military intervention. Furthermore, civil war broke out in Yemen, with Houthi rebels and deposed President Ali Saleh confronting the central government backed by the Saudi regime. Post-Qaddafi Libya witnessed civil unrest between the dawn militias and an elected government. The military ouster of Morsi in Egypt in July 2013 led to a restoration of the counterrevolution. A common question is, "why did the Arab revolutions face such an unfortunate destiny?" Most commentators have highlighted counterrevolutionary plots (both domestic and regional), conservative coups, deep state manipulation and control, and foreign states (great powers) meddling in the Arab world's internal affairs.

Why has this occurred in the Middle East and North Africa? Bayat (2017) has argued that both oil and the state of Israel have shaped the “geostrategic exceptionalism” of the region, causing geopolitical competition. Foreign actors pursuing geopolitical and economic interests have interfered, as in the case of NATO forces in Libya crushing Qaddafi’s regime and developing close ties with the post-Gaddafi government. In Syria, Russia, Iran, and the Lebanese Hezbollah gave unconditional support to Assad’s regime; while the United States, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia maintained consistent support for the Syrian rebels both financially and militarily. Qatar was a supporter of the Islamist groups in Libya and Egypt in addition to ISIS, while UAE was against them. Geopolitical competition between regional powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia, led to the downfall of the Yemeni revolution, as Saudi Arabia deployed its military to fight Houthi rebels backed by Iran.

### **The Middle East and North Africa region in the aftermath of World War I**

In David Fromkin’s book, entitled *A Peace to End All Peace*, the author discussed the notion that the present-day Middle East cannot be understood without an appreciation of its formation in the aftermath of World War I. He stated that by 1922, European powers had divided the former Ottoman Empire into states and puppet regimes, drawing boundaries and imposing rulers, while ignoring the wishes of those who actually lived there (Fromkin 1989). It was the nature of this division process that led to the creation of states-without-nations in the Middle East. The newly-drawn boundaries cut across religious, social, and ethnic lines. The presence of such antagonistic and conflicting groups in these drawn-up states posed a huge threat to the subsequent process of nation-building. Such divergent groups are fighting each other in Syria, with ongoing political

crises in various parts of the region, including Bahrain. Tunisia has escaped the upheavals for reasons that will be explained later in this chapter.

Paraschos (2017, p. 17) regarded the Middle East as a “shatter belt,” a name, in geopolitical terminology, that is given to a region that is highly fractured and predisposed to conflict. Shatter belts are “instability generators” that can spread insecurity into surrounding regions and interrupt the flow of international trade and commerce. Furthermore, shatter belts are geopolitical realms where Great Powers vie for advantage through client states and proxy forces or seek to maintain stability by intervening against aggressive regional powers”. The modern Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is a quintessential shatter belt. Twelve years ago, the MENA region was relatively stable compared to today. Most regional countries were ruled by long-lived autocratic regimes that had imposed a frangible form of domestic stability, and the primary regional conflicts of concern were in Iraq and Israel. In striking contrast, the MENA region today is considerably more volatile: Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen continue to be embroiled in violent conflict, producing a degree of insecurity that is unprecedented in the region’s modern history and revolutionary in its implications for regional and international order. Each of these fractured states creates instability far beyond its own borders, and it remains to be seen whether any of them can ever be stabilized within their current internationally recognized borders.

The Arab Spring not only caused the ouster of longtime autocratic rulers in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen, but it also sparked region-shaking conflicts in Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Significant repercussions of the Arab Spring include the Islamic State’s invasion of Iraq in mid-2014 and later in Syria and the outbreak of civil war in

Yemen in 2015. Depending on the estimate, well over 300,000 people have been killed in Syria's civil war, with approximately 4.8 million refugees fleeing to neighboring countries<sup>2</sup>. About 6.6 million people remain internally displaced inside of Syria. "A conflict that started as a Sunni Arab uprising against the minority *Alawite*-dominated Assad's regime, became, over time, a complex, interconnected set of sub-conflicts" (Paraschos 2017, p. 17). "The rapid spread of conflict throughout the MENA region since 2011 allowed al-Qaeda and the Islamic State to grow much stronger, and their competition for leadership of the global jihad movement has caused the jihadist threat to rapidly grow and evolve" (Paraschos 2017, p. 18).

### **Great Powers Patronage and their respective influences toward the Middle East and North Africa**

Foreign policy coalesces the international goals of a state and the strategies for harnessing national capabilities to realize those goals. The primary objectives of states are interrelated and can be regarded as a hierarchical structure of instrumental goals; the most important foreign policy objective of any state is to ensure survival, which is defined in "terms of some combination of territorial integrity and autonomy" (Levy 2004, p.32 cited in Prifti 2017, p.11). For example, "the survival of the USA as a free and independent nation is ranked number one in all of its official national security strategies" (Rourke and Boyer 2010, p.141) cited in (Prifti 2017). "The most important of its secondary objectives is to prevent the emergence of another dominant power that would challenge the status quo of the international community" (Levy 2004, p.32 cited in Prifti

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<sup>2</sup> Geopolitical Risk in the Middle East & North Africa: Shatter Belts & Great Power Rivalry, *Japan SPOTLIGHT*, March / April 2017.

2017). The United States has been the undisputed external military power in the region; Russia's geopolitical influence has remained at a post-Soviet nadir; and China has only begun to develop significant economic and commercial interests in the area. Although European and Asian powers, including the United Kingdom, France, India, Japan, South Korea, and others have played important roles in regional affairs, the real competitors in the MENA shatterbelt are the United States, Russia, and China, all of which exert an outsized effect on the region. The regional wave of Arab Spring protests at the end of 2010 and in early 2011 deeply fragmented the regional geopolitical order in fundamental and ostensibly irrevocable ways (Paraschos 2017).

### **Structural realism**

Derived from Waltz's structural realism, structural realist theorists can be categorized into two competing camps with competing assumptions and policy measures: *offensive realism* and *defensive realism* (Lobell 2017, p. 2). For offensive realists security is in short supply. The anarchic essence of the international system pressures states to maximize their share of world power and to pursue superiority, not equality, in order to safeguard their own security and increase their chances for survival (Gilpin, 1981; Liberman, 1996; Schweller 1996; Labs 1997; Zakaria 1998; Mearsheimer 2001; Elman 2004). The end goal of every major power is to become the dominant superpower, the hegemon. The reasoning is that the more powerful the state, the less chance it will become a target, since weaker powers will be deterred from challenging it. Defensive realists argue that the international system empowers states to seek moderation and restraint to assure their survival and safety, providing incentives for expansion in only a few specific cases. The rationale is that aggression, competition, and expansion to

maximize power through superiority and dominance are ineffective, serving only to induce security dilemmas and counterbalancing behaviors, ultimately derailing the state's efforts to increase its security (Lobell 2017). Defensive or positional realists (Joseph Grieco coined the term “defensive positionalists” in *Cooperation Among Nations*) endorse the idea that security is plentiful. Major powers seek to maximize their security by maintaining the existing balance of power through mostly defensive strategies (Jervis 1978; Waltz 1979; Posen 1984; Walt 1987; Grieco 1990; Snyder 1991; Glaser 1994/5; Layne 1997; Van Evera 1999).

### **Offensive realism and maximizing power**

Classical realists (such as Thucydides, E.H. Carr, Arnold Wolfers, and Hans Morgenthau) and offensive realists share the assumption that states strive to maximize power – that states relentlessly pursue power and influence. Specifically, classical realists have asserted that “nations expand their political interests abroad when their relative power increases” (Zakaria 1998, p.19). Thucydides’ assertion in “The Melian Dialogue” is that “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.” Morgenthau and other classical realists have argued that the cause of conflict, aggression, expansion, and wars can be attributed to the human lust for power, and that, therefore, states are hardwired to act with aggression toward one another. The result is never-ending conflict among states because of the natural human drive to dominate others ( Lobell 2017).

### **Is International trade conditioned to the stability of the Middle Eastern region?**

The confluence of Western nations and Middle Eastern stability equates to stable international trade. The MENA region is an insignificant producer of manufactured goods. Nevertheless, it plays a singularly significant role in global energy production and

maritime transportation. The region holds 872.1 billion barrels in crude oil reserves, or 52.5% of the global total. In 2016, MENA crude oil production averaged 27.6 million barrels per day, accounting for 30.1% of total world oil production. The region also holds 3,096.5 trillion cubic feet of natural gas reserves, or 44.6% of the global total. Additionally, the MENA region encompasses three well-known maritime “chokepoints”: the Suez Canal, which connects the Mediterranean and Red Seas, the *Bab al-Mandab*, which connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden, and the Strait of Hormuz, which connects the energy-laden Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. The maritime transportation of crude oil through these chokepoints accounts for about 45% of total global maritime oil trade. “Maintaining the free flow of energy and commerce through these chokepoints is vital to the continuous flow of international trade, and the presence of US, European, and Asian naval forces has continued to play a crucial role in averting piracy and other land-based threats to international shipping” (Paraschos 2017, p. 18).

Instability in the MENA region has directly affected European nations, who now host over one million refugees, mostly from war-torn MENA countries, with a vast number of refugees from Syria. The MENA shatterbelt will face consequences resulting from a resurgent Russia, an increasingly nationalistic U.S., sluggish economic growth, and high levels of debt. These factors will hamper any possible future democratic development in the region. The Gulf Arab monarchies, including Bahrain, have withstood the wave of mass anti-regime demonstrations by cracking down on voices of dissent and increasing socioeconomic spending to placate domestic sources of resentment. However, consistently low oil prices since 2014 have caused the monarchies to introduce significant

austerity measures, including the reduction of energy subsidies. At the same time, the Gulf Arab states have been spending more on national defense in response to Iran's growing military strength and regional presence (Paraschos 2017).

### **External influences in the Middle East and North Africa region.**

During the Obama era, the U.S. significantly reduced its military presence in the MENA region, primarily by withdrawing all of its combat forces from Iraq in 2011. However, the U.S. did continue to maintain the largest military presence of any great power in the region, including ground and air combat forces based in Gulf Arab countries and at sea in regional waters, along with a growing missile defense architecture stretching from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf. The U.S. also maintained close military relations with Egypt, Israel, Jordan, and Turkey despite considerable tension in bilateral relations with each of these countries. In retrospect, the general U.S. approach during the Obama era was to avoid any major "Iraq style" military intervention in the region, coupled with the reaffirmation of traditional U.S. interests. For example, in September 2013, Obama announced that the U.S. would employ "all elements" of its power, including military force, to secure "core interests in the region." These core interests included protecting regional allies from external aggression, ensuring the "free flow of energy from the region to the world," combating "terrorist networks" that threatened Americans, and preventing the regional proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Under the Obama administration, U.S. military involvement in regional conflicts continued, but on a much smaller scale. The U.S. also continued to be the largest exporter of arms to the Middle East, with approved sales totaling \$33 billion since May 2015, (Paraschos 2017). The evolving paradigm of global competition and

cooperation among the U.S., Russia, and China will have major implications for regional order and stability well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The purported shift in U.S. foreign policy under Obama since 2009 has been heavily debated. After two terms of expansive U.S. foreign policy under George W. Bush, informed by the theory that the United States needed to project force overseas unilaterally in defense of its own and its allies' national interests, Obama's approach to foreign and security policy at first seemed to be non-interventionist, the administration's attention being directed more towards domestic matters. (Lindsay 2011). After two expensive and devastating wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, with US taxpayers and service personnel principally carrying the burden, Obama was unyielding in his belief that in times of austerity and globalization, military action must be limited to the defense of vital U.S. interests while being carried out by a leaner, more flexible military force acting multilaterally in cooperation with local allies, rather than unilaterally (Gerges, Fawaz, A. 2013). U.S. foreign policy objectives had not necessarily changed, but rather the means chosen to achieve them (Manyin *et al.*, 2012). According to Fareed Zackaria<sup>3</sup> (2012) the question was not whether Obama had been a good foreign policy president, but whether he had been a great one. In the decades after the Vietnam War, Republicans frequently warned of global dangers, often harshly criticizing their Democratic adversaries for being gutless appeasers. During the Obama years, however, Republicans infrequently leveled narrow attacks on the president's handling of American foreign policy.

Obama's primary strategic approach to foreign and security policy was guided by the precept of "multilateral retrenchment," a principle "designed to curtail the United

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<sup>3</sup> The strategist', Time, 30 Jan.2012

States' overseas commitments, restore its standing in the world, and shift burdens onto global partners" (Drezner 2004, p.59). Thus, the Obama administration had primarily attempted to maintain its foreign posture without solely relying on military power or presence. And while it accentuated the need for "soft power" engagement with its allies, partners and adversaries, that posture did not equate to completely closing off the option of military action. (Turse 2012).

On the other hand, some would argue that Obama showed considerable willingness to use military force to protect vital national interests against geographically and legally amorphous threats<sup>4</sup>, which were often ill-defined. However, given the complexity of the operating environment and domestic limitations, the use of force employed by the Obama administration was different. The Obama Doctrine was a product of the shifts in the geostrategic environment examined above. There has been a realization in Washington that the United States, though still a Great Power, is not omnipotent, as a variety of different actors actively have attempted to subvert the statist foundation of the international system.

President Donald Trump inherited this geostrategic dossier, and his first regional steps sought to restore relations with longtime allies that had become severely strained during the Obama era, with Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia at the top of the list. Trump also endeavored to shift U.S. policy in a more activist direction: his chief goal was to defeat the Islamic State and other "radical Islamic terror groups," possibly in cooperation with Russia. The U.S. is no longer the sole external military power in the MENA region

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<sup>4</sup> The White House, *National Security Strategy* (Washington DC, 2010).

because of the recent growth of Russian and Chinese military activity, but it is capable of mobilizing enormous military strength in the area with relatively short notice. (Paraschos 2017).

According to Collins and Rothe (2014), U.S. foreign policy in the region has remained consistent following the ouster of President Morsi. In fact, the Obama Administration did not characterize the ouster of Morsi by Egyptian military forces in 2013 as a coup, but rather as a response to the demands of Egyptian citizens. However, this was considered a violation of U.S. law which prohibits providing aid to countries where an elected leader has been forcibly removed from power through a military coup. And the unchanged U.S. foreign policy position in the region was due to its interest in protecting Israel. Regarding U.S. relations with Egypt, political and diplomatic ties were not significantly affected because of the new government. U.S. foreign policy gained strength in the successive Egyptian regimes from Sadat to the incumbent Abdel Fatah El Sisi. The United States' interest in the Middle East and North Africa has relied on dependent collaborators such as Egypt, and U.S. military assistance is a tool to ensure continuity. Friendly authoritarian regimes are of paramount preference over a democratically-elected leader who would be unlikely to support U.S. interests.

Another fact is that the “American pursuit of regional security over democracy dated back to longstanding interests in a US-led security frameworks and cordial ties with Arab energy exporters,.” The protesters of 2010-2012 have faced strong coercive elements, often with support from abroad that seems determined to preserve authoritarianism in these modern times (Brownlee *et al.* 2015, p.42).

While discussing the main impetus of American foreign policy, Prifti (2017) has asserted that the U.S. seeks to prevent any other great power from becoming a potential regional hegemon, since such an occurrence could eventually pose a threat to the United States. Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan have been cited as the main examples of U.S. insecurity. “The problem with this line of argument, however, is that it justifies American intervention in states on the basis of pre-emption. The U.S. dominance over the flow of oil in the Middle East and the safeguarding of its alliance with Israel are secondary U.S. foreign policy objectives in the Middle East” (Prifti 2017, pp. 14, 15).

In discussing the future prospects of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, the author has claimed that it is likely to remain unchanged, based on the theory of offensive realism, unless there is a change, in terms of influence, in the territory as the maritime power or regional hegemon status of the United States (Prifti 2017p. 188).

This may appear persuasive if one subscribes to the arguments grounded in offensive realism; however, current political developments in the form of the emerging trilateral alliance of Russia, Turkey, and Iran seem to pose a challenge to the continuation of the American policy to pursue offshore balance in the Middle East. Similarly, the increasing role of China is another factor that has been overlooked in this context. Some scholars, based on new political trends, have claimed that the role of China as a challenger to U.S. power is likely to increase, which appears true if one examines the country’s economic growth and military strength. Nevertheless, others have determined that China still lags far behind to challenge the U.S. through military might when comparing both countries’ military spending. In 2019, the Chinese government reported

an official defense budget of just under \$178 billion<sup>5</sup>, while the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI 2019) estimated the actual (nominal) spending to have been \$261 billion. In 2018, IISS<sup>6</sup> estimated Chinese defense spending to be \$225 billion, while SIPRI put the number at nearly \$254 billion. The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS, 2019) provides estimates that are typically lower than those of SIPRI<sup>7</sup>. The official budget that year was just \$167 billion. Foreign estimates of Chinese military spending have suggested that actual spending may be much higher. Although China spends little on military development compared to U.S. military spending, some scholars such as Prifti (2017) have argued that China is advancing not only economically but also militarily; this approach further contends that China is better placed to compete with the United States than Russia, which appears to be facing economic problems. China's growing military strength and its implications for the U.S. is often not discussed by American authors. For example, Joseph Nye expresses reservations about the rising power of China (Prifti 2017, p.198).

As for China, it has begun to secure a naval foothold equal to its substantial and growing maritime and commercial interests in the region. Since the mid-1990s, China has steadily acquired major economic and energy interests in the Middle East. China has invested sizeable amounts in the development of Iranian and Iraqi oil fields, long since eclipsing the U.S. as the major importer of crude oil from the region. China has likewise been involved in the construction, financing, and operation of the Mediterranean ports in Egypt, Israel, Jordan, and Turkey, as well as in Eritrea and Djibouti on the Red Sea.

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<sup>5</sup> China does withhold data and it is sometimes hard to get into accurate stats of China's government

<sup>6</sup> IISS, International Institute for Strategic Studies

<sup>7</sup> SIPRI, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, <https://www.sipri.org>

China is investing enormous sums in Egypt: \$45 billion in the Suez Canal Economic Zone and another \$15 billion in Egyptian electricity, transportation, and infrastructure projects. These investments are vital to China's continued development of a "maritime Silk Road," which flanks the southern edge of Eurasia into the Mediterranean Sea to ensure access to Europe's vast market. At the same time, China continues to develop "blue water" naval capabilities and construct a series of bases needed to project military power along the entire length of its maritime Silk Road (Paraschos 2017).

In historical terms, however, China's military presence is new to the MENA region. China's first naval visit to the Mediterranean occurred in 2009, and in 2010, China's navy conducted its first visit to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. In 2011 and again in 2014, the Chinese military evacuated Chinese nationals from war-torn Libya. In April 2015, China's navy evacuated foreign nationals from Yemen, the first time it has ever rescued non-Chinese nationals from the dangers of a mounting regional conflict. That same year, China conducted joint naval exercises with Russia in the Mediterranean Sea, gaining further experience in conducting long-range naval operations. In 2016, China began construction of a naval base in the East African country of Djibouti, which also hosts the largest US military base in Africa. Over this same period, China avoided taking on any major military role in regional conflicts; Beijing has adhered to a relatively low-key diplomatic stance regarding conflicts in Syria and other countries in the region. For now, China is content to allow Russia, the US, and other countries deal with these conflicts while it focuses on the steady expansion of its commercial and naval influence and establishes stronger relations with regional states, including key U.S. allies (Paraschos 2017).

As China systematically expands its power and influence, the slow and steady pace may not bear fruit if dwindling economic growth compels Beijing to choose between domestic considerations and long-range foreign policy goals. At times, these interests may overlap, and cooperation aimed at restoring regional stability could occur. However, at the end of the Obama era, according to Paraschos (2017, p.20), the region was at a dangerously extant risk of being divided into opposing spheres of U.S. and Russian influence. As of early 2017, it was unclear if this emergent phenomenon would harden into a protracted stalemate similar to the Cold War.

### **Russia and China as the US major challenger at international level**

According to Hancock and Lobell (2010, pp. 146-147), offensive realists assert that “China and Russia, like other great powers throughout history, have primarily revisionist intentions; at a minimum, the political leaders of other states should assume that they harbor these intentions in order to protect their own security”. On the other hand, defensive realists argue that China and Russia are principally driven by security-seeking behavior. For offensive realists, major or emerging powers are rarely satisfied with the current distribution of power. The rationale is that states, including China and Russia, can never be certain of the intentions of other states. Specifically, it is difficult for a state to ascertain how much power it must have compared to its rivals in order to maintain its security, and it is difficult to ascertain how much power will be enough power in the future. Even in the absence of a specific or imminent threat, offensive realists contend, states will maximize power and influence because of the uncertainty of when or where the next threat might emerge. Uncertainty about intentions and concerns about miscalculation mean that states always prepare for the worst-case scenario when

assessing another power. States therefore always appraise each other with fear, mistrust, and suspicion; moreover, all states regard one another in the same manner. The result is a constant security competition, even among states that have no reason to compete, hence the title of Mearsheimer's book, *"The Tragedy of Great Power Politics"* (Lobell & Hancock 2010, p. 147). And the United States and Russia's influences as external actors have been also discussed in the cases of Bahrain and Syria.

### **Israeli politics toward its neighboring Middle Eastern countries and its response to the Arab Spring**

According to Eldar (2012) in a survey conducted on the tenth anniversary of Prime Minister Rabin's assassination in 2005, Israeli Jews were asked to assess whether the decision to engage in the Oslo process had been the correct one. While 62 percent of the secular respondents answered affirmatively, the answer given by religious and ultra-Orthodox respondents was the complete opposite; among those respondents, representing a growing segment of Israeli society, more than 70 percent said it had been the wrong decision. Placing "greater Israel" at the top of the value system meant that democracy and demography were undermined among the wider public, to the extent that they believed the executive branch and the Knesset did not have a mandate to make decisions on territorial withdrawals. This is reflected in a statement by Benny Katzover, former chairman of the Shomron settlers' regional council and a settler leader: "The main role of Israeli democracy now is to disappear. Israeli democracy has finished its role, and it must disassemble and give way to Judaism" (Elder 2012, p.11). Eldar reflected the views of Gabriel Sheffer, a prominent expert on the study of regime and societal relations in Israel. He observed the lack of separation between religion and state in Israel as the key factor in

understanding the country's recent history. In a 2005 article, he stressed that the historical failure to separate ethnic-national identity and religious belief has been the primary cause of events in Jewish society and in the relationship between Israelis, Arabs, and Palestinians. He explained that this issue has distorted Israeli democracy. More recently, he characterized Israel as a Jewish national-religious state that naturally excludes many citizen groups from any serious influence on public policy (Eldar 2012). To exercise control over the land without giving up its Jewish identity, Israel has embraced various policies of "separation." It has separate legal systems for traditional Israeli territory and for the territory it occupies; it divides those who reside in occupied lands based on ethnic identity; it has retained control over occupied lands but has evaded responsibility for the people living there; and it has created a conceptual distinction between its democratic principles and its actual practices in the occupied territories. These separations have permitted Israel to maintain the occupation for almost five and a half decades while maintaining its identity and international status (Eldar 2012).

In polling, the Israeli public about what ought to be done in view of the Arab Spring, Peace Index (2011), as cited in Haas and Lesch (2017, p. 231) reported that "the vast majority of Israeli Jews 70.2 percent agreed with the claim that Israel should remain passive "at this stage" while only 40 percent of Israeli Arabs agreed with this position". Haas and Lesch went on to assert that there was no concerted effort by the Israeli government to convince the public to see any positive aspect of the Arab Spring. The scholars further explained that the Netanyahu government's passive position demonstrated that the possibility of democracy had been ignored in favor of an exclusive emphasis on the dangers of instability and Islamism. Netanyahu's stance justified and

legitimized his do-nothing approach with regard to the Palestinian conflict and the push for a Palestinian settlement as a way to promote stability (Haas and Lesch 2017).

### **The concept of waves of democratization**

The concept of waves of democracy, or democratization, is meant to describe the initiation of transitional democracy in which certain countries transition from authoritarian to democratic regimes for a limited period of time. Some countries may begin together in one wave of democracy, and a few countries may continue and attain a certain level of democracy; by contrast, other countries in the same wave of democracy may revert to non-democratic or authoritarian regimes. Even though the study of Bahrain, Syria, and Tunisia may yield modest insights into the scope of conditions that govern a number of countries in the Middle East and North Africa region, this chapter highlights the distinctive lessons of the Arab region's experimentation with democratization (based on these three cases), and the study in general explains some implications for further democratization in the Arab world.

Among the distinctive lessons learned by the Arab region's experimentation with democratization, according to Bellin (2018, p.167), "three are specifically noteworthy. First, the experience of Tunisia and other Arab Spring outcomes confirms the need to reimagine the idea of what constitutes "fatal polarization" for democracy. According to Bellin (2018, p.p. 471-472) Sartori conceived of polarization as "the ideological distance that separates key political actors. It is seen as harmful to democracy because it undermines the possibilities of negotiation and compromise, makes political competition appear "zero-sum, and threatens to inflict permanent losses on key political actors who then become irrevocably dissatisfied with democracy". In contrast to Sartori, however,

Latin Americanists such as Mainwaring, Perez-Linan (2013) as cited in Bellin (2018, p. 471), and others have redefined the concept of polarization, arguing that “it is not so much the ideological divide between political actors that is problematic for democracy as it is the matter of “intransigence and urgency”. If ideologically conflicting political actors are willing to embrace longer time horizons to achieve their policy objectives, then democracy-saving compromise can be realized. In Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s, when the primary ideological divide centered mostly on distributional issues, the survival of democracy depended on the willingness (especially by the left) to take the long view— postponing some of its redistributive objectives to assuage the worst fears of the business community and its military allies, Bellin (2018).

By contrast, Bellin (2018) went on to say, in the Arab world today, the most intense ideological divide is cultural: Islamist versus non-Islamist. However, here as well, the level of ideological distance between key parties need not portend democratic failure if political actors are willing to embrace longer time horizons. In Tunisia, the ideological divide between the Islamist and non-Islamist camps was to a great extent much more severe than it is in Syria. Ingrained in the French tradition of *la laïcité*, the non-Islamist camp in Tunisia was much more hostile to the official endorsement of religion. Furthermore, in Tunisia, the amenability of the Islamist leadership to “take the long view” and more slowly pursue its policy agenda made the Islamist position less threatening to its opponents and allowed the transition process to continue progressing. In Bahrain, the issue is that the minority Sunni Muslims led by the Al-Khalifa ruling family fear the emergence of the Shiite community as the majority in the country. The monarchical regime endeavors to exclude them from any influential positions, and Shia

leaders face unprecedented discrimination. Second, the events in Tunisia, Bahrain, and Syria (as well as the Arab Spring in general) signal the consequences for democratization created by changes in the international community: the end of unipolarity and the erosion of liberal dominance. As Plattner has pointed out, much of the third and fourth waves of democracy occurred during a unique period when the overwhelming dominance of the United States and its democratic allies created an international environment amenable to prodemocracy campaigns. Now, however, well into the twenty-first century, increasingly insistent nondemocracies, some of them major world powers (such as Russia and China) and some of them regional power players (such as Iran and Saudi Arabia), regularly oppose democratization in neighboring or “client” countries. This has proven true in Egypt, as well as in Syria, Bahrain, and beyond (Bellin (2018). The impact of this international factor, in addition to the long-standing willingness of major powers to subsidize authoritarian regimes in the Arab world to combat terrorism and contain Islamic radicalism, underscores the important international challenges to a “fifth wave.” Third, Bellin (2018) continued to explain, the Arab region’s experimentation with democratization (and its abrupt suspension) once again illustrates that, for most people, democracy is prioritized far below economic and physical security. This is by no means limited to the Arab world, but the compromise between security and freedom is viewed as especially striking in the Arab world today. Engulfed in the turmoil of failed states, the violent radicalism of competing religious movements, and the general plight of economic and personal insecurity, most citizens (both the elite and the common classes) in the region, exhibit little enthusiasm for democracy. In war-torn countries such as Syria and Libya, democracy seems to be a fanciful goal. But even in somewhat stable authoritarian

countries (Morocco, Jordan, Egypt, Algeria, Saudi Arabia), the liberal-leaning have been taken aback by the threat of neighboring chaos and persuaded by their governments' self-congratulatory promotion of stability and order. The current lack of commitment to the democratization, especially among the elite, is the single most important hurdle to democratic progress in the Middle East today. The region's history illustrates once again that order trumps freedom. In sum, what are the implications of the Tunisian, Bahraini, and Syrian examples for the rest of the Middle East and North Africa in terms of the possibilities for democratization?

To some extent, it is difficult to generalize these cases. Tunisia, Bahrain, and Syria are vastly different in terms of ethnic homogeneity, even though they share Islamic culture. Moreover, Tunisia, Bahrain, and Syria are underdeveloped countries. However, these cases suggest two generalizable lessons for the region, two of which are pessimistic (Bahrain and Syria) and one of which is optimistic (Tunisia). The pessimistic lesson has already been discussed: the region's deep entanglement in international power struggles and patronage, because of its substantial oil and gas resources and geographic location as the epicenter of Islamic radicalism and terror, signifies that democratization will continue to face international challenge more often than garner international support. Despite this recent attention to international variables, few scholars uphold the preeminence of international factors over domestic ones in propelling democratization. The general consensus, as comparativists argue, continues to be that democracy must be largely homegrown to survive (Bellin 2018).

## **Democracy, political and economic incentives in the Middle East and North Africa**

By the mid-1990s, a new “family of hypotheses,” emphasizing international factors, had emerged in the study of democratization. Conquest, sanctions, conditionality, persuasion, and modeling across international boundaries all attracted the attention of scholars. The “neighborhood effect” of the spread of democracy in Latin America; the fall of authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe (triggered by the end of Soviet backing); the shift to democracy in Panama, Grenada, and Haiti (under the threat of American occupation); the tentative support for democracy by sub-Saharan countries (prodded by debt crises and conditional international assistance) all pointed to the importance of international (independent) variables in democratization. One of the most sophisticated contributions to this new trend has been advanced by Levitsky and Way. They have argued that much of the international pressure for democracy is mediated through two channels: linkage and leverage. Linkage refers to “the density of ties (economic, political, diplomatic, social, and organizational) and cross border flows (of trade, investment, people, and communication)” that exist between a given country and Western democracies. Leverage refers to the degree to which the government of a given country is “vulnerable to external democratizing pressure” (for example, through aid dependency, insignificance as a security ally, etc.). Levitsky and Way further argued that where Western linkage and leverage are low, as in many countries in the Middle East, the former Soviet Union, and most if not all Sub-Saharan Africa; the effectiveness of international pressure to democratize is weak. By contrast, where Western linkage and leverage are high, the reverse is true (Levitsky and Way 2006).

## **Democratic institutions and other key elements of democracy**

According to Little *et al.* (2013, p. 534), democratic institutions (parliament, elections, rule of law, constitutions), citizenship (individual rights and freedoms within a political community), and the public sphere (spaces for public debate) are the three key elements of a democracy. These three elements ensure democratic rule by the people.

Habermas (1998) has emphasized that the formation of direct and representative democracies requires a deliberative process. General consensus among people emerges in public exchanges. Habermas (1990) has further argued that the ideal speech situation is the underlying *norm* of the democratic process. An ideal speech situation allows for everyone to equally contribute to public discourse, question claims, and present ideas. No one is restricted arbitrarily from participating, and no one is impeded from participating because of socioeconomic status, level of education, or other practical restrictions.

Representative democracies support the establishment of democratic will via political parties competing in elections. Kitschelt (1995) has identified two factors that embody democratic party systems: (1) “political demand refers to the underlying societal factors and social changes that create constituencies of people with common interests. For example, changes in the types of jobs generated by the economy will affect the size of electoral support for labor unions and labor union politics. (2) Political supply refers to the strategies and organizational capacities of political parties to deliver an appealing political program to particular constituencies. For example, the Liberal Party of Canada often attempts to develop policies and political messaging that will position it in the middle of the political spectrum where the largest group of voters potentially resides.”

Henry and Ji-Hyang (2012, p.p. 36, 37) have noted that “in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, the Arab uprisings have indeed effected fundamental change in the toppling of longstanding dictators. For many, seeing these dictatorial regimes fall was a cause for joyful celebration. However, though authoritarian breakdown is necessary for a transition to democracy, most authoritarian regimes historically have been replaced by other authoritarian regimes; in the view of some scholars, this is the case of the current regime in Egypt which, in a reversal from transitional democracy, returned to being an authoritarian regime as it had been during the Mubarak era”.

Brownlee *et al.* (2015, p.p. 36, 37) has argued that only through a free, fair, and competitive election, with all players accepting the results and all civil liberties afforded, can a true transition to democracy take place. Within the context of the post-Arab Spring, citizens of Tunisia and Egypt (immediately after revolution) did participate in a competitive election process; however, only Tunisia maintained the complete transitional definition.

Ahmed (2016, p.59) has reported that the term “Arab Exceptionalism” popularly refers to the scarcity of democracy in the Arab world, having been excluded from the third wave of democratization in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, some scholars labeled the Arab Spring as the “fourth wave” of democratization, despite the historical lack of conditions favorable to transitional democracy in the region. Gerard (2002, p.1149) has asserted that the Arab world lacks the necessary components of democracy, namely equal treatment under the law rather than authoritarian arbitrariness and favoritism. Some Arab countries are ruled by absolute monarchies, while others are ruled by autocratic regimes, and human rights organizations rebuke them for abuses.

With regard to political incentives (politically moderate concessions) or economic incentives (welfare programs), in order to contain demonstrations, petrol-oil Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia responded by offering welfare packages and deploying their security forces in various cities as a public display of military might in order to discourage the assembly of protesters. Resource-poor monarchies such as Jordan and Morocco employed a mix of moderate concessions and reforms that resulted in convincing the protest organizers to stop demonstrations even though no fundamental changes occurred within these monarchies.

Bolivia, Peru, Uruguay, Honduras, and Ecuador witnessed mass demonstrations in the 1980s. These protests resulted in political change and the initiation of transitional democracy in the form of the third waves of democratization that have taken place since the 1970s that have been endorsed by a certain number of countries in the world. To this end, Middle Eastern scholars such as Ahmed (2016) have argued that what happened in Latin America in the 1980s is similar to the pro-democracy protests of the Arab world; thus, the features and outcomes of the Arab Spring would not be different, and this could inspire the reformers to appeal for regime change in North Africa and the Middle East.

By contrast, other scholars such as Henry Kissinger were pessimistic about the outcomes of the demonstrations. Moreover, scholars such as Lewis (2005) have claimed that the modern Arab world's resistance to liberal democratic governance is a result of "cultural beliefs and political Islam." As to the question of "*why transitional democracy has mainly escaped Middle Eastern and Northern African countries*?" Bellin (2004, p.142) has explained that "it is not because of a lack of regional democratic forces, where human rights groups, professional associations, and other civil associations operate.

Instead, this scholar argued that repressive regimes impede the democratic process by undermining democratic institutions and the work of progressive scholars and activists who interpret Islam through a lens that recognizes democratic ideas and values. Some Islamic theorists and most of the state elites work to vigorously resist these progressive ideas”.

### **Coup-proofing militaries and coercive apparatus**

During mostly peaceful and stable intervals, incumbent regimes employ a wide range of strategies intended to stave off coups, first and foremost dissuading military officers from engaging in politics (Holger, 2015).

The causes of the 2011 MENA region uprisings cannot be attributed to the actions (or lack thereof) of military and security forces. Likewise, the role of the military cannot predict significant patterns of regime change nor the potential for democratization. Mass uprisings disrupted core political institutions (ruling parties), dissolved legal foundations (constitutions), and dislodged elite alliances and leadership from executive office. Without question, the authoritarian incumbencies in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Yemen were confronted with structural challenges that amount to “endgame scenarios” in which “a government has exhausted most of its political capital or will to find a peaceful resolution to a conflict” (Pion-Berlin & Trinkunas, 2010, p. 398). Military participation was instrumental in shaping the subsequent chain of events once people took to the streets (Barany, 2012; Bellin, 2012; Makara, 2013). Militaries have ousted long-time leaders in Egypt (actively) and Tunisia (voiding support for President Ben Ali). In Bahrain, internal and external armed forces (mostly from Saudi Arabia) quashed the mass protests (Holger, 2015). According to Owen (2012; cited in Holgan 2015, p. 41), “Bashar

al Assad regime's military apparatuses was developed with Ba'thism political ideology, combining nationalist, socialist, anti-feudal, egalitarian, pan-Arab and etatist notions." In consolidating power, the Assad regime fortified its position against other state political institutions and endeavored to implement quasi-hereditary lines of power transfer (Owen, 2013).

When Bashar acceded to the presidency in June 2000 after the death of his father, he was confronted with a strong and independent political syndicate. However, he enjoyed military support and was endorsed by the Ba'th Party's magnates as a candidate of compromise for maintaining unity.

The Syrian uprising was met with a severe and forceful response by the security forces, who opened fire on demonstrators. Nevertheless, the protests persisted, spreading beyond the earliest demonstrations in the southern city of Dera'a to the Sunni heartland around Homs, Hama, Deir al-Zur and Aleppo (Holger, 2015).

In response to the oppressive reaction of the security forces, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was established via pockets of militant resistance that emerged as early as June 2011, and also through the defection of numerous low-ranking officers. The country descended into civil war during the regime's military operations in the spring of 2012 and the rebel attacks in Damascus and Aleppo soon afterward. The rebels were buoyed by international support as well as by regime forces ceding control over expansive areas of the country. Despite the high stakes and the documented vulnerability of the Syrian regime in 2012, military officers have continued to demonstrate considerable loyalty to Bashar al-Asad. Defections among officers were mostly limited to those in the lower ranks, such as lieutenants (molazim), captains (naqeeb) and majors (ra'ed). Defections

among higher ranking officers continued to be rare: on June 20, 2012, the pilot of a Mig-21 fighter jet escaped to Jordan and requested political asylum; on June 24, a general, two majors, a lieutenant and 33 soldiers crossed the border into Turkey; on October 6, former prime minister Riad Hijab and 17 officers also fled the country (Holger 2015).

Military engagement has not often been implemented for capacity building, but rather, as an instrument of patronage. The “new middle class” mindset that successfully ushered in military coups in other Arab countries has not taken root in the Arabian peninsula, where low-ranking officers typically remain obedient servants to individual princes (Hertog, 2011, p. 401). According to Hertog (2011, p. 402) “GCC militaries are neither vanguards nor ‘people’s armies,’ but rather large, passive, and dependent clienteles of individual regime figures.”

Bellin (2004, p.143) reasserted Skocpol’s argument of the coercive apparatus: “If the state’s coercive apparatus remains coherent and effective, it can face down popular disaffection and survive significant illegitimacy, ‘value incoherence,’ and even a pervasive sense of relative deprivation among its subjects.” With regard to democratic transition in the Middle East and North Africa, in explaining the difference between cause (revolutions) and effect (transitional democracy), I argue that the main obstacle to realizing the objectives of revolutions is the might of state’s military/police and how the state could use its monopoly on employing coercion; this happened in many countries of the region during the Arab Spring.

Democratic transition can be successful only if the state does not use force to crack-down on protests, in other words, that military and police forces remain neutral in the event of protests. However, if the coercive apparatus remains loyal to an incumbent

and is opposed to changes aimed at initiating new political processes, democratic transition will not be achieved. The state will remain intact, holding though, an illegitimate status because citizens who have the sovereignty to award such status are illegally deprived of their right to do so.

Brownlee *et al.* (2015, p.62) has explained that, “Arab regimes remained durable, but their opponents, in some countries, were willing to take new risks to challenge them.” Brownlee, *et al* has further explained that although dissidents took to the streets in different Arab capitals and cities and appeared to take the lead, soldiers had the final say in whether to endorse their political goals or to crackdown and forcibly crush the protests.

## **Conclusion**

The literature review studied five major components: 1) Theories and conceptual framework of social movements. 2) Arab Spring “protest and mass demonstrations.” 3) transitional democracy as a result of the Arab Spring in the Arab World. 4) The patronage of great powers. 5) Coercive apparatus. This section has shown that the Middle East and North Africa have been in need of regime changes since the second wave of democracy after World War II. However, the Arab Spring has been considered part of the third wave of democracy for some scholars and part of a fourth wave for others. According to Gunitsky (2018, p. 639), “the Arab Spring is the thirteenth wave of democracy since the eighteenth century. Since the wave of decolonization in the 1950s, and the third wave of democracy in the mid-1970s, there had been not any political shifts toward democratization in the Arab world until the famous Arab Spring of December 2010”.

At the conclusion of the Literature Review, we move to Chapter 3, which illustrates a historical overview of how Bahrain has exercised political governance and

economic policies such as mismanagement of public offices and misappropriation of public funds that have led majority of Bahraini Shiite citizens in the country to rebel against their own governments.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Bahrain's historical overview and political governance**

#### Introduction

In this chapter, the study highlights a brief description of Bahrain and a historical overview of how it gained independence from Great Britain. The chapter further examines how the Sunni Islam al Khalifa ruling family represses a large portion of the Bahraini community, especially the Shia Islam segment, excluding them from important government positions such as intelligence, security, military, police, and other ministerial portfolios. There is also a rivalry over sectarian leadership between the Islamic Republic of Iran, which supports the Shia worldwide, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia<sup>8</sup> (which bears the Sunni Islam flag because of its two Holy Mosques in Makkah and Madinah).

Furthermore, the chapter looks into the United States' relations with Bahrain and how the U.S government considers Bahrain an important ally in the Gulf region. The chapter also explores the Bahraini economy, an important factor that helps the al Khalifa ruling family to strengthen its political position in the country by discriminating against the Shia majority.

Finally, civil liberties and political rights were analyzed (using the findings of Freedom House, 2020) revealing that the al Khalifa ruling family in Bahrain denies all civil liberties and political rights to its fellow Shia citizens.

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<sup>8</sup>Saudi Arabia competes with other Muslim countries such as Egypt to leading Sunni Muslims in the world.

## **The Bahrain historical overview**

The Kingdom of Bahrain got independence<sup>9</sup> on August 15, 1971 from Great Britain. Bahrain is an archipelago of 33 islands, and it is located on the western shores of the Persian Gulf, 16 miles off the east coast of Saudi Arabia and connected to the Saudi coastal city of Al Khobar by the King Fahad causeway, which opened for traffic in 1986. Until 1783, Bahrain was under Persian control. The ruling Al Khalifa family, which started governing Bahrain from that year onward, has its ancestral roots in Najd, in central Saudi Arabia. The Al Khlifas are Sunni Muslims, while 70% of Bahrainis are Shiites (Nuruzzaman 2013). The name “Bahrain” refers to the fact that the country contains two sources of water, both fresh water and salt water in the surrounding seas. The current population of Bahrain, at 1,728,122, comprises 0.02% of the total world population, ranking 152 on the list of countries (and dependencies) by population. Bahrain’s total land mass is 760 Km<sup>2</sup> (293 sq. miles) and 89.3% of the total population is urban. (United Nations- Worldometer 2020). Bahrain has over twenty cities, according to Al-Morshid (2011) Manama is its capital, and Muharraq is where the Bahrain international airport is located.

According to Jordan and the *World Atlas* (2006), the location of Bahrain is increasingly of strategic importance in the Arabian Gulf, a waterway which serves as an easy path for trade between East Asia and Europe, historically making it the focus of attention in trade and political rivalries. Britain once considered the Gulf to be a British lake and an important link en route to its property in India. Britain was committed to

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<sup>9</sup> Al-Jazi, M. (2020, p. 347) said that Bahrain gained its independence in August 1971.

keeping Bahrain independent of surrounding countries, such as Saudi Arabia. In 1859, Britain informed Faisal bin Turki that it considered Bahrain an "independent emirate," and it sent a naval fleet to protect it. After several treaties between Britain and the rulers of Bahrain, the Al Khalifa signed the British Protection Agreement in 1861, and Bahrain remained a British protectorate until 1971 (Al-Jazi 2020). On August 15, 1971, Bahrain declared itself fully independent from Great Britain. In 1971, the year of independence for Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in addition to Bahrain, Iran was still a monarchy governed by the Pahlavi dynasty; the Iranian Revolution was still eight years away. At the time, unhappy with the move to create wealthy microstates in the Gulf, the Shah Reza Pahlavi declared that the formation of new countries in its regional area of influence amounted to an imperial plot to diminish Iranian power in the Gulf (Davidson 2008, p. 64 cited in Pinto 2014). Central to this argument was that Bahrain was actually part of Iran since it had belonged to the Persian Empire. The matter was resolved when a United Nations delegation was dispatched to Bahrain in 1970 to inquire about the population's national preferences. They declared themselves overwhelmingly as Bahraini, therefore assuring independence (Pinto 2014).

Troubled by the "loss" of Bahrain, the Shah decided to occupy three small islands that belonged to the UAE—Abu Musa and Greater and Lesser Tunbs—in 1971, on the eve of the country's independence (Pinto, 2012b). Iran still holds on to these islands and this has since become a rather thorny issue looming over bilateral relations (empirical credibility).

## **Bahrain's current and future political perspective and region's political shake-up**

Divisions between Bahrain's majority Shia population and Sunni leadership<sup>10</sup> continue to engender political risks. Ongoing violence strengthens hardliners on sides, perpetuating the conflict and increasing Bahrain's dependence on Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia, wary of emboldening its own domestic Shia population, ensures that Bahrain's government refrains from granting greater political rights to its own Shia citizens, a necessity for resolving the ongoing violent unrest. Persistent internal rivalries between King Hamad and the conservative Prime Minister Khalifa are unlikely to threaten government stability. According to Jake and Meda (2017), the prospect of reconciliation between the majority Shia population and the ruling Sunni Khalifa family over the coming year is doubtful. A series of high-profile rulings against the main Shia opposition group, Al-Wefaq, underscore the government's hardening stance against the opposition. For example, an appeals court increased the jail sentence of Al-Wefaq's leader, Ali Salman, from four to nine years in May 2016. Since the 2011 Bahraini mass demonstrations demanding political reform, and the subsequent aggressive intervention by security forces, the state has been reluctant to engage with the Shia, and has also refused to acknowledge solidarity with a small faction of less affluent members of the Sunni community. While there is evidence for only a fraction of such allegations, the government has depicted all anti-government protests or democratization demands involving its Shia citizens as Iranian-backed attempts to undermine and overthrow the

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<sup>10</sup> Jake Jolly and Meda Al-Rowas (2017). Bahrain Country Reports, IHS Global Inc. <https://eds-a-ebshost-com.ezproxy.libraries.wright.edu/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=3&sid=2992ed44-47fc-488f-b104-d77c5d8bb1a1%40sessionmgr4008>  
Accessed on December 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Sunni GCC regime. Sympathetic Sunni were also ostracized, with prominent Sunni activist leaders prosecuted alongside their Shia counterparts.

With internal security forces drawing heavily on prominent Sunni Bahraini tribes and families, and state patronage prioritizing the Sunni population, the Al Khalifa leadership has ensured continued support which disincentivizes Sunni mobilization against the state. However, government policy has had the unintended consequence of increasing radicalization among the Sunni minority, including among security forces tasked with squashing Shia unrest and tackling increasingly growing Shia militancy. It has also made both King Hamad and his eldest son, Crown Prince Salman, who in the past advocated for political reform and the failed National Dialogue process intended to foster Sunni-Shia reconciliation in response to the 2011 mass protests, appear weak in the face of a growing “Iranian-backed” threat. This situation is nevertheless working to the advantage of other senior members of the ruling family, such as the long-serving and powerful Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman. This faction, which typically includes high-ranking members of the security and military services and state institutions, is much more aligned with Saudi Arabia's hawkish leadership and considerably less tolerant of conciliation towards the Shia and Iran.

The prime minister has strong conservative and Saudi support, as well as close relations with the country's powerful business elite. He uses his wealth and influence within the defense sector to protect his position. In the very dubious scenario of the government losing Saudi support or in a currently unlikely change in Saudi policy towards Iran and its own increasingly agitated Shia population, sectarian division and related Sunni and Shia unrest is only prone to reaching politically destabilizing levels.

Until then, the Al Khalifa monarchy will not likely face an existential threat, despite the fundamental instability of its present political arrangement. Bahrain is financially dependent on Saudi Arabia, which operates the Abu Safa oil field off Bahrain and controls the amount of revenue allocated to Bahrain from its output (Jake & Meda 2017).

The Trump Administration's foreign policy focused on expediting peace between Arab nations and Israel, based on the precedent of the Camp David accords signed by Egypt and Israel in 1979. Four decades later, other countries in the Middle East, prodded by the U.S. government, have followed suit. Recent examples are the UAE and Bahrain, and other countries such as Saudi Arabia are engaged in undercover negotiations fearing that their citizens may take to the streets to demonstrate against a move that has been initiated without considering Palestinian political positions and Israeli foreign policy towards the Palestinian authority.

### **Power patronage, regional major powers' ties and rivalries in Bahrain**

Bahrain is a battlefield of sectarian leadership between Iran, which remains the leading Shiite power in the Muslim world, and Saudi Arabia, which sees itself as the defender of the Sunni Muslims in and beyond the Middle East. Thus, Bahrain is and will be an ongoing sectarian battleground between two regional powers, Saudi Arabia supporting the incumbent ruling Bahraini family and Iran maintaining and sustaining its ties with the Shiite opposition in Bahrain. The mass uprisings that took place in Bahrain and the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia<sup>11</sup> rang an alarm bell of serious proportions in Riyadh; the Saudi government decided to intervene militarily in Bahrain to support the

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<sup>11</sup> Eastern Province in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is seen as a fief of Shiite community

Bahraini government security forces against the Shiite opposition, which is considered a close ally of Iran and a real threat to the ruling Al-Khalifa family.

A Saudi official candidly told The New York Times (March 17, 2011) soon after the pro-democracy movements in Bahrain had erupted: “King Abdullah has been clear that Saudi Arabia will never allow Shia rule in Bahrain – never.” This Saudi policy will extend to other GCC states should a future Shiite or Sunni challenge threaten Saudi economic interests, as in Bahrain, or challenge Saudi control over its vast oil resources.

Could Saudi Arabia intervene in other GCC States? The big question the Saudi intervention in Bahrain raises is whether Saudi intervention in other GCC countries could become a reality if a similar scenario of internal, pro-democracy forces were to arise. Three important and interrelated factors strongly support the possibility of future Saudi interventions in situations similar to that of Bahrain. The first factor is obviously the overriding economic interests and associated politico-strategic considerations.

The two other, related factors are the very nature of the Saudi state and the Saudi version of Islam, which is based on the interpretations of Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, an eighteenth-century Muslim scholar and jurist. The threads that tie these three factors together are the vast Saudi oil wealth and the use of oil revenues that promote a symbiotic relationship between the Al-Saud-controlled Saudi state and the Wahhabi religious establishment, with clear implications for domestic politics, regional relationships, and external relations. With or without an Iranian link, the overthrow of the Al Khalifa family by Shiite-led prodemocracy uprisings could present serious economic and strategic risks for Saudi Arabia and the United States. A Shiite-dominated government in Manama would likely bring Iran closer to Saudi Arabia with the potential

to destabilize the Saudi Eastern Province, where Saudi Shiites are concentrated. There is no proven, solid link between the Iranian, Bahraini, and Saudi Shiites, but the development of a critical bond of Shiite solidarity during times of crisis or a bond of solidarity reinforced by a possible Shiite victory in Bahrain is not out of the question. The growing ties between the Iranian and Iraqi Shiites in the post-2003 period remain a case at hand (Kemp 2005). This is what has haunted, and continues to haunt, the Saudi government.

Understandably, a possible loss of control over the Saudi Eastern Province, following the potential fall of Bahrain into Shiite hands, would severely weaken the Saudi economy by depriving it of huge oil revenues. The spill-over effects would also likely disturb the neighboring oil- and gas-rich countries of Kuwait (30% Shiites), Qatar (10%), and the United Arab Emirates (16%), where the Shiites are a minority but nevertheless comprise a significant percentage of the total population. For Saudi Arabia, the ramifications would be numerous. First, there would be a possibility of a looming breakdown of the royal family-controlled Saudi economy, with the oil lifeline under the control of the rebellious Shiites who would likely receive support from their neighboring brothers in Bahrain and Iran. Secondly, the loss of Saudi trade and investment relations with Bahrain would further curtail Saudi economic prospects. Private Saudi investors would stand to lose their investments in Bahrain with the government cut off from access to investment avenues through the Bahraini financial district.

The Saudi government could make up its losses in the Dubai and Qatar financial centers, but the loss of Bahrain from Saudi control would be difficult to forget. It would likely also force the Saudi government to redefine and recast its relations with Shiite

Bahrain and Iran – either a friendly posture towards these two countries or a policy of maintaining distance, if not hostility, in collaboration with other GCC states. Any Saudi departure from Bahrain and limits on its economic power would directly affect the interests of The United States as well. Saudi Arabia is the third largest oil provider to the United States after Venezuela and Mexico. America’s European and Asian allies critically depend on Gulf oil; this also promulgates a close U.S. strategic relationship with Saudi Arabia. In addition to the oil business, Saudi Arabia is also a major importer of the United States arms and a major investor in the U.S. economy. The Saudi-United States weapons deal finalized in late 2010 was worth \$60 billion, supporting at least 75,000 jobs and helping the U.S. to revamp its declining economy. The two countries reportedly struck another arms deal valued at \$30 billion in December 2011 (The New York Times, December 29, 2011).

The other GCC countries also buy most of their arms and ammunition from the United States. Washington also has a booming non-military business relationship with the GCC countries. The United States exports to the GCC countries, excluding arms and military equipment, jumped from \$10 billion in 2003 to over \$31 billion in 2010. The United States imports from the GCC countries also made a similar jump from \$33 billion in 2005 to approximately \$40 billion in 2010 (US International Trade Commission 2011 as cited in Nuruzzaman 2013). This enormous business interest dictates that Washington must do everything possible to keep the GCC states out of the Iranian sphere of influence. “Certainly, the assertion of Shiite power in Bahrain and the Saudi Eastern Province has the prospects of weakening U.S. economic health since an emboldened Iran would seek

to restrict Washington's ties to the GCC countries while enhancing its own" (Nuruzzaman 2013, p. 372).

The objectives Iran may exploit from political change in Bahrain, which are always on the minds of the Saudis and the U.S., include the following: first, expelling the U.S. from Bahrain, thus obstructing Washington's economic relations and military strategy in the Gulf and Middle East region; and, second, pressuring Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab states to accommodate Iranian economic and political interests.

Iran is mostly isolated from the economic dynamics in the Gulf sub-region due to recent levels of increasing trade transactions and investments between the Gulf Arab states themselves. Gradual Iranian access to and involvement in the Gulf Arab economies would help Iran to successfully counter the consequences of U.S.-led sanctions. Finally, Iran will gain an upper hand in international oil markets to determine oil production and prices. Iran currently coordinates its oil policy with Venezuela, and it has the support of another big oil producer – Iraq. Saudi cooperation, even if reluctant, would undoubtedly enhance Tehran's economic bargaining power at the regional and global levels. A redefinition of the politics and economics of oil appears to be the minimum Iran will seek in the new context. Historically, Iran and Saudi Arabia have pursued acrimonious oil production and pricing policies. Saudi Arabia is the world's largest oil producer, with a total of 267 billion barrels of reserves. Iran is the third-largest oil producer among the OPEC countries and has a total oil reserve of 136 billion barrels. Compared to Saudi Arabia, Iran is under more economic stress due to economic sanctions and has much fewer oil reserves. Iranian oil policy, as a result, seeks to maximize oil prices in order to maintain sound fiscal health and create employment opportunities for its growing youth

population. The Saudis, in contrast, have long rejected the Iranian short-term objectives-driven oil policy, focusing instead on long-term benefits. Saudi oil policy has been dictated traditionally by challenges from non-OPEC producers, such as Canada and the Russian Federation, along with the possibility of Western industrialized countries developing alternative sources of energy (Wehrey *et al.* 2009). Although an oil war against Iran seems unrealistic, oil tensions undoubtedly largely define Iran's relations with Saudi Arabia and the United States (Nuruzzaman 2013).

### **U.S. military ties with Bahrain and Iranian policies towards Bahrain**

Bahrain also carries significant military and strategic value in the Persian Gulf sub-region. It hosts the U.S. Fifth Fleet and a military base near Manama, the capital city. Together with Qatar, which houses the U.S. Central Command, and Kuwait, the launching pad of U.S. operations in Iraq, Bahrain comprises a key role in U.S. military strategy and operations in the Middle East. Relying on its military relationships with the GCC states, the U.S. ensures the free flow of oil, the lifeline of Western economies, from the Persian Gulf to Europe, East Asia, and North America. The occasional Iranian threats to close the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow waterway connecting the Persian Gulf to the Indian Ocean, often destabilize international oil markets, pushing oil prices up. The U.S. is unable to counter the Iranian threats without the support of the Gulf Arab states, whose financial and fiscal health also depend on uninterrupted exports of oil to the outside world (Nuruzzaman 2013).

Relations between Bahrain and Iran are rather heavily influenced by their historical past and by the United States. The unofficial Iranian claim of sovereignty over Bahrain, made by newspaper editors and opposition leaders from time to time, has

seriously strained their bilateral relations in the past. The Kayhan newspaper, published in Tehran, claimed in July 2007 that Bahrain was an Iranian territory, which immediately provoked anti-Iranian protests in Manama. Tensions between the two neighbors subsided after the Iranian government officially disavowed the Kayhan story (Wherey *et al.* 2009, p. 54). Tensions flared up again in February 2009 when an Iranian official remarked that up until 1971, Bahrain had been the fourteenth province of Iran. This claim resulted in the Bahraini government freezing diplomatic relations with Iran for several weeks; diplomatic normalcy returned only after the Iranian official had revised his remark as being reflective of eighteenth-century conditions<sup>12</sup>. Such poor political relations between Manama and Tehran have hampered efforts to expand future economic and business ties between them. The much-discussed natural gas deal for export of Iranian gas to Bahrain, negotiations over which started in October 2008, has yet to make any real progress. In the absence of mutually beneficial economic relations, the factor that predominantly influences Bahrain-Iran relations is demographic -- a Shiite majority in Bahrain, though Iran maintains no strong ties to Shiite Bahrainis.

### **Bahraini civil liberties and political rights**

According to Freedom House (2020), the Bahraini government employs several tactics to silence its opponents, such as revoking citizenship as political and criminal punishment, even when if this leaves people stateless. In a recent key development in 2019, the King of Bahrain, under international pressure, restored citizenship to nearly two-thirds of the people whose citizenship had been revoked over the past seven years. In January, the country's highest court upheld the sentence of life in prison given in 2018 to

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<sup>12</sup> Arab News, February 23, 2009

Ali Salman, leader of the disbanded opposition party, Al-Wefaq, for supposedly spying for Qatar during the antigovernment protests of 2011. Bahrain carries out religious discrimination against Shiites, and political prisoners face mistreatment while in custody. Bahrain's 2002 constitution gives the king power over the executive, legislative, and judicial authorities. The monarch appoints and removes the prime minister and cabinet officials, who are responsible to him rather than to the legislature. However, since independence from Britain in 1971, the country has had only one prime minister, Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, the uncle of the current king, Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa.

The king appoints the 40-member Consultative Council, the upper house of the National Assembly. The lower house, or Council of Representatives, is comprised of 40 elected members serving four-year terms. Formal political parties are not permitted, but members of "political societies" have participated in elections in practice. Lower house elections were held in November, with a runoff in December 2018, but with bans on the country's main opposition groups, the exercise produced little meaningful competition. A law passed several months before the elections prohibited the candidacy of anyone who had belonged to discontinued political societies, had boycotted or been expelled from the parliament, or had received a prison sentence of at least six months. Most seats were won by independents, though small Sunni Islamist groups won several seats and a leftist group was victorious in two. As in previous years, turnout figures were disputed amid a lack of independent election monitoring (Freedom House 2020).

Bahrain's electoral framework is unfair, with electoral districts deliberately constructed to underrepresent Shiites, who represent a majority of the citizen population but have never managed to achieve majority representation in the parliament. The

government has also allegedly drawn district borders to place certain political societies, including leftist and Sunni Islamist groups, at a disadvantage. The government directorate responsible for supervising elections is headed by the justice minister, a member of the royal family, and is not an independent body (Freedom House 2020).

Table: 3: Civil liberties and political rights in Bahrain

<b>Freedom in the World 2020</b>		<b>Observation(s)</b>
Country	Score(s) [total]	
Bahrain	11/%	Total score 11%
Item(s)	Score(s)	
Political Rights	1/40	1 out of forty, very unfortunate score
Civil liberties	10/60	10 out of sixty, very low score
Status	<b>NOT FREE</b>	The year 2020, the country scores 11%, meaning it is not free
		The previous year [2019], Bahrain got 12% It wasn't free too.

Source: Freedom House, 2020<sup>13</sup>.

### **Political pluralism and participation**

Formal political parties in Bahrain are illegal, and a 2005 law prohibits the formation of political associations based on class, profession, or religion. A 2016 amendment bans practicing religious clerics from participating in political activity. The law permits “political societies,” with some of the functions of a political party, to operate after registering with the government; but the authorities have shuttered almost all opposition political societies since 2016. The most popular, the Shiite Islamist society Al-Wefaq, was forcibly disbanded that year for allegedly promoting violence. Bahrain’s

<sup>13</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/country/bahrain/freedom-world/2020>

Accessed on December 12, 2020

second-largest opposition group, the secularist National Democratic Action Society (Wa'ad), was banned in 2017 (Freedom House 2020).

### **Inclusiveness, political rights, and electoral opportunities**

Although Shiites comprise a majority of Bahrain's citizens, they have historically been underrepresented in both chambers of the National Assembly and in the cabinet. One of the main grievances of the Shiite community is the universal view that its members are considered second-class citizens, both politically and economically. The regime, dominated by a Sunni ruling family, steadfastly prevents Shiites from organizing independently to further their political interests, though it does ensure that at least some pro-government Shiites and members of religious minorities are placed into the legislature and cabinet. The dominant role of the monarchy means that even Sunnis face restrictions on their ability to take part in independent political activity (Freedom House 2020).

### **Functioning of government and corruption**

Bahrain's king and other unelected officials have jurisdiction over the development and implementation of the country's laws and policies. Most major cabinet posts are occupied by members of the ruling family. The National Assembly has the right to propose legislation to the government, but the government drafts and submits bills for the legislature to consider. The main opposition groups no longer have representation in the National Assembly following a series of boycotts and legal bans; thus, the body has fallen silent on politically sensitive topics, even if it does sometimes debate economic reforms, austerity measures, and public services. Some laws are in place to combat corruption, but enforcement is weak, and high-ranking officials or members of the royal

family suspected of corruption rarely receive punishment. The media does not enjoy sufficient freedom to independently report allegations of corruption against such figures. Likewise, civil society anticorruption efforts face restrictions; the current and former chairs of the Bahrain Transparency Society have routinely been prohibited from travel. The proceedings of the parliament are public, and it is entitled to examine the government budget, but in practice orders and laws are issued without providing insight or allowing meaningful public debate on their creation or implementation (Freedom House 2020).

### **Freedom of association, CSOs and rights of organizations**

A permit is required to hold demonstrations, and a number of burdensome restrictions make it next to impossible to organize a legal gathering. Police frequently utilize force to break up political protests, most of which take place in Shiite villages. Participants can face long jail sentences, especially if the demonstrations include clashes with security personnel. In July 2019, police used tear gas to forcibly disperse protests that followed the execution of two Shiite activists (Freedom House 2020).

### **Rule of law, individual rights**

The king appoints all judges and presides over the Supreme Judicial Council, which administers the courts and puts forward judicial nominees. The courts are subject to government pressure. The country's judicial system is viewed as corrupt and biased in favor of the royal family and its allies, especially in politically sensitive cases. Once announced, judicial decisions are typically enforced. Law enforcement officers purportedly violate due process during arrests and detention, partly by obstructing detainees' access to legal representation. Detainees are sometimes held incommunicado.

Judicial proceedings frequently put defendants at a disadvantage; judges often deny bail requests or restrict defense attorneys from attending (Freedom House 2020).

### **Bahrain's economy**

Economic policy reform has produced wide-ranging consequences, even in the Middle East where unorthodox reform strategies dominate, and the Washington Consensus has a weak foothold (Heydemann, 2004, p. 6).

Despite being a small island state, Bahrain's economic and financial clout affords it global significance. A leading financial hub in the Middle East, Bahrain has offered foreign firms and banks a safe haven since 1975. It rose to prominence after the collapse of the Beirut financial hub that resulted from the Lebanese civil war of 1975 to 1990. By 2001, Bahrain had become firmly established as a prominent business center and has been effectively competing against other emerging Gulf financial hubs in Dubai and Qatar. Until the political uprisings in early March 2011, over 370 offshore banking units and representative offices operated in the Bahrain financial district, including some 65 American and 34 Saudi businesses. The political protests, however, scared numerous international investors, business firms, and banks, such as BNP Paribas, *Credit Agricole*, Robeco, Nomura, Citigroup, *Société Générale*, and Standard Chartered away from Bahrain to Dubai (*Financial Times*, February 22, 2012).

Between 2000 and 2009 Bahrain enjoyed a robust GDP growth rate of 6.1%, and its total bank assets increased from \$108 billion in 2009 to \$241 billion in 2010 (ISI Emerging Markets Blog 2011). The Heritage Foundation, in its 2011 Index of Economic Freedom, ranked Bahrain tenth out of 183 countries in the world. As a result, global banks and business firms put a great deal of trust in the Bahraini financial system.

Bahrain continued to thrive even after Dubai endured a growing financial crisis by the end of 2009. Without a doubt, the pro-democracy movements caused serious consternation that affected the economic base and financial backbone of Bahrain. During and in the aftermath of the protest movements, the stock markets lost 6–10%, hotel occupancy rates fell below 30%, and a 1.4% and 1.7% deficit in GDP was projected for 2011 and 2012, respectively (cited in Ameinfo.com 2011).

Bahrain's economic strength also derives from regional oil wealth, though it is not a significant oil-producing country or a member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). It does, however, host one of the largest oil refineries in the world – the BAPCO Sitrah Refinery, with a processing capacity of 267,000 barrels of crude oil per day. Only about one-sixth of the crude oil processed at this refinery originates from Bahrain; the rest comes from Saudi Arabia, the largest oil producer in the world. An oil pipeline of 54 kilometers in length connects Bahrain to the Saudi offshore oil facility of Abu Saafa in the Persian Gulf. Most of the crude oil Bahrain receives from Abu Saafa is processed and then re-exported to Asian and North American markets.

Beyond oil, Saudi Arabia is Bahrain's largest trading partner. According to the U.S. State Department report, in 2009 Bahrain conducted 26.7% import trade and 3.4% export trade with Saudi Arabia (U.S. Department of State 2012). It is worth noting that similar economies with a dominant oil sector tend to restrict the promotion of trade and integration among GCC countries, but, in recent years, trade volumes have been on the rise. In 1980, for example, intra-GCC trade flows amounted to just \$8 billion; by 2008, the figure rose to \$67 billion, a share of 6% of the GCC's total world trade. Of the GCC member states, Bahrain and Oman have more intra-GCC trade orientations. In 2008, they

had 18.34% and 20.1% GCC import-export trade flows, respectively, while Saudi Arabia had a share of only 3.8%. At the bilateral import-export trade level, Bahrain and Oman again have heavily depended on GCC markets. Bahrain, in particular, conducts a large percentage of its trade with Saudi Arabia. In 2008, more than 85% of Bahrain's intra-GCC imports originated from Saudi Arabia, while it exported 45% of its products to Saudi Arabia in 2005. Saudi imports from Bahrain in 2008, in contrast, were 20.1% and exports to Bahrain were 39% of total Saudi GCC trade (Nechi 2010, 163–168). Overall, Bahrain holds the first position in terms of Saudi export trade (39%) and the second position (Bahrain's share is 20.1%) after the United Arab Emirates (55%) in terms of Saudi import trade.

Saudi investments in Bahrain's tourism, construction, and other development projects top \$1 billion annually. Major Bahraini industries, such as the Gulf Petrochemical Industries Company and Aluminum Bahrain, are dependent on Saudi investments. Until the violent pro-democracy movements erupted in February 2011, Saudi companies had invested massive amounts in Bahrain's huge development projects, such as Amwaj Island, Durrat Al Bahrain, and Al Areen. In addition, Bahrain has been a tourist attraction for Saudi citizens. Saudi visitors to Bahrain have accounted for 70% of the roughly six million tourists who visit the island state annually (cited in Trade Arabia 2011).

Equally significant has been the use of Bahrain's excellent financial services networks to channel Saudi oil revenues into regional and global investments. Statistics on Saudi investments abroad funneled through Bahraini financial districts are not available, but the significance is well asserted by Raj Madha, an analyst with the Rajmala Investment

Bank, which conducts major operations in Bahrain. According to Madha, “Bahrain is still a major offshore banking market, and a lot of Saudi money goes through Bahrain to their ultimate destinations” (cited in *Ameinfo.com*, 2011). This means that Bahrain plays a significant role in Saudi economic expansion and is economically too significant for the Saudis to be forgotten.

Iran, in contrast, has limited economic, trade, and banking relations with Bahrain. According to one estimate, Bahrain conducts less than 1% of its total trade with Iran. The net value of Bahrain-Iran bilateral trade amounted to just \$33.7 million in 2004 before jumping to \$108 million in 2007. Still, it remained a one-way trade relationship; until 2007, Bahrain exported petroleum and mining products as well as financial services to Iran, while Bahraini imports from Iran were insignificant. Bahrain’s actions after 2007 to implement U.S.-led sanctions against Iran have further reduced financial relations with Tehran. In 2007, the Central Bank of Bahrain forced Ahli United Bank, Bahrain’s largest lender, to suspend joint banking and financial transactions with Iran’s Bank Melli and Bank Saderat. The three banks had formed a Bahrain-based joint venture called Future Bank BSC back in 2004. The government of Bahrain took control of the Future Bank (*The Guardian*, February 15, 2011), and Iran was thus isolated from Bahrain’s comprehensive financial networks.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has demonstrated that Bahrain, has long endured dictatorship and that the Bahraini citizens have been repressed and subjected to human rights abuse.

Examining the political history of the Kingdom of Bahrain as its sister countries in the Persian Gulf, I have found that it missed opportunities to ride various waves of

democracy, whereas some countries in Latin America and in Africa had at least initiated democratic processes, especially in the 1990s.

In Bahrain, the political situation remains tense, with the Sunni Muslim minority (al-Khalifa family) controlling the Shia Muslim majority in order to limit their direct influence in Bahraini society; the reforms Bahrain must undertake should involve the Shia majority in the key government leadership roles. But as Bahrain and other Gulf countries fear Iranian influence through Shia communities in the region, Bahrain has chosen to politically silence its Shia population instead of including them in power sharing in the key sectors such as intelligence, security, and economy.

At the conclusion of this chapter, I move to Chapter 4, which will illustrate a historical overview of how Syria has exercised political governance and economic policies such as mismanagement of public offices and misappropriation of public funds that have led majority of Syrian Sunni citizens in the country to rebel against their own governments.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Syria's historical political governance**

#### **Introduction**

The primary challenge faced by the Syrian regime before and after independence was its ethnically, religiously, and socially heterogeneous composition. Syrian society consists of different communities with diverse religious beliefs: Sunni Muslims, who are the majority of the population, along with a minority of Alawite, Druze, Turkmen, Assyrians, and Christians. This chapter analyzes the authoritarian system that was strengthened under the Ba'ath Party in the early 1960s and thereafter, when the Assad family descended to power. Dictatorship is the only word to describe its regime. As with many countries of the Middle East and North Africa that fell into the Arab Spring, the Syrian economic crisis caused by the Assad regime's policies was among the root causes of the uprising, as we shall see in the chapter six. This chapter finally looks into the research results of Freedom House (2020), in which the Syrian regime failed to cope with its citizens' grievances and claims; instead, the Syrian government persecuted its people by denying them civil liberties and political rights, especially the Sunni majority. As a result, when the Arab Spring began at the end of 2010 and early 2011, Syrians took to the streets to protest against the Assad regime.

#### **Syrian historical overview**

The Syrian Arab Republic is a country in the Middle East, bordered by the Mediterranean Sea to the north-West, Lebanon to the West, Turkey to the North, Iraq to the South-East, and Israel to the South-West (World Map 2020).

According to the United Nations, the population of Syria is 17,693,370 (Worldometer 2020). Syria's population comprises 0.22% of the total world population. It ranks number 68 in the list of countries (and dependencies) by population. Syrian total land area is 183,630 km<sup>2</sup> (70,900 sq. miles), and 60.0% of its population is urban. Syria got independence<sup>14</sup>: October 24<sup>th</sup>, 1945.

First World War, the Stance of the Ottoman Empire and, Subsequently, the Partition of the Region between the Great Powers of the Time under Colonialism.

In the First World War, the Ottoman Empire took the side of the Germans. Even before the war had ended, England and France, with the approval of Russia, were secretly negotiating to break up the Ottoman Empire (Ullah and Khan 2017). In November 1915, Sir Mark Sykes of Britain and Francois George-Picot of France met to divide Ottoman Syria between their respective countries. Syria had been a part of the Ottoman Empire for around 400 years by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2017). The men simply drew lines on a map to create new states without any regard for religions, ethnicities, tribes, cultures, or histories of the people; these same types of divisions were carried out by the major world powers of the era in different continents, including Africa and other parts of the world. This essentially represents the root cause of the emergence of the present-day fault lines in the Middle East, including Syria. The negotiations led to the Sykes-Picot Agreement in May 1916 (Sykes 1916). Through the agreement, Britain was promised Iraq and Palestine (which includes present-day Israel and Jordan) and France was promised Syria and Lebanon.

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<sup>14</sup> Ullah and Khan (2017, p. 560).

Subsequently, the Treaty of Versailles (1919) formally validated the secret arrangement through the creation of the League of Nations and its Mandate System (Versailles 1919). A mandate was an authorization granted to member states of the League of Nations to govern a former German or Turkish colony (Chauhan 2010). The typical imperial justification was that the people in question were not yet ready for self-government. Therefore, France was granted the mandate over Syria and Lebanon.

### **Sunni and Shia Alawite rivalries**

Due to their beliefs and religious practices, the Alawites, which constitute approximately 12% of the overall Syrian population, have been considered *ghulat* (extremists) and periodically subjected to persecution by their Sunni counterparts due to their beliefs (Talhamy 2010). In addition, impoverished Alawites living in one of Syria's most isolated regions, an area known as Alawite mountains, have worked as peasants on the farms of wealthy Sunni and Christians (Tekdal 2012). During the French Mandate period in Syria, to prevent the formation of a united Arab nationalist movement, France formed military units called "*Troupes Spéciales du Levant*," making especially sure to include minorities in these units in order to separate them from the Sunni majority. The Alawites viewed these military units as means of securing economic opportunities for themselves and an opportunity to enter into a career, flocking en masse to the military units (Faksh, 1984). The urban Sunnis, on the other hand, saw the military as a means of French imperialism in Syria, so they considered joining the military to be contrary to their ideologies (Hof and Simon 2013). Therefore, the Sunnis paid fees in the hopes of exempting their sons from military service (Faksh, 1984). However, the Sunni elites' approach to the military was an historical mistake (Tekdal 2012). When Syria became

independent, 25% of these units consisted of Alawites, and these units were transformed into the regular Syrian army (Maoz 1991). Because the Sunnis did not recognize the importance of the army at its outset, the majority of the military was comprised of Alawites, which meant that the balance of power in Syrian politics shifted away from the Sunnis and toward the Alawites (Tekdal 2012). Further, the Ba'ath Party, founded in 1947, embraced a secular and socialist stance that did not place emphasis on Islam and thus defended social equality. Further, the party's stance regarding Arab nationalism caused minority groups such as the Alawites, Druze, Ismailis, and Christians to take greater interest in the party (Şenzeybek 2013), which led these groups to become party members.

While the Sunnis were predominant in state government, in-party conflicts between them brought about numerous military coups, and each new coup caused the Sunnis to gradually be purged from the upper government ranks, which allowed for the Alawites to climb the ladder of state government (Pipes 1989); thereafter, the Alawites remained at the helm of Syrian political power.

When Hafez al-Assad initiated a bloodless coup and defeated his rival, Salah Jadid, an Alawite like himself, Syria, for the first time in its history, was governed by an Alawite president. Hafez al-Assad, who had learned from the lessons of the past, firmly established his regime by placing people from his own sect in the state's high-level government and military ranks. This served to support the claims that the Alawites had greater voices among the military and administrative units. However, it is necessary to note that the regime in Syria was not an Alawite regime, but rather a patrimonial

dictatorship, and the Alawites made up just one of the pillars that served to keep the regime in power (Goldsmith 2011).

### **Syrian post independence era**

According to Heydemann (2013, p. 60) it is possible that the authoritarian system of rule initiated by the Ba'ath Party in the early 1960s, later captured by the Assad family and its clients, will yet be “annihilated” as a result of the protracted civil war.

The fundamental problem faced by the new state was its ethnically, religiously, and socially heterogeneous makeup. It consisted of a majority of Sunni Muslims (70 percent) along with a minority of *Alawites*, Druze, Turkmen, Assyrians, and Christians. Apart from that, Syrian society had been starkly divided into the rich townsmen on the one hand and the poor peasants and nomads on the other side. In the initial period after independence, the *Sunnis* were in power. The country faced a series of coups that ultimately led to a *Baathist* Coup in March 1963. Later, in 1970, General Hafez al-Assad, an *Alawite*, seized power and was sworn in as president on March 14, 1971. Hafez al-Assad was an astute and clever statesman. In the years that followed, he shaped the nature of the Syrian polity. Throughout his regime, he was popular because he advocated for economic development, the promotion of education, strengthening of the military, and vehement opposition to Israel. However, a bond emerged between the Ba'ath Party, the military, and the bureaucracy, which repressed all opposition with ruthless brutality through a vast intelligence apparatus. The majority but subjugated Sunnis came to resent their oppression by a minority *Alawite* ruling elite (Heydemann 2013).

These feelings of resentment resurfaced during the antigovernment protests of the Arab Spring. The reminder of the years of subjugation under the Alawites strengthened

the resolve of the rebels -- mainly Sunni -- to confront the government. After the death of Hafez al-Assad in 2000, his son, Bashar al-Assad, assumed power. However, he maintained his father's policies and did not liberalize the government. Moreover, he was not shrewd enough to remain a part of the rich, powerful, and luxurious elite -- as his father was -- while still commanding the loyalty of his people. Furthermore, he was financially corrupt, unlike his father. The luxurious lifestyle of the rich elite pitted the poor, unemployed, and suppressed citizenry against the governing elite. These feelings had reached their apex by the time the Arab Spring had arrived. This brings the discussion to the protests in Syria and how the revolution has transformed into civil war. The revolution and contemporary civil war will be discussed in Chapter 6.

According to Aksu (2018) when Bashar al-Assad first came to power in Syria in 2000, he pledged that the government would employ democratic strategies and that the economy, education, and administration of the state would be modernized based on the needs of the time. Throughout this period, which has been termed the "Damascus Spring," the academic and intellectual segments of society, which enjoyed a relatively free political environment, created forums to determine and outline favorable conditions in an attempt to convince the regime to carry out needed reforms (Lundgren-Jörum 2012).

In October 2005, opposition groups in Syria published a manifesto known as the "Damascus Declaration." This was an important document because it was signed by both Arab and Kurdish parties, including those who had been banned by the regime (Wikas 2007). In May 2006, 250 members of the opposition signed the "Beirut-Damascus Declaration," which not only called upon the government to initiate reforms, but also

criticized the government's policies toward Lebanon (Wikas 2007). Soon after, the regime concluded that these declarations served American and Israel conspiracies regarding Syria. As a result, 12 people who had signed the Damascus Declaration were arrested and sentenced to between 3 and 6 years in prison (Ulutaş 2011). In sum, Bashar al-Assad pledged reform when he first seized power in Syria, but he took no meaningful steps to overturn existing policies and procedures, which suggested to the people that he was no different than his father (Salık 2011).

Bashar al-Assad's neo-liberal economic policies benefitted very few while pushing the majority into poverty. The fall of the once-important agricultural sector due to government neglect and poor planning with regard to severe drought, the migration of people from the countryside to the cities when they could no longer depend on the agricultural sector to sustain them, and rising real estate prices resulting from increased demands for housing due to the presence of Iraqi refugees who had fled the war in 2003 all served to negatively affect poor and low-income citizens. In addition, increased food prices and reduced subsidies negatively impacted their purchasing power and quality of life. Beyond these economic factors, the regime's use of fear and repression to control the people, and its lack of tolerance for any opposition, served as social factors that contributed to the war. Dating back to the period of Hafez al-Assad, the suppression of the most effective opposition movement of the time via violence had left a deep imprint in the memory of the Syrian people, which prevented the formation of an effective opposition movement against the regime. In contrast with his father, when Bashar al-Assad first assumed power in Syria, he promised that he would implement economic and political reforms; however, after a few ostensibly democratic acts, he, like his father,

decided to rule via repression and intimidation with the aim of protecting his regime (Aksu 2018).

### **The reasons for the Syrian uprising and civil war**

Was the Syrian economic crisis the cause of the Syrian civil war? Are socioeconomic grievances the root cause of the Syrian uprising?

Without question, the country's persistent economic problems served to precipitate Syria's civil war. Since coming to power in 2000, Bashar al-Assad began taking steps to shift the country from a statist economy to a free-market economy (Abboud and Arslanian 2008). In taking this free market approach to galvanize liberalization, privatization, and foreign investment, Bashar al-Assad believed that the dynamism the Syrian economy lacked, because it had been stagnant for some time, could be created. To implement this economic program, Assad turned to the Chinese economic model. According to this model, the regime was seeking both to develop and modernize the country via economic reforms while also assuming control of the masses (Lust-Okar 2006). In other words, this model, which promotes economic liberalization, does not allow for similar political liberalization (Abboud & Arslanian, 2008). To implement the model, Bashar al-Assad enacted several laws. For instance, private banks were permitted to operate in Syria, public goods were privatized, and the ban on carrying foreign currency was rescinded (Sandıklı and Çakmak 2014). These steps, which were taken to revive the Syrian economy, did indeed create the expected economic boost, but they also brought about numerous problems.

In an interview conducted by Aksu Kargin with Professor James L. Gelvin, an American scholar of Middle Eastern history at the University of California Los Angeles

(UCLA), Dr. Gelvin had this to say: “All regimes in the Middle East are [isomorphic]”. He continued to say, “I do not care whether they are kingdoms or Republics”. “They are all isomorphic; they are all the same” (2018, p. 37). The professor confirmed that due to various factors, regimes in the MENA region are vulnerable to uprisings. He noted that among these factors was that the government had violated the rule of compliance. From the inception of the states during the period of decolonization to approximately the 1970s, there was a bargain that the governments made with their populations – a promise they made – which had to do with the “benefits of compliance.” In other words, “sit down and shut up and we will take care of you.” But beginning in the 1970s, with the introduction of neoliberal economic policies worldwide, governments began to backtrack from the promises that they had made. Populations that had been accustomed to free education, free medical care, and subsidized food and fuel, were now not getting what they believed they were supposed to be getting, for example, the kinds of jobs that they used to have before privatization began taking place. And Syria was at the forefront of many of these problems. As Professor Gelvin went on to contend, the neo-liberalization and privatization policies that Bashar al-Assad pursued, prompted cuts to aid (namely, subsidies) that previous governments made available to the majority of the people, bringing about resentment on the part of those who had previously benefited from this aid (Aksu 2018).

### **Syrian civil liberties and political rights**

Political rights and civil liberties in Syria have been critically undermined by one of the world’s most repressive regimes and by other antagonistic forces in an ongoing civil war. The regime prohibits genuine political opposition and harshly suppresses

freedoms of speech and assembly. Corruption, enforced disappearances, military trials, and torture are widespread in government-controlled areas. Residents of contested regions or territory held by nonstate actors are subject to additional abuses, including intense and indiscriminate combat, sieges and interruptions of humanitarian aid, and mass displacement.

Table 4: Civil liberties and political rights in Syria

<b>Freedom in the World 2020</b>		<b>Observation(s)</b>
Country	Score(s) [total]	
Syria	0/60	Total score 0%
Item(s)	Score(s)	
Political Rights	-3/40	-3 out of forty, good score
Civil liberties	3/60	3 out of sixty, good score
Status	<b>NOT FREE</b>	The year 2020, the country scores 0% that means it is not free
		The previous year [2019], Syria received 0% It was very sad, not free too.

Source: Freedom House, 2020<sup>15</sup>.

### **Functioning of government**

De facto authority in government-controlled Syria is held by the president—who is not freely elected—and by his political, security, and business allies rather than in formal institutions such as the cabinet and parliament. Foreign powers like Iran and Russia also exert considerable influence over state policy, and both opposition forces and Kurdish-led fighters have held large expanses of territory aided by countries such as Turkey and the United States (Freedom House 2020).

<sup>15</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/country/bahrain/freedom-world/2020>

Accessed on December 12, 2020

## **Transparency, freedom, and fairness of elections**

When President Bashar al-Assad was elected for a third seven-year term in 2014, the government claimed he had won 88.7 percent of the vote. However, the balloting was conducted only in government-controlled areas during wartime and under conditions of severe repression. Major democratic states decried the legitimacy of the election. As for the parliament, elections were held in 2016 for the 250-seat People's Council, but only in government-controlled territories. Several opposition groups that were traditionally tolerated by the authorities boycotted the election, and state workers were reportedly pressured to vote. Members of the military were permitted to participate in the elections for the first time. The ruling Ba'ath Party and its allies won 200 of the 250 seats, with the remainder going to nominal independents (Freedom House 2020).

## **Political pluralism and participation**

A 2011 decree permitted the registration of new political parties but also established significant roadblocks to party formation, prohibiting parties based on religion, regional affiliation, and other criteria. In reality, all legal political groups and independents are either part of, allied with, or heavily vetted by the regime. The Ba'ath Party has controlled Syria continuously since the 1960s, led by Assad or his late father for nearly all of that time. The 2011 decree and 2012 constitutional reforms formally relaxed rules regarding the participation of non-Ba'athist parties. However, the government maintains a powerful intelligence and security apparatus to monitor and punish any opposition movements that might come to the fore as serious challengers to the Assad regime (Freedom House 2020).

## **Freedom of association and freedom of expression**

Freedom of assembly is heavily restricted throughout Syria. Opposition protests in government-held areas are typically met with gunfire, mass arrests, and the torture of those who are arrested. Jihadist groups, the PYD, and some rebel factions have also employed force to stifle public dissent and demonstrations. The constitution ostensibly guarantees freedom of speech and the press, but in reality, freedom of expression is heavily restricted in government-held areas; journalists and ordinary citizens who criticize the state endure censorship, detention, torture, and death in custody (Freedom House 2020).

## **Rule of Law**

The constitution prohibits government interference in the civil judicial system, but judges and prosecutors are, for all intents and purposes, required to belong to the Ba'ath Party and are in practice duty-bound to the political leadership (Freedom House 2020).

## **Conclusion**

The chapter illustrated a historical overview of how Syria has exercised political governance and economic policies such as mismanagement of public offices and misappropriation of public funds that have led majority of Syrian Sunni citizens in the country to rebel against their own governments.

The Syrian case is the very worst among the MENA cases as it has attracted the attention of not only the region of the Middle East but also the international community, including the United States, Russia, China, and regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran, etc. The Syrian case has clearly revealed the importance of the region.

At the conclusion of this chapter, I move to chapter 5, which will illustrate a historical overview of how Tunisia has exercised political governance and economic policies such as mismanagement of public offices and misappropriation of public funds that have led the unsatisfied Tunisian citizens in the country to take to the streets protesting against their own governments.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Tunisia's historical political governance**

#### **Introduction**

The chapter explored the Tunisian political history especially under Ben Ali's regime. It further analyzed security challenges that Tunisia faced in different periods. Because Ben Ali's regime was tough against Islamist ideologies that led to imprison most of Islamist opposition's members while others fled the country. Ben Ali's regime adopted unreasonable measures to limit fundamental freedoms including freedom of association and freedom of expression; this also added more claims to the citizens' grievances who wanted to express their opinions against the regime. Among the oppressed people in Tunisia, were the members of Salafist movement, even though this religious movement represents a small number [10,000 population] compared with the overall population number of Tunisia [11,000,000] Wolf (2013), it has a strong impact in the Tunisian society.

The chapter shows how in the 1980s and early 1990s the Islamist movements were divided on how to deal with the regime in place. There were revolutionists and reformists, the former called for total regime change, and the latter wanted reconciliation with the regime, to just adopt some agreed changes. The puzzle game now is in the hands of Ennahda Party which debates on how to implement Islamic Sharia law in the modern Tunisia's politics.

The chapter further analyzed the Tunisia's economy, and it also showed how in the perspective of Tunisian regime's cronies [main big industries] worked hard to strengthen their ties with the government in offering an unconditional assistance to help

re-elect the incumbent with the purpose of keeping their businesses intact and remaining friendly with the regime. This part of the study finally explored how civil liberties and political rights of Tunisia's post Arab Spring are respected; and the findings revealed that these freedoms were respected with enough score of 70%, Freedom House (2020). However, a contentious counterterrorism law which was adopted in 2015, and successive measures adopted as states of emergency in response to the security issues are hampering the freedom of association to enable citizens convey their messages through the protests.

### **Historical overview**

The Republic of Tunisia is located in Northern Africa, bordered by the Mediterranean Sea to the north and Algeria to the west. It is bordered by Libya to the southeast and the Sahara to the southwest (Map of the World 2020). According to the United Nations, the population of Tunisia is 11,875,373. Tunisia's population comprises 0.15% of the total world population, ranking number 79 in the list of countries (and dependencies) by population. Tunisian total land area is 155,360 km<sup>2</sup> (59,985 sq. miles) and 70.1% of its population is urban (Worldometer 2020). Tunis is the capital of the Republic of Tunisia. According to Ali and Abdelwahab (2003, p.105) Tunisia gained its independence on March 20, 1956.

### **Radicalization that occurred in between the 1980s and 2000s**

Wolf (2013) questioned whether Tunisia's Islamist opposition was actually aligned with radicalism and possibly terrorism. From its very beginning, the Islamist movement in Tunisia had a heterogeneous membership encompassing different variations and interpretations of Islam. According to Habib Ellouze, the primary division inside *Jamaa*

*Islamiyya*, the most important Islamist organization at that time, “was between ‘reformists’ and ‘revolutionists’ who looked to the 1979 Iranian Revolution as a model.”

This split came to the surface after the regime’s discovery of the organization in 1980. “We were divided on our strategy *vis-à-vis* the government,” remembered Habib Ellouze, who considers himself among *Jamaa Islamiyya*’s most revolutionist members. “The reformists wanted to apply for a license to continue our activities legally while the revolutionists preferred to simply declare our existence officially without asking for government approval,” he explained. This vacillation between compromise and confrontation would define the movement throughout its existence, with at times one faction dominating over the other, depending on the Islamist leadership, as well as the regime’s approach to it. For example, in 1980 a group of armed Tunisian dissidents occupied the city of Gafsa, to confront the government of Bourguiba. In response, the leadership of *Jamaa Islamiyya* released a press *communiqué*’ condemning the incident, while its student wing, composed of rather determined “revolutionists,” openly supported the attack. *Jamaa Islamiyya*’s quick public condemnation could cause us to believe that the organization was moderate at that time, but Ajmi Ourimi, then a member of the student wing, asserted that, “Upon the attack one person quickly sent the press release, but actually the leadership of the organization was itself divided on the issue.” Despite internal leadership divisions, it was the divide between the organization and its more radical student wing that was most notable at that time. In 1981, for example, Islamist students occupied a science faculty building and held its dean hostage, which gave the regime an excuse to embark on a major operation of arrests and prosecutions of the entire

Islamist organization, by then re-named the Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI) Hamidi (1998, p. 44).

Regardless of Bourguiba's insistence on the MTI's "radical nature" and its "revolutionist" wing, the Islamist movement's strategy towards the government was in the beginning mainly one of common consent and participation. With Mohammed Mzali as prime minister, the government opened a dialogue with the Islamist movement between 1984 and 1985. This offered hope to the MTI and amplified the role of some of the movement's more "reformist" figures known for their position of compromise towards the regime, such as its co-founder Abdelfattah Mourou. "I of course thought that it would be possible for us to integrate the movement into the political sphere," he insisted. "We had discussions with politicians and the trade union; we thought we were not alone with this hope." This attitude of reconciliation toward the regime was further promoted by voices inside the MTI declaring it essential that a specific "Tunisian Islam" compatible with democratic principles be developed. For his part, Rachid Ghannouchi stated that the Islamic concept of *shura* (consultation) "legitimizes multi-party politics, alternation in power and the protection of human rights" (Maddy-Weitzman 1996). The movement's hope of joining the political process suffered bitter disappointment, however, when the Mzali government fell in 1986. The bombing of hotels in the coastal cities of Sousse and Monastir, for which a radical group called Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility (Regional Surveys of the World Series 2004, 1072 as cited in Willis (2012), "gave Bourguiba an excuse to engage in another major wave of arrests and prosecutions of the Islamists in 1987, attempting to execute its leadership, just a few months before his own deposition" (Willis 2012, p.165).

Having eagerly anticipated political inclusion for years, the Islamist movement, renamed in 1989 as “Ennahda” (“Renaissance Movement”) was anxious to join the political game once Ben Ali came to power. But his harsh repression of the Islamists following their success in the 1989 elections, resulted in many members changing their stance and strategy toward the regime.

Believing they had been deceived too often by the regime, some Ennahda members developed a more radical stance. While a secret wing of the movement composed of its most militant members had purportedly already formed years before, (Pargeter 2012), it now came to exercise control over certain aspects of Ennahda’s strategies and actions. This reached its apex in 1991, when three Islamists burned down a Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) office in Bab Souika, downtown Tunis leading to the death of a guard there. “This is part of our history, there are some events, some accidents,” acknowledged Rachid Ghannouchi in an interview with the author. Ennahda, however, still does not take a firm position on these events and the degree of its involvement. “I think there is a certain responsibility of some leaders, who were well aware of the event and let it happen,” affirmed Abdelfattah Mourou, who split from the movement in 1991 after the incident. One should bear in mind, however, that most of Ennahda’s traditional leaders, such as Rachid Ghannouchi, were either in prison or in exile at that time, leaving the movement to its own dynamics and struggles with the regime. While this is the only violent incident that can be blamed on members of the movement, it gave the government a pretext for launching an unprecedented nationwide crackdown on the Islamists, leading many observers inside and outside Tunisia to declare Ennahda “dead” until the fall of the Ben Ali regime during the 2011 revolution. With

most Ennahda members either in exile or imprisoned since the 1990s, some conservative Muslims explored different avenues for expressing their religiousness, joining more radical and extremist movements that were growing throughout the region at that time. While Tunisia's experience in Afghanistan was much less significant than the experiences of Algeria or Libya, some Tunisian volunteers did join the fight against the Soviets in the late-1980s. Several factors help to explain the minimal number of recruits from Tunisia: "little support from Saudi Arabia, which was often necessary to reach Afghanistan; the lack of any official Afghan policy on the part of the Tunisian regime, and the difficulty of returning to Tunisia after having joined jihadi call abroad" (Pargeter 2012, p. 76).

Overall, the 1990s were relatively quiet in Tunisia, with the regime praising the success of its struggle against "terrorists." Things changed, however, when the events of September 11, 2001 launched yet another wave of militancy throughout the region. In 2002, the synagogue of Djerba in southern Tunisia was bombed by a young Tunisian, and 19 people were killed. This attack, reportedly by al-Qaeda, led the Tunisian government in 2003 to enact a set of comprehensive anti-terror laws (Pargeter 2012).

In the past several years, however, there has been a greater tendency<sup>16</sup> to sign up for "jihad" in Tunisia (US Embassy-Tunis, 2008). This development was most apparent in 2006, when a small group of five Tunisians and a Mauritanian, trained by the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, later to become al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, entered Tunisia from Algeria to wage jihad in the country. While two members of the

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<sup>16</sup> US Embassy-Tunis. (2008). as cited in Wolf, A. (2013). Cable to State Department, 08TUNIS975, "Tunisia: Nineteen Convicted in Terrorism Trials," Secret//NoFORN, September 2, 2008.

group were quickly arrested by police, the remaining four, armed with six Kalashnikov rifles, some magazines, and a few grenades, planned to realize their jihadist mission by launching attacks against key infrastructure, foreign interests, symbolic targets, and Tunisian and foreign figures. Calling themselves the Soldiers of Asad Bin al-Furhat or Jund Asad Bin al-Furats, after a Tunisian who had led an army against Sicily in 827, they aspired to create a jihadist network throughout the country. “The four Tunisians managed to recruit many members from universities and quickly radicalized them, often by a few highly committed militants within the group” (Pargeter 2012, p. 85, 87).

However, government forces crushed members of the group in the town of Suleiman, south of Tunis, destroying the entire organization. Although membership was low, with only around 30 militants directly involved in the “Suleiman Group,” it is striking that, within a period of six weeks, the initial group of just four people had managed to recruit 40 at its height. Indeed, the 2000s saw an unparalleled movement of Tunisians to jihadist ideology, so much so that “Tunisian leftists, communists and Baathists [found] their own children [were] enthralled with al-Qaeda,” US diplomat reported at the time. “Even when raised by the most secular families, Tunisian youth [appeared] to be increasingly supportive of extremist ideology,” he added. A lawyer who defended the members of the Suleiman Group in court explained the group’s emergence to a United States diplomat in 2008 in as follows: “The top motivation for their actions was the war in Iraq. Several had aspired to join the ‘resistance’ there. Because of the logistical difficulties of doing so, they opted for ‘jihad’ in Tunisia instead.” Furthermore, “all [members] harbored grievances against the Tunisian state and its repressive security regime,” the lawyer added. Concerned about the possible continued growth of jihadist

groups following the Suleiman incident, the Tunisian government instituted a sweeping arrest campaign, targeting many more people somehow affiliated with the incident. The arrests were often unjustified. As Samir Ben Amor, who was the lawyer for several of the defendants, explained: “When police [arrested] one suspect, they then [reviewed] all incoming and outgoing calls to his cell phone and [swept] up everyone with whom the suspect had been in contact. Family members were often considered guilty by association” (Wolf 2013). In the government’s war against “terrorists,” all conservative Muslims, including their friends and family members, were considered suspects, even if they were moderate Islamists or Salafists. Indeed, Ben Ali was determined to erase any distinctions between the former and the latter, arguing that they all posed a threat to the state’s modernization project.

In the aftermath of the protests, “the influx of weapons and militants from Libya has adversely affected several north African countries, including Tunisia” (Paraschos 2017, p. 18). However, can Ennahda, in post-revolutionary Tunisia, truly be linked to religious conservatism, which is commonly understood to be opposed to modernization? And what is the nature of its relationship with the Salafists?

### **Tunisia’s security challenges and issues**

Terrorism is a dilemma for CSOs. Violence has continued in Tunisia since 2015, mostly on the border. Some of the violence has targeted tourists. In 2018, a suicide bombing in central Tunis injured at least nine people (Guardian 2018). Terrorism, of course, has a direct detrimental effect, but it is also used to justify repression. Indeed, in a clear violation of the 88/2011 law, the government has recently suspended hundreds of organizations for alleged links to terrorism. A recent extension of a state of emergency in

Tunisia permitted authorities to implement arbitrary and prohibitive measures to limit fundamental freedoms, such as suppressing social protests or undermining the freedom of expression, which may have negatively impacted the effectiveness of the social dialogue. Additionally, the Constitutional Court, years after its creation in the new constitution, is still looking for its posts to be filled in order to commence its role. The most worrisome challenge has been the National Constituent Assembly's refusal to constitutionalize the Social Pact, which was viewed as a way to institute social democracy and the right to collective bargaining. The refusal came in reaction to the flood of labor strikes. As employers have lost total control over workers, there has been a sharp increase in the number of strikes, detrimental to the competitiveness of the economy (Baccouche 2016). These challenges, though expected in a fledgling democracy, have indeed significantly impacted the current economic performance of the country.

Determined to create a new, even if contrived, Muslim identity to boost his own legitimacy, Ben Ali was nevertheless careful when countering elements he considered too religiously conservative (Wolf, 2013). Though the Islamist opposition was either in prison or in exile, the increasing emergence of Islamic symbols and signs among the population was highly visible in the 1990s. "Many Tunisians are increasingly demonstrating their religious beliefs, while calling into question the historically secular nature of Tunisian society," noted a cable from the US Embassy in Tunis<sup>17</sup> at the time.

Religious symbols the president considered too antiquated, such as headscarves or beards, were therefore countered. "There are many anecdotes about [government] harassment of veiled women or men with beards, including stories that police have torn

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<sup>17</sup> US Embassy, (Tunis) (2005). Cable to the US State Department as cited in Wolf (2013).

off women's veils, manhandled veiled women in the markets and arrested or interrogated bearded men or women," according to the same Embassy cable.

Pawns used to enforce the government's anti-veil policies even included some secular women's organizations, which were highly visible under Ben Ali. In 2006, for example, in a major public meeting of a pro-government women's rights organization, all participating women were demanded to remove their veils. This was done by "whispering in their ears to tugging at veils and verbally abusing the women," according to a US diplomat who was present at the meeting. "When [the President of the organization] arrived she proceeded straight to the podium and began to berate veiled members of the audience," he added. Such anti-Islamic initiatives were justified in the eyes of the government because of the so-called terrorist threat attached to conservative interpretations of Islam (Wolf 2013).

### **The Salafist issues in Tunisia's politics**

Having been severely suppressed under the Ben Ali regime, Salafists have attained a public presence in post-revolutionary Tunisia. They represent at least 10,000 in a population of approximately 11 million, but their visibility and impact go far beyond what this relatively low number might suggest. Ultra-conservative Muslims now control several hundred of the 5000 mosques in Tunisia, including important sites such as the Great Mosque of Msaken close to the coastal city of Sousse<sup>18</sup>. Salafists have also organized numerous demonstrations and sit-ins throughout the country, challenged dress-code regulations in universities, and have taken the dean of the Manouba University in Tunis hostage. To the dismay of many Tunisians and the government, Salafists have

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<sup>18</sup>Wolf, Anne's interview with Ferid Beji of Mosaique FM, on, 6 May 2013 [Ferid Beji is the president of the Dar el Hadith association, he claimed that over 500 mosques are controlled by Salafists (Wolf, A. 2013)

acquired arms and have clashed with security forces throughout Tunisia. In May 2012, ultra-conservative Muslims in the governorate of El Kef attacked a police station and places selling alcohol. One month later, they firebombed the offices of Tunisia's largest trade union, *the Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail* in Bousalam, Bengarden, and Jendouba. According to Tarek and Noueihed (2012), the aforementioned Salafist attack on the arts exhibition in La Marsa caused one death, 65 injuries of policemen, and the arrest of over 160<sup>19</sup>. In September 2012, violent Salafist mobs took to the streets to protest an American film that ridiculed the Prophet Mohamed and stormed the U.S. Embassy in Tunis and an American school, leaving three dead and causing the U.S. Embassy to recall its nonessential staff. Mohammed Khouja the leader of Jabhat al-Islah, which constitutes a minority, originated from the Tunisian Islamic Front, a radical wing of the MTI that split from the movement in 1988 but whose influence remained rather limited under the former regime. Since the beginning of the Tunisian revolution, however, Khouja and other radical militants of the Tunisian Islamic Front have joined the peaceful "scientific" Salafists and formed a political party in order to participate in politics, despite their objection to the Western model of liberal democracy.

According to Wolf (2013), Mohammed Khouja maintained that "In Europe, democracy gives sovereignty to the people, but in Muslim countries, we prefer to emphasize the sovereignty of Islamic legislation," adding that, for him, "the job of the lawmaker is to distinguish the *haram* (illicit) from what is *halal* (licit) according to

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<sup>19</sup> Amara, Tarek, and Lin Noueihed. 2012. As cited Wolf (2013). "Tunisian Salafi Islamists Riot over 'Insulting' Art." Reuters, June 12.

Islamic law.” Such ultraconservative beliefs suggest that the party is clearly in conflict with internationally recognized human rights standards, such as women’s rights. “Men can have up to four wives,” stated Mohammed Khouja when asked about his stance on polygamy (Wolf 2012). This discussion reflects the agenda of another licensed ultra-conservative party, Hizb-ut-Tahrir, which is part of a wider international organization of the same name. Both Hizb-ut-Tahrir and Jabhat al-Islah have as their primary goal the implementation of Islamic law, with Hizb-ut-Tahrir advocating an international Islamic Revolution to establish the Caliphate. “Such a revolution can either take place through a popular uprising similar to Iran’s in 1979, through a vote, or by staging a *coup d’e’tat*,” explained Moncef Manai, a militant of Hizb-ut-Tahrir in Jendouba. Jabhat al-Islah, on the other hand, favors a more gradual and national approach, which makes it unattractive in the eyes of many Tunisian Salafists, with many suggesting that its members are “not true Salafists” (Wolf 2013).

### **Ennahda gained power with its Islamist moderation stance**

When Ennahda came to power as a result of its landslide victory in the October 2011 Constituent Assembly elections, many inside and outside Tunisia found it disconcerting that 55 years of secular rule had come to an end. The use of the terms “extremists” and “terrorists” by Bourguiba and Ben Ali to denounce the Islamist movement for decades undoubtedly contributed to the apprehension with the new ruling party. Statements by senior members of Ennahda such as Said Ferjani announcing that it would “protect both the bikini<sup>20</sup> and the burka” could not placate the country’s

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<sup>20</sup> BBC News, “Tunisia Will Protect ‘Burqa or Bikini’ Choice,” (March 12, 2012 as cited in Wolf, A. 2013).

secularists; they were troubled by the sharp increase in the role of religion in post-revolutionary Tunisia (BBC News, March 12, 2012). Such declarations, however, were also worrisome to Tunisia's most conservative Muslims, who vigorously object to secular and Western symbols in the country. Adding to this complexity, Rachid Ghannouchi mentioned numerous times that Salafists are the children of Tunisia and that they reminded him of his own youth. This led many to conclude that Ennahda was pursuing a "double strategy." The ruling party attempted to justify its apparently ambiguous stance by stating that it strived to reconcile Islam with modernity, not in the secular and autocratic way of Bourguiba and Ben Ali, but in a way that would show consideration for particularities of Tunisian culture and Islamic identity, while maintaining modern principles like democracy (Wolf 2013).

Ennahda's seemingly dubious policies are not just because of its attempt to take a centrist position between the Salafist and the secularists. They are also the result of its dependence on the Salafist vote and two different and sometimes contradictory tendencies within the movement itself. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the Islamists were divided on their respective strategies towards the regime. The "revolutionists" called for confrontation, while the "reformists" supported reconciliation. Nowadays, the split within Ennahda is the debate about the method of implementing Islamic Sharia law.

Ennahda's "pragmatics," such as Rachid Ghannouchi and former Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali, favor compromise and a step-by-step approach towards Islamic principles and practices. Conversely, the party's "doctrinal wing," which includes Habib Ellouze and Sadok Chourou, aligns more with the Salafists in stressing the supremacy of Islamic law and calling for its immediate implementation. The deep division inside Ennahda

along the lines of these two tendencies is best exemplified by Sadok Chourou being ranked by Islamist militants as the number one choice for Ennahda's Shura Council during its Congress, whereas Rachid Ghannouchi was reappointed as the head of the movement at the same time. When in March 2012 Ennahda elected not to endorse a specific reference to *Sharia* as a foundation of law in Tunisia's new Constitution<sup>21</sup>, this decision thus did not garner consensus among its members (Reuters, March 26, 2012). In fact, the decision even led some senior militants, like Sadok Chourou, who had been imprisoned for 18 years under the former regime, to repeatedly and indignantly object before Tunisia's Constituent Assembly, a highly acclaimed action applauded by Ennahda's doctrinal wing, as well as the country's Salafists. Many ultra-conservative Muslims undeniably deeply respect Ennahda's most militant members, having sometimes spent years in prison together under the former regime. "There was always sympathy and brotherhood between Salafists and members of Ennahda in jail," explained Ajmi Ourimi, who was imprisoned for more than 17 years for being an Ennahda militant, much of it in solitary confinement<sup>22</sup>. Although many Ennahda members were in reality released before a wave of Salafists were imprisoned in the 2000s, a sense of brotherhood and goodwill among Islamists and ultra-conservatives can still be explained by this common experience. When Ennahda decided against a specific reference to Islamic law in the Constitution, the frustration and disappointment among its doctrinal wing and Tunisia's Salafists became very apparent.

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<sup>21</sup> (Reuters, March 26, 2012 as cited in Wolf 2013).

<sup>22</sup> Anne Wolf's Interview with Ajmi Ourimi, Tunis, August 8, 2012 as cite in Wolf (2013, p.567)

Tunisia's youth wing was especially disenchanted by the decision, causing some young Islamists to abandon the movement to join more conservative camps (Wolf 2013a). The decision not to refer to Sharia was made primarily because of the influence of "pragmatists" among Ennahda leaders such as Ghannouchi and former prime minister Hamadi Jebali. In 2006, just after being released from prison, Hamadi Jebali emphasized in a discussion with an American diplomat that Ennahda does not intend to create an Islamic Republic, stressing that "in the social and political world, [it is] just one party like the others." He clearly distanced himself from other Islamic parties where, according to him "everyone believes they have the divine truth, and no one accepts criticism". Such rhetoric reflects the pragmatism of Ennahda leader Ghannouchi, whose moderate position on issues such as Sharia law and women's rights has profoundly shaped the entire movement. In an interview with the author, Ghannouchi explained that, contrary to the widespread belief that Islamic law is about "punishment," for him Sharia represents "a set of values to be understood and translated into society. These values are justice, liberty, mercy and brotherhood." This implies that "Tunisia is now not outside of Sharia, but inside it. Every time justice is implemented, Tunisia comes closer to Sharia." In contrast with the Salafists and Ennahda's doctrinal wing, Ghannouchi opposes enacting Islamic law on a society in which "many people do not understand it." He insisted that "in a democratic state, the parliament has to reflect the society," stressing that "Ennahda does not want Bourguiba and Ben Ali's top-down approach of imposing their ideology and strategy on the Tunisian people." Ennahda's willingness to broaden its interpretation of Islam to reflect Tunisian reality, as well as its internal contradictions between the pragmatic and doctrinal wing, is also evident in other topics, such as the role of women in

society. Eager to demonstrate a modern vision of gender politics, Ennahda's leaders have encouraged more and more women to join the party and to run for office. Ennahda has even appointed Mehrezia Labidi as the vice-president of the Constituent Assembly, the highest government position held by any woman in the entire Arab world.

On the other hand, some male Ennahda members have criticized Labidi for shaking the hand of a man during plenary sessions and have also opposed parts of Tunisia's pioneering Personal Status Code, causing many secular Tunisians to question the party's commitment to women's rights. This became apparent when Al-Ennahda proposed a constitutional reference to the "complementary" nature of gender roles, rather than equality, a clause that was later removed due to fierce protest by the political opposition and in civil society. Within Al-Ennahda, the reference was supported by the majority of men and women alike. Yusra Ghannouchi, who opposed the clause due to its ambiguity, confirmed that she found herself in the minority within the ruling party.

While under the Ennahda government secular women have feared infringement of their basic rights, many Islamist women have felt that for the first time their rights are being respected. In an interview with the author, Amel Azzouz, vice-president of Ennahda's Parliamentary Block, explained that, for her, Ben Ali's modernization policies were a double-edged sword that prevented her, in the name of women's rights, from expressing her religious convictions by, for example, wearing the veil. Amel Azzouz explained that "in Islamic law, the position of women as human beings is equal to that of men: they enjoy the same rights." While this, according to her, "does not mean full equality in every field of life," but rather complementary gender roles, (Wolf 2013, p.), it nevertheless differentiates Ennahda from the more conservative Salafist view calling for

total gender segregation in everyday life. However, despite its often ambiguous relationship with the Salafists, Ennahda is still very cautious to differentiate itself, for ideological and strategic reasons, from Tunisia's more conservative Muslims. When Salafists attacked an arts exhibition in La Marsa in June 2012, Ennahda called the incident a "terrorist attack" and threatened to employ live ammunition in any future, similar cases. However, despite the increase this type of religiously motivated unrest in the country, Tunisia's moderate Islamists reassert that ultra-conservatives constitute only a "tiny minority" within Tunisian society. They note that Salafism emerged in the 1990s when Ennahda members were either in exile or imprisoned, pushing conservative Muslims to look for other ways to express their religious devotion. In an interview with the author, Ghannouchi insisted that there is no place in Tunisia for religious extremism. According to Ennahda's leader, Tunisia features a specifically moderate Islamic legacy that reconciles Islam with modernity, in contrast with the global and sometimes violent approach of many Salafists (Wolf 2013). By inferring that Salafism is an anomaly foreign to the country with little social base comprising it, Ghannouchi argues that Ennahda is the true heir to Tunisian Islam.

But does this hold true in post-revolutionary Tunisia, where the Salafist movement is rapidly increasing its numbers and its voice? And does the increase in Salafists jeopardize Ennahda's plan to reconcile Islam with modernization?

### **Tunisia's economy**

Tunisia's economic development remained flat and the economy stagnant after a decade of the Ben Ali honeymoon (Murphy (1999). Cronies working to strengthen ties with the dictatorial government(s), cronies' deliverables to the regime. Elections in the

patrimonial dictatorial regimes such as Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia served to lend an air of legitimacy to the governments that distribute rent-seeking benefits to key supporters (Blaydes 2011). Cronies have played a large role in providing political support to Tunisia, just as in other countries. Businessmen in Egypt bought votes (often literally) in exchange for government favors to keep the regime in power in the pseudo-democracy. In the 2010 elections, Ahmed Ezz and other prominent businessmen in Egypt hired intimidating thugs to harass ordinary people and discourage them from voting. Ezz bussed thousands of his steel factory employees (EZDK) and lined up the bussing of government employees from other state and semi-state institutions and ministries to vote for the regime. In Morocco, politically connected enterprises are known to implicitly order their employees to vote for the ruling party (Kubinec 2018). Even in rural areas, local elites and large landowners work with the intelligence body (Caid) and the police to depoliticize the rural population and prevent it from presenting a threat to the monarchy (Bergh & Rossi-Doria 2015; Bergh 2008). In Tunisia, the National Council of the Tunisian Union of Industry, Trade, and Handicrafts (UTICA) closely supported the president in elections. In 2010, it issued a statement calling on him to run for re-election in 2014 (Sadiki 2010).

### **The growth of disadvantaged social groups**

In all three of these countries [Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia], public sector employees are the second most privileged group. They enjoy lifetime job security, social protection, annual public sector wage raises, several allowances, and various consumer subsidies and social services, though these latter two have been decreasing. The average

government salary in Tunisia in 2007 was 67% above the national average (Mahjoub 2010).

Nevertheless, the potential for a favorable transformation exists in Tunisia. The assets of Tunisia's former cronies have been confiscated, although the new political environment has not resulted in the complete restructuring of that group. According to El-Haddad (2019), new policies have not yet been completely developed or implemented, but a serious social dialogue has been blossoming that will eventually shape the relationship between the state and the numerous social groups. Thus, a better social contract may be evolving. For example, immediately following the revolution, two Industrial Policies [IPs] measures were instituted in response to the grievances of disadvantaged social groups. Moreover, Tunisia's social contract is likely to sustain improvements that may well lead to stability in the coming years.

In response to Tunisia's newly relaxed regulations, there has been massive expansion in the CSO, creating active social and political spaces. Following a 10-month National Dialogue, in January 2013 the government, the secretary general of UGTT<sup>23</sup>, the President of the employers' association, UTICA<sup>24</sup>, the Tunisian Human Rights League (LADH) and the Tunisian Order of Lawyers have all signed a joint Social Pact to explore new ways to develop industrial relations. In the past, business associations were only mechanisms for promoting state policy to the private sector. Ben Ali's clan dominated UTICA through its president Hedi Djilani, a close ally of Ben Ali since 1988; Djilani was forced to step down after the uprisings. The Pact recognizes the value of social dialogue

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<sup>23</sup> *Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail : الاتحاد العام التونسي للشغل*

<sup>24</sup> *Union Tunisienne de l'Industrie, du Commerce et de l'Artisanat*

as a reliable backbone of an economic development model focused on targeted employment and greater social justice (Jemail 2015).

### **Laws related to Commerce and international partners**

Tunisia introduced a new legislative structure that partially cleared away the ambiguity in laws that had catalyzed opportunities for rent and corruption. The new laws for investment (#71/2016), fiscal incentives (#8/2017) and financial incentives (#389/2017) established strong requirements to market access in terms of the administrative guidelines and procedures. The laws also established equality between Tunisian and foreign investors, expanded international transfer of funds and set clear guarantees and obligations for investors (El-Haddad 2019).

The success of these reforms, however, relies on reforming the financial and banking sectors. The large state-owned banks that prominently comprise the banking sector have no expertise in risk selection. The sector was weakened because the private interests of the clans of the previous regime received credit based on a different set of criteria, saddling the sector with a high number of non-performing loans (OECD, 2015). Conscious efforts have been made to address the problem of duality: the segregation of offshore/onshore sectors due to substantial restrictions to entry to the degree that it had become easier to export to France than it was to the onshore sector (World Bank 2014). For example, the government has raised corporate tax rates on exporting firms from 0% to 10% and reduced the rate from 35% to 25% for non-exporting firms (Oxford Business Group 2016).

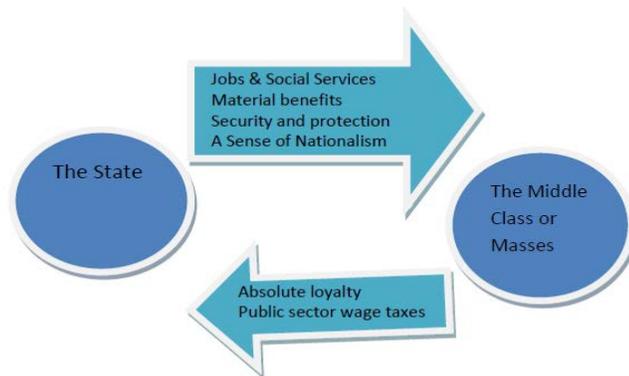
Tunisia is also allowing close cooperation with international multilaterals. For example, the value chain development platform is part of a World Bank-supported pilot

project whose purpose is to institutionalize an integrated, analytical, participatory, and market-oriented approach to value chain development in order to safeguard against risks of capture. Remarkably, this initiative is supported several relevant ministries and is not just in the hands of the ministry of industry in cooperation with small and medium enterprise support agencies (APIA, APII, and CEPEX) and a couple of regional development ones (ODNO and ODCO). Among the pilot sectors were pharmaceuticals, with the following results:: 1) the reduction of delays in medical appraisal reviews to bring products to the market, from 2.5 to 3 years in 2013 to just 6–9 months in 2017; 2) a decree in 2014 modernizing the regulatory framework of clinical trials; and 3) achieving consensus between ministries of trade, health, and social affairs on the guidelines for medical pricing. These agreements were reached in a transparent, efficient, and participatory manner (El-Haddad 2019).

### **Tunisia’s social contract**

Social contract with support base rooted in the elite rather than the masses: The “‘unsocial’ social contract,” 1980–2010. The economic reforms established to remedy the crisis of the old development model hastened the end of the populist social contract. As the rents which funded this model dried up, a power struggle ensued, with crony capitalists capturing the remaining and emerging rents rather than the middle classes, creating an “unsocial” social contract. The term *unsocial* here refers to the fact that a growing number of societal groups were excluded from negotiating or benefitting from the contract, ultimately leading to the uprisings in 2010–2011.

Figure 3: Social Contract



**Source:** Adapted from El-Haddad (2019).

Tunisia's program has been praised as a success story by the international community and a role model for other MENA and African countries in light of the significant and sustainable rise in exports, steady growth, and flourishing industrial production (Altenburg 2011; Erdle 2011; Murphy 2006). Tunisia followed a dual model in which the export-oriented offshore sector was accessible to free competition and distinctly represented the competitive side of its economy (Achy 2012).

Tunisia is progressing toward an even more inclusive development model, but the country is still struggling for consensus on a clear direction for economic policy and remains threatened by extremism. International efforts to support democratic development in countries like Tunisia need to be conditioned on the diverse nature of the ongoing transitions in the social contract (El-Haddad 2019).

Over 50 percent of the Tunisian economy is subject to full or partial entry restrictions, equivalent to a tax on revenue of 13 percent (Rijkers et al., 2014; World Bank, 2014). These restrictions include the number of firms allowed in the market in specific sectors, such as road transport, railways, fisheries, tourism (travel agencies),

advertising, health, real estate, agricultural extension services, vocational and professional training, telecoms, and education.

There are also legal monopolies which are mostly but not exclusively found in utilities such as the tobacco supply chain, water, gas, electricity, road transport, and air transport. Laws such as the Investment Incentive Code (Law No. 93-120, 1993 amended in 2009), the Commerce Code, and even the Competition Law often solidify these barriers. These regulations can also take the form of district legislation, particularly in services. The laws have bolstered Tunisia's dual system in a way that has created opportunities for rents for the onshore sector. The investment law grants the offshore export-oriented sector investment incentives. But the very same law has subjected the onshore sector, where the majority of Ben Ali's and Tarabelsi businesses have operated, to various entry restrictions. Offshore firms find it difficult to compete in domestic onshore markets. Around 40 percent of the sectors with at least one Ben Ali firm require previous authorization from the Investment Commission (Schiffbauer *et al.*, 2014) suggesting regulatory capture where the regulator favors particular firms (Rijkers 2013).

In 2011, the estimated total value of clan-confiscated assets amounted to a quarter of Tunisia's GDP. There have also been cases of outright closures of businesses that directly compete with those of Ben Ali's, such as the Bouebdelli School, and the restriction on the entry of McDonald's (Rijkers *et al.*, 2014). Tunisia maintained monopolies even in segments of transport and telecom that have been long-identified as typically subject to competition (World Bank, 2014). As a result, the protected firms have accumulated substantial profits, which, in turn, have led the state-dominated banking system to favor them with loans. They have received close to 2.5 percent of GDP in bank

loans, around a third of which were granted without a guarantee (ibid.). Constraints to competition have limited private sector growth and job creation in the onshore sector and have damaged the competitiveness of the offshore sector, thereby limiting Tunisia's counterfactual growth (in manufacturing) and high value-added job creation. Industrial policy has, therefore, been captured by cronies.

### **Tunisian civil liberties and political rights**

Tunisia began transitioning to democracy after ousting a longtime autocrat from power in 2011. Tunisian citizens now enjoy groundbreaking political rights and civil liberties. However, widespread corruption, economic challenges, security threats, and ongoing unresolved issues pertaining to gender equality and transitional justice continue to pose roadblocks to the full establishment of democracy.

### **Recent political developments in Tunisia**

After President Beji Caid Essebsi's death in July 2019, Tunisia held a special presidential election in September and October of that same year. A political outsider, Kais Saied, was victorious in the runoff, defeating television station owner Nabil Karoui by a wide margin. The Ennahda party placed first in the parliamentary elections held in October, but was still working to form a coalition government as the year was ending. Both the presidential and parliamentary elections were well conducted overall, and stakeholders gave credence to the results (Freedom House 2020).

Quite possibly the most cherished accomplishment in the years following the Tunisian uprisings has been the realization of freedom of speech and assembly. However, not all forms of assembly and speech are permitted, or even protected, in Tunisia's post-Ben Ali environment. Tunisians continue to decry the same frustrations they voiced in

2010-2011, mainly demands for social and economic justice: issues such as corruption, unemployment, and a decent standard of living. With some noteworthy exceptions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been free to take on the role of watchdog over the electoral and civil liberties aspects of Tunisia’s foray into democracy. However, recent leftist and land/labor demonstrations aimed towards issues of economic and social justice have encountered repressive responses (Gordner 2019).

Table 5: Civil Liberties and Political Rights in Tunisia

<b>Freedom in the World 2020</b>		<b>Observation(s)</b>
Country	Score(s) [total]	
Tunisia	70/%	Total score 70%
Item(s)	Score(s)	
Political Rights	32/40	32 out of forty, good score
Civil liberties	38/60	38 out of sixty, good score
Status	<b>FREE</b>	In 2020, the country scored 70%, meaning it is free
		The previous year [2019], Tunisia scored 69% , also indicating it was free.

Source: Freedom House 2020<sup>25</sup>.

### **Political processes in the Tunisia’s post-Arab Spring**

The 2014 constitution codifies a semi-presidential system<sup>26</sup> in which a popularly elected president serves as head of state and exercises predefined powers, while the majority party in the parliament chooses a prime minister who serves as head of

<sup>25</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/country/bahrain/freedom-world/2020>

Accessed on December 12, 2020

<sup>26</sup> Semi-Presidential System is known to be exercised by France as a former great power and colonizer of Tunisia.

government, following parliamentary elections. The president is directly elected for up to two five-year terms (Freedom House 2020).

### **Functioning of government**

The expulsion of the autocrat Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and his close relatives and associates in 2011 paved the way for the formation of a representative government accountable to voters. However, the late president Essebsi had manipulated the national budget in such a way as to leave the legislative branch significantly underfunded, leaving it with a limited capacity and resources to draw up legislation on its own. As a result, lawmaking has become primarily a function of the executive branch (Freedom House 2020).

### **Rule of law**

Although a robust and independent judiciary is a requirement spelled out in the constitution, judicial reform has progressed slowly since the 2011 revolution, with several Ben Ali-era judges still seated on the bench and successive governments regularly pushing to influence the courts. Legislation passed in 2016 established the Supreme Judicial Council, a body tasked with ensuring the independence of the judiciary and appointing Constitutional Court judges. Council members were elected in 2016 by thousands of legal professionals. However, as of 2019, the Constitutional Court, which is intended to evaluate the constitutionality of decrees and laws, had not yet been established, with no members formally appointed as of yet (Freedom House 2020).

### **Transparency, freedom, and fairness of elections**

Tunisia's 2014 constitution established a unicameral legislature, the Assembly of the Representatives of the People (ARP), which comprises 217 representatives serving

five-year terms, with members elected on party lists in 33 multimember constituencies. International and national observers deemed the legislative elections held in October 2019 to be generally competitive and fair. Ennahda placed first with 52 seats, and the party's prime-minister designate, former junior agriculture minister Habib Jemli, was engaged in forming a coalition government by year's end. Karoui's new Qalb Tounes (Heart of Tunisia) party won 38 seats, the progressive Democratic Current took 22, the Al-Karama (Dignity) Coalition won 21, and the remaining seats were divided among 11 other parties and 17 independent candidates (Freedom House 2020).

### **Political pluralism and participation**

Tunisia's numerous political parties span a broad range of ideologies and political ideals, and they are generally free to organize and operate. The 2019 parliamentary elections saw robust competition between political parties and independent candidates within electoral processes that were considered to be largely free and fair by both local and international observers (Freedom House 2020).

### **Freedom of association**

The constitution guarantees the rights to assembly and peaceful protest. Public demonstrations on political, social, and economic issues periodically occur. However, a controversial counterterrorism law was adopted in 2015, and successive states of emergency were declared in response to political and security issues, causing significant limitations on public demonstrations. The latest state of emergency, which was renewed in August 2019 through the end of that year, permitted security forces to ban strikes, meetings, and large gatherings if they were likely to foment unrest. Although the government argues that the continued state of emergency is necessary due to security

concerns, many analysts claim that it remains in place primarily as a political tool to quell dissent (Freedom House 2020).

## **Conclusion**

Tunisia is the only country in the Arab world that has endorsed the principles of democratic governance despite having parties that are affiliated with political Islam.

The current political situation in Tunisia is regarded as a good model to follow in the MENA region. Freedom House (2020), an American research institution that promotes democracy and human rights, found that Tunisians are free to exercise political rights and civil liberties. This does not mean that Tunisia has reached a requisite level in these freedoms and liberties; there are still allegations that under the pretext of security issues, the current Tunisian government has restricted the freedom of association.

The following chapter takes us to our final assessment of this study, which examines how, why, and when protests in these countries started and ended, and where they currently stand.

Chapter 6 discusses the Arab Spring and its outcomes, how and why social movements erupted in Tunisia, and how soon after, the protests spread in the Arab world. As further explained in Chapter 6, the Arab Spring caused different outcomes ranging from successful protests and regime change to mass demonstrations that transformed into civil war.

## **Chapter Six**

### **The Arab Spring: failed and successful revolutions and the path to the transitional democracy**

#### **Introduction**

The literature of contentious politics centers on a wide range of arguments to explain events such as protests, rebellions, civil wars, revolutions, and terrorism, among others. However, most of these factors are categorized in two categories: grievances and opportunities. Earlier literature emphasized the role of underlying grievances as the core reason for rebellion. This classical model, also known as the relative deprivation model, argues that people make the decision to rebel because of the grievances against the target group, mostly the authority. For this model, there is an objective aspect -- conditions or strains originating from society or the state which can affect individuals. There is also a subjective aspect that considers the psychological impact of these objective factors on individuals. The motivation to participate in social movements, therefore, comes from the need to change the conditions that create a disruptive psychological state ( Kilavuz 2020).

Many analyses of the social drivers of protest in the Arab Spring have stressed the bottom-up factors driving Middle Eastern discontent. Examining the participants involved in mass street demonstrations and their specific grievances, these interpretations have indicated that “unrest in the MENA region is most closely tied to socioeconomic inequality, perceived official corruption, a large youth bulge, and the widespread use of modern communications technologies” (Hess 2013, p.255). The reasons that underlined these demonstrations are the same as in other Arab countries: “better living conditions, the expansion of political rights while limiting the power of the ruling family, and an end

to the perceived anti-Shiite policies of the Bahraini government” (Davidson 2012, p.p. 205, 208). “They all involved the eruption of nonviolent mass protests over multiple days, the spread of protest to multiple geographic sites, and the seizure and control of public spaces by protesters (Tunisia: Bourguiba Avenue in Tunis, Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt, the ‘Pear Roundabout’ [*Dawwār Al-lu’lu’ah*] of Manama in Bahrain)” Brownlee (2015, p. 20).

The adaptation of Middle Eastern authoritarianism to the challenges posed by the renewal of mass politics: As waves of protest spread across the region at the end of 2010 and early 2011, authoritarian regimes seemed to be more vulnerable than at any time in the modern history of the Middle East. Protest movements exposed the failure of Arab autocrats to address deep-seated economic, social, and political grievances, challenging the idea that authoritarian regimes are adaptive and able to adjust their strategies and tactics to evolving conditions. These movements, in their respective working mass demonstrations, have helped to “topple four longtime rulers - in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen- while threatening the stability of others” (Heydemann 2013, p.61). In terms of the interests of great powers, the MENA region lacks the international pressure necessary to democratize the Arab world’s political and other governmental institutions (which constitutes what scholars call “unconstrained security states”), especially in comparison to regimes that fell during the third wave of democracy (Bellin 2004; Skocpol 1979). When uprisings threatened pro-U.S. autocracies, according to Brownlee, *et al.* (2015, p.70), the White House preferred a “wait and see” approach, reserving strong support until after the opposition had overthrown the despot”. This approach in the Arab

Spring cases such as Tunisia and Egypt helped ensure that local militaries, not foreign patrons, remained the catalysts of protests.

### **Causes of revolutions and protests in the MENA**

The Middle East and North Africa have fascinated social scientists because almost all of the region's regimes survived the third wave of democratization, and those few that fell were replaced by new autocracies (Huntington 1991). In the 2000s, comparativists revisited the question of Middle Eastern exceptionalism (Berman 2002; Fish 2002; Stepan and Robertson 2003). Some scholars wonder if there was something about the region's history, culture, or dominant religion (Islam) that exacerbated authoritarianism.

Political experts of the region responded that while the MENA autocracies were more durable than their counterparts elsewhere, the causes of robust authoritarianism were inherently political (Posusney 2004; Posusney and Angrist 2005). Consequently, the MENA regimes were not exceptions to the relationships social scientists had observed between institutions or economics, on the one hand, and political outcomes on the other. Instead, these enduring autocracies exhibited new levels of variance for those explanatory and dependent variables. In particular, regimes from Morocco to the Persian Gulf relied on high levels of domestic repression and a general lack of international pressure (this constitutes what scholars call "unconstrained security states"), especially when compared to regimes that fell during the third wave (Bellin 2004; Brownlee 2002; Snyder 1991; Skocpol 1979).

Some scholars have gone on to say that these common conditions present a contrast to the nature of authoritarianism in other regions; however, with regard to the

lack of international pressure on countries in other regions, everything depends on the interests of great powers in a given region. In Sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, a significant number of countries use domestic repression at the same or greater level than Arab countries do, without facing any pressure from international community.

### **Protests in Tunisia**

In the case of grievances, Hoffman and Jamal (2014) found that higher religiosity had an impact on participation in protests in both Tunisia and Egypt. Delving deeper into the issue, they argued that religiosity also played a significant role in predicting religious motivations (which they have considered under the label of grievances) and not religious resources (opportunities). Beissinger *et al.* (2015) as cited in Kilavuz (2020) examined the same cases to explain the differences in socioeconomic profiles of revolutionary coalitions. While the factors explaining participation in protests in Tunisia would be nominally different from other MENA states, some scholars have argued that the Tunisian Revolution was significantly more diverse in social composition compared to other Arab nations such as Bahrain and Syria. While they have cited “the presence of economic grievances as the overriding cause of participants’ motives, they did not systematically analyze the role of such grievances in participation in protests” (Kilavuz 2020, p. 86).

Barrie, focusing on Tunisia, argued that the drivers of protest can be fluid and tied to the process of protest itself. While local development, which is linked to economic grievances, was a predictor of participation in the early stages of protests, it later shifted, and the commitment to democracy was a better predictor in subsequent stages of the anti-Ben Ali protests (Barrie 2018). This is clearly substantiated by the fact that the Ben Ali

regime lacked the principles of good governance that would have fostered economic development for “all”. Thus, the protests’ shift from a social perspective to a political one occurred as a result of Ben Ali’s detrimental policies.

The protests in Tunisia at the end of 2010 seemed to catch some students of international politics off guard, but the country had experienced sporadic protests in the past, though, of course, with little capacity to change the social order of the Ben Ali regime. Prior to the 2010 protests, disgruntled citizens had organized collective actions against a mining company in 2008, which soon expanded to involve protestors demonstrating against rising inflation and unemployment in other parts of the country (Ottaway and Hamzawy 2011).

Protesting against an authoritarian regime may result in serious ramifications, ranging from beatings, to imprisonment, and even death in some cases. In fact, a retrospective analysis of the protests in Tunisia and in other MENA countries such as Syria and Bahrain shows that the protestors often suffered these dangerous consequences. Since they had lived under the rule of repressive regimes, citizens had been aware of the potential risks of participating in protests even before they left their homes. Nonetheless, some of them resolved to protest, while others did not. This discrepancy was potentially brought about by their varying perceptions of opportunities (Kilavuz 2020).

December 18, 2010 marked the beginning of major protests in Tunisia (Brownlee 2015, p.12). According to Kilavuz (2020, p. 87) “the main slogan of the Tunisian Revolution was “Bread, Freedom, and Human Dignity” (*Aish, Hurriyah, Karamah Insaniyyah*). In Tunisia, as in many other MENA countries, the large, educated youth population became increasingly frustrated with its poor job prospects, which likely

played a decisive role in fueling the unrest. Many of these educated youth joined the growing ranks of the *hittistes*, Arab slang [especially in Tunisia and Algeria] for “those who lean against walls” (Knickmeyer 2011). In 2005, the official unemployment rate in Tunisia had reached 14.2 percent, leaving many youths exasperated with the political and economic status quo and the impetus to plan and organize collective actions against the regime. The government of Tunisia was slowly eroding because of its lack of effective institutional mechanisms for sustaining long term internal cohesion among elites and control over society. At the same time, “Tunisia also ranked high in their degree of oppression. Citing the exceptional “robustness” of the coercive apparatuses of Middle Eastern regimes”, Bellin (2004, p.p. 139, 57) and Brownlee (2010, p.p. 468, 89) considered this capacity to be a primary reason for the remarkable resilience of dictatorships in the region (Hess 2013). While Tunisia and other former regimes in the MENA region had implemented some liberal reforms, these regimes for the most part had unyieldingly maintained their discretionary grip on the economy (Bellin 2004), which substantially precipitated the formation of a “rent-seeking urban bourgeoisie and landed elite with no interest in democracy or political participation” (King 2007, p. 434 cited in Hess 2013, p. 262).

Many commentaries written immediately after the Arab Spring argued that the “sultanistic” nature of authoritarian rule in Tunisia and Egypt, compared with the better institutionalized single-party rule of the CCP, left MENA regimes vulnerable to internal divisions and collapse (Fukuyama 2011; Goldstone 2011b, p.p. 8-16 as cited in Hess 2013, p. 263).

## **Tunisia's military stance in politics**

Because of Tunisia's military's stance before, during, and after the Arab Spring, the transition to democracy flourished to the extent that Tunisia is now considered a post-transitional democracy. However, in the summer of 2013, the Tunisian transition appeared to be on the verge of collapse. In the aftermath of the assassination of two leftist politicians, a deadlock of the Constituent Assembly, and the negligent detention of Islamic radicals by the Ennahda-led government, popular discontent ensued. Sixty members of the Constituent Assembly resigned from their posts, and a coalition of political parties supported by 100,000 protesters gathered in Bardo Square demanding the dissolution of the assembly, the resignation of the government, and the replacement of both with unelected technocrats. This was a *coup d'etat* moment: some activists approached the military to ascertain its willingness to intervene as in Egypt. The Tunisian military, however, indicated its reluctance to provide a military solution, and the civilians were compelled to seek an alternative resolution. The military's unique corporate culture and self-understanding played a key role in preventing it from responding to these triggers (Eva Bellin, 2018). Furthermore, despite lacking a strong army, Tunisia's police force served as the backbone of the coercive apparatus to control and repress the opposition (Kilavuz 2020).

Tunisia's Ben Ali summoned much despotic power as he could mobilize, but in the toughest confrontation in his career, the backstop of the coercive apparatus, the uniformed military, soon deserted him. The coercive apparatus enjoyed autonomy from the political leadership through modern Tunisian statehood. Uniformed officers had never been married to the regime through rents or dynasticism. Thus, the essential seeds of an

effective challenge to the regime had been sown long before Bouazizi's dramatic self-immolation in December 2010 (Brownlee *et al.* 2015). However, when the Tunisian Police intervened and appeared to be prepared to use force to defend former president Ben Ali, the military defied him. Armed Forces Chief of Staff General Rachid Ammar disobeyed the order to attack the Kasserine protesters, signaling to the dictator and his constituents that the military would not support their lethal campaign. In this case, the military did not remain neutral and instead joined the fray, but not on the side of Ben Ali. Rather than repelling the crowds, Ammar protected them, deploying soldiers into the streets of Tunis and other cities to shield them from further assaults by the Ministry of the Interior. With no other option, Ben Ali fled the country. In the coercive apparatus, Tunisia has presented the clearest example of a divide between military and police forces (Brownlee *et al.* 2015).

According to Schraeder and Redissi (2011, p.p.13, 14) after Ben Ali fled the country, "Ammar ordered the troops to secure the major cities and crossroads and made it clear that neither he nor the military had any intention of playing any political role beyond protecting the demonstrators and the Tunisian public more generally and ensuring the formation of a civilian led democracy." This detachment from national politics would unfold effectively in the years that followed, as civilians, not soldiers, led a contentious, but by regional standards, promising transition to democracy. Although Tunisia observers credited the Obama Administration with conveying to Ben Ali that he would not be allowed to take refuge in United States (Schraeder and Redissi 2011, 14), when former U.S. President Obama hailed the Tunisian victory during his State of the Union address on January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011, Ben Ali had already been in Saudi Arabia for over ten days.

## **Protests in Bahrain**

Bahrain is a small island kingdom in the Arabian Gulf. Surrounded by other Gulf monarchies, such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates, these countries are typically known for their oil wealth and their political systems rooted in the principles of tribal hereditary monarchy (with the exception of Yemen, an oil-poor republic). The Gulf countries share many common structural factors, including a history of extreme pre-oil poverty, illiteracy, and a harsh subsistence existence in the desert, as well as royal families that have ruled their respective regions for roughly 200 years (Pinto 2014). All of the Gulf countries have experienced varying degrees of popular protest and dissent (Davidson 2012).

In Bahrain, social agitation reached levels that had not been witnessed in the other Gulf monarchies. In countries like the UAE or Oman popular protest was limited both in scope and in demands, but in Bahrain they were fiercely anti-system. Historically, Bahraini society was relatively open compared to the other Gulf States. Since it had begun to develop earlier, it featured a more publicly engaged and educated population. There had been intermittent political protests since the country's independence and before the more recent uprisings, the last serious ones having taken place in the 1990s. Featuring a Sunni royal family in a Shiite-majority country, the population has regularly accused the government of favoring the Sunni minority both socially and in access to jobs. A further accusation frequently leveled against the government has been the purported attempt to alter the religious makeup of the country by granting citizenship to Sunni Arabs from other parts of the Middle East and Asia, such as Yemenites and Pakistanis (Pinto 2014). It should also be noted that about two-thirds of the population

are under the age of thirty and that unemployment is in the range 30% (International Crisis Group 2011).

According to Henry and J-Hyang (2012) at first, popular protests in Bahrain during the Arab Spring had significantly challenged the survival of the monarchy, but the hopes of toppling the regime were extinguished by the extreme force summoned by the regime to quell the protesters. Scholars such as Henry and J-Hyang (2012) have argued that some progressive monarchies, including Kuwait and Bahrain, have occasionally experimented with parliamentary representation and might have experienced genuine reform had Saudi Arabia not intervened.

### **Bahrain's demonstrations, foreign blame, containment and securitization by receiving military support under GCC protocols**

Bahrain is not the only country that has experienced difficult relations with Iran. Relations with the other Gulf monarchies, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have been similarly strained. In the years following the 1979 Iranian revolution, relations between the Gulf monarchies and Iran have deteriorated significantly, due in essence to the strong anti-monarchy spirit of the revolution. Regarded inside Iran as a victory of the oppressed masses against a despotic and amoral ruler, the new republican regime aspired to spread the revolution to other parts of the world, chiefly to their neighboring countries, to inspire the oppressed masses in the fight against dictators (Pinto 2014).

Bahrain is the least populous of the cases in this study. However, it experienced the largest uprising on a per capita basis. At its peak, according to Wehrey 2009, "the demonstrations would involve about a fifth of Bahrain's half a million people. Despite its

proportional breadth, the revolt was the third shortest of the Arab Spring: thirty-three days, compared with eighteen days in Egypt and twenty seven days in Tunisia” (Brownlee *et al.* 2015, p. 86).

The protests began in February 2011 in the Pearl Roundabout, a central location in the capital city of Manama. The demonstrators were a diverse group, representing young and old, Sunnis and Shiites, as well as professional and political groups. As is often the case in these types of gatherings, the demands varied. In addition to the expansion of political rights, according to Brownlee *et al.* (2015), Bahraini protesters called for reforms within government to include the replacement of the hardline prime minister and member of the royal family, Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa. Furthermore, their demands included constitutional reforms, free parliamentary elections, the release of political prisoners, and an end to torture (Gelvin 2012), cited in (Brownlee *et al.* 2015). The government responded violently to the demonstrations. In the first four days, seven protesters were killed. As the movement continued, Shi’a parliamentarians and members of the judiciary joined the cause. The demonstrators took control of the Pearl Roundabout in Manama and converted it into a tent city - Bahrain’s version of Tahrir Square (Brownlee *et al.* 2015). As time passed and efforts for political dialogue between the government and the opposition floundered, the demonstrations were increasing in size and voices demanding the end of the al-Khalifa rule were growing louder (Pinto 2014). However, as a strategic calculation, the protesters did not immediately call for the fall of the regime; it replicated the tactics in Tunisia and Egypt, where the protesters had incrementally revised their initial claims until finally calling for total regime change.

Bahraini protest organizers consciously modeled their Egyptian peers in calling for a “Day of Anger” on February 14, 2011. Since political parties were forbidden in Bahrain, newly mobilized activists who operated apart from existing opposition groups comprised the core of the demonstrations. In addition, the so-called “societies” served as the equivalent to parties. Of these societies Al-Wifaq had been the leading political representatives for Bahraini Shias in the country. (Wehrey 2013, cited in Browlee, et al., 2015). Tens of thousands of Bahrainis participated on the first day of the protest, most of them from the majority Shia community that had long been subject to discrimination by the Sunni minority of the al-Khalifas (Brownlee *et al.* 2015).

In line with Pinto’s securitization theory, the Bahraini king securitized the protests, identifying an existential threat to the country’s national sovereignty (and, by implication, the sovereignty of other Gulf monarchies). The identified threat, of course, was Iran, who was blamed for attempting to destabilize Bahrain by inciting the Shiite masses to rebel against the government. In speeches, he implored his neighbors for help in controlling the protests and in allowing rising levels of violence to take hold. On March 14, 2011, troops from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states (a regional group created in the midst of the First Gulf War, whose main goal was to defend against Iran), operating under an agreement called the Peninsula Security Shield, entered Bahrain. It was comprised of 1,000 Saudis, 500 Emiratis, and a small number of Qataris (Pinto 2014, p. 168). The overall situation in the country was securitized and the King imposed extraordinary measures, declaring a national state of emergency with partial curfews, banning protests, and expanding military power.

This was accompanied by an increase in violence and the imprisonment of opposition leaders (Pinto 2012b as cited in Pinto 2014). The fact that the GCC countries sent troops to Bahrain demonstrated that the process of securitization had resonated among them. Likewise, concerns about an Iranian plot, whereby the latter would incite the Shiite masses in other countries to rebel and provoke the fall of the Sunni regimes, proved important. Consequently, the overall argument had consistency, mainly because of Bahrain's (and other Gulf countries') difficult relationship with Iran and because of the historical animosity between Sunnis and Shiites, two important points that explain the success of the king's implementation of securitization.

The Bahraini regime was not rescued from breakdown by external forces. Rather, it displayed precisely the type of cohesive despotic power that routinely quell opposition movements in authoritarian regimes. As for the Bahraini military stance, the military did not split at all. "There were no defectors. Without GCC support, the crackdown might have taken longer, but it still would have succeeded" (Browlee *et al.* 2015, p. 89-90). Bahrain was the first Arab autocracy to survive the 2011 protests through a repressive crackdown.

### **Protests in Syria**

Hokaye (2014, p.478) has defined five critical fault lines running through the Middle East as key to the origins of the Syrian uprisings and protests: "The first is the breakdown of the social contract between regimes and society, which helped to spark the Arab Spring. The second is the battle for regional dominance between Iran and several Arab states. The third is the growing *Sunni-Shi'a* divide in the region, which equally influenced developments in Syria. The fourth is the strength of political Islam, with

implications for secular and non-Muslim groups. The final one pertains to ethnic identities, whereby minorities and majorities are increasingly engaged in existential battles”.

The Syrian regime neglected its own rural constituencies as a consequence of flawed economic liberalization and cronyism. It then responded to the popular challenge to its rule by the time-tested use of mass violence, coup-proofing methods, ingenious military adaptation, and taking advantage of raw sectarian fears, especially among Alawites and Christians (Hokayem 2014). In March 2011, anti-government protests erupted in Syria. These protests were inspired by similar Arab Spring protests across the Middle East. The Assad regime responded aggressively to the peaceful protests, which escalated the situation. The regime unleashed its security and intelligence services to break up rallies and demonstrations, and to arrest dissidents, often using live ammunition. The events took a horrific turn near the end of 2011, as armed warfare began between government forces and the opposition rebels. In the war, the Alawite ruling elite of the state machinery have been battling an alliance of opposition rebels who are mainly Sunnis (Ullah and Khan 2017). According to Henry and Ji-Hyang (2012, p. 47) “the Syrian revolution represents perhaps the most tragic case of all of the Arab states impacted by the Arab Spring”. As in the other cases, previously discussed here, Syria experienced a steady rise in popular protest, initially non-violent, which spread throughout the country. In contrast to Egypt and Tunisia, (but similar to Bahrain) the military elite proved willing to repress civilians brutally, employing the deadliest of firepower and tactics. Unlike the case in Bahrain, however, the balance of power between the regime and the opposition was unclear until motives of every foreign actor were

apparent and constant. The revolutionaries could not hide the fact that most of them were members of the country's Sunni Arab community, and despite attempts to remain conciliatory, their most vocal members quickly adopted extremist Salafi agendas, thereby pinning many secular and non-Muslim Syrians to the regime. Hokayem (2014) has persuasively argued in this context that urban-rural divisions have helped to further undermine the anti-regime opposition. Opposition leadership, mostly quarreling in exile, has failed to gain sufficient credibility. Rebel commanders counted on the regime's total defeat, and as a result prevented a more calculating political stance that could have successfully fractured the regime's remaining support base and, perhaps, even its inner circles.

Iran, Hezbollah, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar quickly entered into the conflict in defense of their own regional agendas, thus augmenting the violence to levels Syria had never before witnessed. Russia came to the regime's defense due to its suspicions towards the West, its own apprehensions about political Islam, and its ties to the Syrian regime and communities, including Orthodox Christians. Despite its rhetoric suggesting that it would be glad to see the end of the regime, the United States for all intents and purposes at first did nothing, even when the UK and France, at least initially, signaled their willingness to arm the rebels operating under the command of the Free Syrian Army (Hokayem 2014). The United States, as we will see in this study, did later intervene in the Syrian crisis by providing some military materials and training to the opposition rebels. However, the complexity of the war has intensified due to the interference of global and regional powers as well as Islamic Jihadists. Hence, it is essential to first understand who

is fighting whom in Syria before any peace plan can be envisioned, (Ullah and Khan 2017).

### **Opposition and Weapons Suppliers**

The opposition primarily consists of anti-government rebels (including the Kurds) whose goal is to overthrow the government. The largest anti-regime alliance, “The Army of Conquest,” groups Islamist factions like Ahrar al-Sham and Faylaq Al-sham with jihadists such as Fateh al-Sham Front, which was previously known as Al-Nusra Front (an affiliate of Al-Qaeda) (AFP 2016). At first, the main group opposing the regime was the Free Syrian Army (FSA,) but it has weakened and disintegrated. It was formed by officers who had defected from the Syrian Armed Forces. However, it has seen its power diminished due to infighting. The West supports opposition forces which are thought to be “moderate,” a definition which does not include Al-Nusra. These countries, including the U.S., UK and France, support the opposition in its quest to overthrow the regime. The West has publicly demanded that Assad to step down and has called for the democratization of Syria (AFP 2016).

On the other hand, the opposition is also supported covertly by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. The rationale for supporting the opposition in Turkey’s case is the “democratic” argument, whereas the motivation for Saudi Arabia and Qatar is the “sectarian” reason. Both of these countries support the removal of the Alawite (Shia) Regime and its replacement by the Sunni opposition. It should be noted that these countries also support the IS. However, the myriad opposition groups disagree in their vision for the country. For instance, the Fateh Al-Sham strives to create an Islamic emirate in Syria (AFP 2016).

According to Stanek (2015) security void following the overthrow of Gaddafi left state weapons arsenals open to looting by enterprising groups and individuals. Libyan arms have since been spread to conflict zones all over northern Africa as well as further destinations such as Syria (Security Council 2014[1]).

Libyan weapons were readily available for export beginning in 2011, and Syrian rebels wasted no time in reaching out to potential suppliers. In the spring of that year, Syrian National Council (SNC) representatives visited Libya to directly request arms support. In return, the leader of the Tripoli Military Council flew to Turkey to meet with FSA members in November 2011. This communication between Libyan and Syrian opposition groups epitomizes a strong sense of solidarity that existed throughout the Arab Spring revolutions. In this particular case, there was an even stronger connection because Assad reportedly sent weapons and support to Gaddafi at the beginning of the Libyan revolution (Stanek 2015).

### **The Assad Regime's Reaction to Mass Protests**

Almost as soon as the first major protest broke out in the southern city of Deraa on March 18, 2011, the Assad regime began shooting. As more protestors took up arms in self-defense, the regime escalated its violence, deploying armored units and heavy artillery in a large-scale military offensive against major urban centers. It also moved to portray a peaceful and cross-sectarian protest movement as a terrorist campaign led by Islamist extremists. Peaceful protests continued across much of the country into 2012, but the uprising gradually transformed into an all-out and increasingly sectarian civil war. The regime's responses to these developments have included a set of internal institutional adjustments and policy changes as well as modifications to its management of regional

and international relations as they have found themselves up against deepening international isolation and economic and diplomatic sanctions. Domestically, the Assad regime has espoused sectarian mobilization to bolster defensive solidarity among the regime's core social base in the Alawite community and non-Muslim minorities, benefiting from, but also contributing to, more extensive regional sectarian polarization. It has reorganized the security sector, including the armed forces, paramilitary criminal networks, and the intelligence and security apparatus, to repel the opposition (in particular, the decentralized guerrilla tactics of armed insurgents) for which the security sector was unprepared and untrained (Heydemann 2013, p. 62).

For many years, critics have portrayed the ruling Assad family as nothing more than an incapable mafia, sometimes comparing Bashar al-Assad to the fictional Fredo<sup>27</sup> Corleone. The Syrian regime's brutal tactics rank at the far end of a spectrum of reprisals against anti-regime protests. These tactics reflect Syria's distinctive social and institutional composition and its political stance as a lead member of the "resistance front" against Israel. Therefore, the modifications that have redefined authoritarianism in Syria may not be transferrable to regimes that govern differently configured societies and polities. However, milder versions of the Assad regime's coercive tactics may be present on the streets of both Bahrain and Egypt, highlighting the lessons that can be learned from the Syrian case about how Arab autocrats will react as the dynamic aspects of mass politics continue to unfold in the modern Middle East. The adaptations of the Assad regime can be documented to the earliest months of the Syrian uprising in March 2011, and perhaps earlier.

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<sup>27</sup> Fredo is portrayed by American actor John Cazale in the Francis Ford Coppola 1972 film adaptation and in the 1974 sequel, *The Godfather Part II*. He is the second son of the Mafia don Vito Corleone

According to Heydemann (2013), Syrian scholar Hassan Abbas confirmed that in February 2011, President Bashar al-Assad “formed a special committee” which concluded that the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes had been toppled because they did not crush the protests instantly. The Assad regime amplified its military tactics and modified its security apparatus. With a capacity for adapting that has caught its detractors off guard, the regime integrated loyalist *shabiha* militias (the word means “ghost” or “thug”)— including a wide array of armed criminal and other informal elements—into a formal paramilitary known as the National Defense Forces (NDF), under the direct control of the regime. Since mid-2012, hundreds (perhaps even thousands) of NDF members have received combat training in Iran, a direct form of authoritarian knowledge transfer.

In light of defections among lower ranking Sunni conscripts and officers, new methods of monitoring and controlling soldiers' movements have been adopted. Iranian and Hezbollah advisors arrived to train local commanders in the finer points of crowd control, urban warfare, and insurgent tactics. The regime expanded its reliance on battle-hardened Hezbollah combat units, which led to regaining control of strategic sites. Taking advantage of its air superiority, the regime has wreaked havoc and instability in areas held by the opposition, forcing millions of Syrians to flee their homes, eroding popular morale and support for the opposition, and preventing stabilization or reconstruction in these opposition-controlled areas. “Because opposition forces had seized a great deal of ground, including most of the Damascus suburbs, many observers had been predicting the regime's imminent collapse” (Heydemann 2013, p. 63). By mid-2012, the regime's survival seemed to be very much in doubt.

With defections sweeping through rank and file in 2012, rebel groups appeared to be taking advantage by seizing territories; key units were being pushed to the brink of exhaustion, and it was not at all certain that the cohesion of the officer corps and security elites could prevent the overthrow of the regime. However, a second resource played a critical role in restraining opposition advances and stabilizing the regime: informal networks of nonstate actors, organized by familial ties, sectarian affinity, or simple mercenary arrangements, and nurtured by regime elites to provide a wide range of duties, often illegal, that could be performed without any formal scrutiny or accountability. Before the uprising, members of these networks, typically described as *shabiha*, engaged in officially sanctioned criminal activities, served as regime enforcers, and used violence to protect the privileges and status of the regime elites. When the protests began in March 2011, the regime recruited from these loose networks to brutalize demonstrators. As the opposition militarized, Assad regime loyalist networks were gradually transformed, first into informal and decentralized paramilitary groups, and later into more formally structured armed units that have been integrated into the regime's security apparatus. Almost exclusively *Alawite* in composition, “*Shabiha* forces have committed some of the worst atrocities of the civil war” (Heydemann 2013, p.66).

This mirrors the experience of African countries, where regimes enlist young men and women from one ethnic group into armed and police forces, excluding other groups from the security forces for the purpose of maintaining the incumbent in power and reinforcing the interests of his or her ethnicity; a clear example is the Rwandan regime

under the RPF ruling party, in which the Tutsi<sup>28</sup> minority ethnic group exerts power and dominates over the Hutu and Twa ethnic groups. It is very similar to the Syrian case, where the Muslim *Alawite* minority dominates security forces and government in general to the exclusion of the Muslim Sunni majority. My modest experience is to believe that where security forces are formed on the basis of sectarianism, it will be difficult (but not impossible) for opposition and rebel elements to defeat those forces, as they can fight tooth and nail and be loyal to the incumbent while defending interests of their ethnic groups.

Official media have frequently highlighted the prominent role of militant Islamists associated with al-Qaeda in opposition ranks to reinforce the narrative of a Sunni terrorist uprising, touting the regime's commitment to the protection of minorities and secularism (its reliance on Iran and Hezbollah notwithstanding) to rally its base. The regime has also reconfigured key institutions, including the Ba'ath Party, to solidify cohesion and ensure the allegiance of senior officials to President Assad and his immediate family. By mid-2013, this combination of improvised adaptations permitted the regime to reassert authority over most of the country's urban "spine" from Homs in the north to Damascus in the south. The adaptations solidified support among the regime's social base, prevented the fracturing of its inner circle, and disrupted attempts to return life to normal in areas outside regime control. The regime now controls the strategically important Mediterranean coast and every major city. It has maintained "secure access to Hezbollah-

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<sup>28</sup> Tutsi: 14%, Hutu: 84%, and Twa: 1% of an estimated population of 12,952,218 United Nations data, 2020

controlled parts of Lebanon and to the sea” (Heydemann 2013, p. 64). Regime officials have reasserted the role of the state as an agent of transformation and modernization, as well as the provider of economic security, despite the absolute destruction of the country's economy and infrastructure. Officials now blame the limited economic reforms espoused by economist and former deputy prime minister Abdullah Dardari, as the root of the grievances that caused citizens to rebel, a claim rebutted by numerous scholars. The regime has also continued to use state-controlled Internet and telecommunications infrastructure to interfere with communications among regime opponents, identify and target opposition supporters, and disseminate proregime narratives. At the regional and international levels, the Assad regime has exploited its strategic alliance with Iran and Hezbollah both for direct military and financial assistance and also for expertise and training in specific methods of repression, including urban and cyber warfare, in which its own security sector lacked experience (Heydemann 2013).

### **Russia’s influence in the MENA region**

Although Russia is once again playing a major military and diplomatic role in the region, it is economically limited and more focused on advancing its geopolitical goals in Europe to compete with the U.S. Nevertheless, Russia has returned and is now involved in an unofficial alliance with Iran to protect the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria. One of the principal aims of Russian foreign policy under President Vladimir Putin is the restoration of Russia as a major global power and an essential power broker in the MENA region. Russian intervention in Syria has ensured the survival of the Assad regime and a permanent Russian military presence, critical to the expansion of Russian power and influence in the MENA region. Russia has long maintained access to a Cold

War-era naval facility on Syria's Mediterranean Sea coast, but in 2015 it also deployed a small, but powerful, military expeditionary force to reinforce the Assad regime's faltering military response to the rebellion (Paraschos 2017).

### **Foreign Intervention in the Syrian Civil War**

The stakeholders in the Syrian civil war can broadly be classified into four groups: the regime, the opposition rebels, foreign powers, and Islamic jihadists. The Syrian factions in the civil war are both domestic and foreign: the Syrian armed forces and its allies. The opposition is comprised of the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army<sup>29</sup>, Jihad Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces, and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. Both Syrian defense forces and the opposition rebels have received military support from foreign nations. And each has received diplomatic support from their respective allies, which is why the Syrian civil war is characterized as a proxy war. Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah support the Syrian government; the U.S and Turkey have maintained their firm backing of the opposition rebels. Some scholars have argued that wars which are supported by external actors may last longer; Cunningham (2010, p. 119) has echoed this idea by arguing that, "When external states intervene in conflicts to pursue a separate agenda, the conflict will be harder to resolve and therefore longer." While Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah have sided with the Assad regime, another group of countries has intervened in the Syrian civil war, siding with the Syrian opposition groups. The U.S., in defending its interests in the Middle East, has sent arms to counter the Iranian threat (*Al-Jazeera*, May 31, 2017), and Syrian rebels have

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<sup>29</sup> Syrian rebels build an army with Turkish help, face challenges, Reuters, August 13, 2018. Accessed on December 26, 2020

acknowledged receiving arms and training from the Turkish government. (*The Telegraph*, London). Saudi Arabia has also replenished Syrian rebels with weapons. (*Business Insider* Oct. 21, 2015).

According to Roula Khalaf and Abigail F. Smith of Financial Times (June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013) Qatar subsidized the Syrian revolt with cash and arms. *The Times of Israel* (January 14, 2019) reported that the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) chief acknowledged supplying weapons to Syrian rebels. On September 11, 2018, *MSN* aired a report that the Dutch government was under fire for supporting the Syrian opposition. The civil war in Syria has devolved into a quagmire with foreign interventions pouring in for myriad reasons and purposes.

In September 2015, Russia forces conducted their first attacks, striking various rebel opponents of the Assad regime, including groups backed by the U.S., Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. Working closely with the Assad regime's military and Iranian-backed proxy forces, Russia managed to decisively tip the balance of power in favor of the regime. In December 2016, the Russian-led military coalition ousted rebels from Aleppo, Syria's largest city, which stands as the Assad regime's most important victory in the six-year conflict. Russia then quickly took the lead on international diplomacy to put an end to the fighting and arrange a peace settlement. Russian diplomats brokered a ceasefire deal between the regime and several rebel groups that went into effect on December. 30, 2016. Russia then organized a new round of multilateral negotiations on January. 23, 2017, in Astana, Kazakhstan, involving Iran and Turkey, but excluding the U.S. In January 2017, Russia signed an agreement with the Assad regime to expand its military presence in Syria, including the deployment of additional naval vessels. "This new

arrangement will continue to enhance Russia's ability to project military power in the Eastern Mediterranean and could interfere with U.S., Israeli, and European capabilities for conducting military operations in this critical maritime region during a future crisis" (Paraschos 2017, p. 19).

The U.S., Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar have transformed the Syrian conflict into a "proxy war" in the heart of the Middle East with the potential to reshape the regional geopolitical order at the expense of the U.S. and its regional allies. "The Islamic State, an offshoot of al-Qaeda in Iraq, has captured vast areas of Syria and Iraq, emboldening the organization's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdad, to declare the rebirth of the Islamic Caliphate in June 2014. Al-Qaeda has likewise established major branches in Syria", (Paraschos 2017, p. 18); as I write this report, most of these terrorist groups (nonstate actors) in both Iraq and Syria, have been dislodged.

### **Last (2019) Key Battleground Development in Syria**

The Islamic State (IS) militant group was pushed out of its territory in Syria in March 2019 after Kurdish forces overran its last stronghold. IS fighters have since employed guerrilla tactics to attack security forces and local civilian leaders. In April 2019, the government launched an offensive into the Idlib Governorate to defeat rebel forces there, killing hundreds of people and displacing at least 440,000. An August 2019 cease-fire offered a respite before the government launched a new offensive in December 2019, forcing 200,000 to flee by the end of the year. The Turkish government launched an offensive into northern Syria in October 2019, targeting armed Kurdish fighters in the region and pledging to create a "buffer zone" that could house as many as one million Syrian refugees currently living in Turkey (Freedom House 2020).

## Peace Efforts

Ton *et al.* (2016, p.6) has drawn three irregular developments for the Syrian peace talks in Geneva:

1) The talks kept on despite different parties to behave differently in the search of a negotiated compromise. 2) The peace discussions collapsed due to a divided opposition, a governmental uncompromising position and insisted zero-sum focus by parties involved in the talks. With this persistence of all parties to the negotiations, the Plan B of John Kerry could be next on the table for which he made allusion to likely partition the Syrian territory if the stalemate persists. For some experts and scholars, this proposal could be subject to moral concerns and to international legal problem which could not be easy to solve. 3) The talks met resistance as the Syrian government and its allies resume their offensive pursuing to regain parts captured by the opposition. And the Assad regime intended to consolidate its hold on the Western Syria.

According to Ullah and Khan (2017) since the beginning of the war, there have been numerous peace efforts, though none have succeeded in bringing peace to Syria (see table 5). The following peace efforts have been undertaken since the start of the war (MEI 2017): most of the peace effort initiators (Turkey, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Qatar) have interests in the conflict.

Table 6: Syrian Peace Talks Initiatives

N°	Peace's name	Date(s)	Result(s)
1	Arab League I and II	November, 2011- January, 2012	No tangible result(s)
2	Kofi Annan's Six Point Plan	April 14, 2012- March 27, 2012	
3	Geneva I	June 30, 2012	
4	Cairo I	July 2, 2012- July 3, 2012	
5	Geneva II	January 22, 2014- February 15,	

		2014	
6	Cairo II	January 22, 2015- January 24, 2015	
7	Moscow I	January 26, 2015- January 29, 2015	
8	Moscow II	April 6, 2015- April 10, 2015	
9	Astana Conference	May 25, 2015- May 27, 2015	
10	Vienna I	October 30, 2015	
11	Vienna II	November 14, 2015	
12	Riyadh Conference	December 9, 2015- December 10, 2015	
13	Munich Conference	February 11, 2016- February 12, 2016	
14	Inter-Syrian Geneva Talks	2016	

Source: Ullah and Khan (2017) Compiled by the author, 2021

Rather than going into the details of each peace effort, this sub-section focuses on the overall picture of the peace process, including impediments to the peace process. The current peace process, led by Mr. Geir Pedersen, the UN Envoy to Syria, is now focusing on drafting a new Constitution with the fifth session to have taken place in Geneva between January 25-29, 2021; the main point of contention between the regime and the opposition is the fate of President Assad. The regime considers a “minus-Assad” formula as the redline. Whereas the opposition rejects any peace deal that allows Assad to stay in power. Without Russian backing, Assad would have been ousted long ago. Russia and China have repeatedly vetoed UNSC resolutions calling for actions against the Syrian government under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter. One of the greatest obstacles to the Syrian crisis is the support given by foreign powers to the stakeholders (Dawn 2016).

Fisk (2016) has suggested that regional powers such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey as well as global powers including the U.S. and Russia should come to a consensus on the Syrian issue.

Table 7: Current Peace Talks Progress

15	Geneva [Under UN auspices]	From 30 November to 4 December 2020. Drafting New Constitution	
16	Geneva, UN <sup>30</sup>	January 25-29, 2021	

Compiled by the author, 2021

Mr. Geir Pedersen, the UN Special envoy for Syria expressed his dissatisfaction to the committee which is tasked with drafting a new Syrian Constitution on the slow progress of the peace talks and he warned that the desired changes that would enable the country to run free and fair elections seem to be a challenge in the future.

### **The Tested Hypotheses**

This study of *Impact of the Arab Spring throughout the Middle East and North Africa*, in attempting to test the following hypotheses, has reached the following results:

#### **Hypothesis 1.**

*The more accumulated political and socio-economic grievances, the more people are likely to experience dissatisfaction and to begin forming and joining social movements with the aim of changing the current social and political order to satisfy their needs.*

With regard to the above hypothesis, all of the cases (Bahrain, Syria and Tunisia) have shared common problems that their respective citizens have experienced during and before the Arab Spring. Since Mohamed Bouazizi's self immolation in Tunisia, with the accrued mixed grievances (political and economic),

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<sup>30</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/01/1083412> 29 Jan 2021 accessed on Jan 30, 2021

citizens started protesting in Tunisia and the revolutions spread rapidly throughout the Arab world.

It confirmed that the Syrian government neglected its own rural constituencies as a result of flawed economic liberalization and cronyism (Hokayem 2014). The political role of engaged young people radiated in all categories of Tunisian society and has drawn in its wake teenagers and adults, women and men, and the middle class and the poor (Henry and J-Hyang 2012, p.81).

The reasons that underlined these demonstrations in Bahrain are the same as in other Arab countries: “To redress economic grievances, the expansion of political rights while limiting the power of the ruling family, and an end to the perceived anti-Shiite policies of the Bahraini government” (Davidson 2012, p.p. 205, 208).

## **Hypothesis 2.**

*The more structured and united the leadership of a social movement, the more likely it is to gain success.*

This hypothesis is likely to be specific for the few countries in the Arab world that have enjoyed success after protesters were able to topple dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya. Because the three latter countries are not among the cases we have studied, the focus for the hypothesis is only on Tunisia as a successful case. “In Tunisia, the successful uprising stemmed from preexisting networks of dissent that centered on prior challenges to the Ben Ali regime, particularly from the country’s organized workers” (Chomiak 2011, p.p.72,73).

Unlike other MENA countries, the history of Tunisia’s structured and united social organizations played a prominent role in its success. The tradition of the

Tunisian military defending the nation, instead of ruling it, aided in the success of the uprising. And according to Brownlee, J. et al. (2015, p. 69), this tradition had been inherited from independence in 1956 onward. Moreover, Tunisia endorsed Western culture, French culture in particular, a culture that leans towards *'la laïcité'* (secularism); this helped Tunisians to move forward. The words of the Al-Nah'da political party spokesperson, Samir Dilou, "we are not an Islamist party, we are an Islamic party that gets its inspiration from Quran," he went on to assert that "Al-Nah'da is not an Islamist party but rather an Islamic party", Bayat (2017, p. 150).

### **Hypothesis 3.**

*Support of the state by an outside great power increases the resilience against regime change. By contrast, support of state's opponent [protesters] by an outside great power increases the chances of regime change.*

The Syrian case is somehow complicated as it split into two groups and each group receives foreign support, whether militarily or economically. One group is the Syrian government, supported specifically by Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, and China. For example, the latter sided with Russia in the UN Security Council to veto any resolution that would go against the Assad regime's interests. The second group are the opposition groups (different factions) supported mostly by the Gulf States and other Sunni-leading Muslims such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and Turkey.

In February 2012, the Saudi Foreign Minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal, was asked by the press<sup>31</sup> what he thought about arming the Syrian rebels. He replied that he thought it was "an excellent idea," and "Saudi weapons were provided predominantly to FSA

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<sup>31</sup> al-Aswat, Asharq, "Syrian opposition praises Saudi FM position", *al-Aswat*, February 25, 2012, accessed December 20, 2020, <http://www.aawsat.net/2012/02/article55243080>

aligned groups, including the Southern Front and the Syrian Revolutionaries Front” (Stanek 2015, p.14). A Carter Center report stated that the kingdom also tends to favor the brigades of the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front, which is described as more moderate than the Islamic Front (The Carter Center 2014). Some countries, like the United States, fear that Iran’s power will rise in the region. According to Angela Joya, the Gulf states “share with the U.S. and Britain the common goal of neutralizing Iran as a potential nuclear power that could shift the ‘balance of power’ against the Sunni ruled states of the Gulf” (Joya 2012, p. 37). To this perspective, even though the United States had been reluctant to arm and support the Syrian rebel groups in the beginning, the Obama administration finally ended up supporting the rebel groups, and President Obama openly asked President Assad to resign. The United States’ concern was how the opposition arms suppliers would be manageable to the extent that weapons would not end up reaching more radical groups. In late 2012, there were accounts of Qatar providing and distributing arms through the March 14th camp in Lebanon, which were then smuggled across the Syrian border (Stanek 2015).

Qatar chose to work primarily through Turkey to supply rebel brigades in northern Syria. And it has reportedly channeled weapons to another militant group under the Islamic Front banner, called *Ahrar al-Sham*, which has been known to fight in coordination with *Jabhat al-Nusra*, an al-Qaeda linked group. However, *Ahrar al-Sham* also has received substantial funding from Kuwait (Stanek 2015).

The Assad regime has leveraged its strategic relationships with Iran, Hezbollah, and other authoritarian actors for reasons that go well beyond the upgrading of its coercive apparatus. Iran has provided the regime with billions of dollars in the form of

loans and contracts. As the Syrian conflict intensified and more insurgents flowed across Syria's borders to fight, Haas and Lesch (2017, p. 182) confirmed that the Iranian government began to interpret the events in the region as an extension of a proxy war with Saudi Arabia and as an uprising supported by the United States and its regional allies. To Iran, this in effect shed doubt on the sincerity of the opposition movement in Syria. Iran viewed the Syrian event not as opposition to Assad's rule, but as a Saudi and Western intervention against an *Alavi ruler* allied with Iran. Iran gains regional influence through political, financial, and military support of its allies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine (Haas & Lesch 2017, p. 190).

Russia has provided arms, money, and diplomatic cover, voting numerous times to prevent the UN Security Council from imposing sanctions. China has followed Russia's lead in the UN, though it has otherwise not played a prominent role with respect to Syria. Nonetheless, the reconfiguration of the Assad regime's coercive apparatus, and the consolidation of power within institutions organized along exclusionary sectarian lines, are most consequential for the kind of postwar political arrangements that will emerge, and least conducive to the prospects for an eventual transition to democracy (Heydemann 2013, p.p. 67, 68).

According to Haas and Lesch (2017, p. 210) Turkey has provided, at a minimum, tacit support of radical Islamists groups in Syria, including Jab'hat al-Nusra (Syria's al-Qaeda affiliate) and ISIS. The objective of this support is to overthrow the Assad regime.

As for Bahrain, scholars have debated the counterfactual question: Was the GCC intervention necessary for the Bahraini regime to survive? The answer is no.

Because GCC forces were not involved in repressing demonstrators; instead, they provided “a deterrent to further popular mobilization and offered some leeway for the Bahraini government” (Brownlee *et al.* 2015, p. 89). Gelvin (2012, p. 138) cited in Brownlee *et al.* (2015, p. 89) has gone far as to say the GCC “freed up Bahrain’s own military and security forces to partake in a binge of repression.” Still, the auxiliary role performed by foreign troops does not indicate that the Bahraini regime itself lacked the coercive capacity to defeat the uprising (Brownlee *et al.* 2015). The above hypothesis is only concerned with the two cases of Bahrain and Syria.

#### **Hypothesis 4.**

*The more government offers in payouts, the less likely protests will lead to change.*

The Bahraini government engages in sectarian game playing by giving incentives to minority Sunni political elites and citizens in order to control the majority Shia community (Ross 2013, p. 20 as cited in Brownlee *et al.* 2015, p. 86). The Bahraini monarchy benefits from significant oil wealth (\$3,720 per capita in 2009 dollars), which helps ensure the loyalty of domestic political elites. Ruling family members reportedly saw their monthly stipends increase, while local elites enjoyed generous housing grants in new developments near the capital city of Manama (Brownlee *et al.* 2015). In this case, the above hypothesis was not positively tested in any example pertaining to our study because Bahrain offered payouts to one part of the population to manage and control the other part of the population (majority Shia), who tended to take to the streets in Bahrain. The other cases (Syria and Tunisia) were unlikely to match with this hypothesis.

## **Hypothesis 5.**

*The more unified the coercive apparatus of the state, the more likely it is to repress protests and allow it to survive with its illegitimate status.*

The MENA region, in particular Muslim majority countries, from Morocco to the Persian Gulf, have relied on high levels of *domestic repression* (Bellin 2004; Skocpol 1979). This hypothesis concerns two of the three cases, that is, Syria and Bahrain, as cases that have witnessed the coercive apparatus against demonstrators. With regard to Syria, the Syrian government responded to the popular challenge to its rule by the time-tested use of mass violence, coup-proofing methods, ingenious military adaptation, and playing on raw sectarian fears, especially among Alawites and Christians (Hokayem 2014). Heydemann projected a negative outcome in Syria of any possibility that protesters might cause authoritarianism to break down and that a transition to democracy might be initiated, because according to him, “the opposition’s opportunity was extinguished early on by the Assad regime’s ferocious repression” (Heydemann 2013, p.59). As for Bahrain, Brownlee, J. *et al.* said, “it was the first Arab autocracy to survive 2011 through a repressive crackdown. And when the Bahraini security forces rolled into the Pearl Roundabout in the middle of March 2011, they had backup from the Saudi military and from the member-states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). However, “it was the Bahraini coercive apparatus that struck demonstrators and cleared the streets” (2015, p.86). So, with regard to the coercive apparatus approach in this study, we can confirm that Syria and Bahrain used extra force to repress and crack down on protesters; and, in the former, the protests transformed into a civil war which has ravaged the

country (with a stalling diplomatic effort to end the conflict in Syria), even though the incumbent Assad regime is on the verge of winning.

## **Conclusion**

Protest in the form of social movements has been taking place in the MENA region over various time spans, but the manner by which the Arab Spring started and spread in just a few days across the Arab world was quite different from previous revolutions. Iran experienced an Islamic revolution in 1979; Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain, Syria, and other Middle Eastern countries have seen sporadic protests, but not to the degree of the Arab Spring of 2010-2011.

With regard to democracy and democratization, earlier generations of scholars and writers blamed Islam as the cause for the absence of democracy. The 18<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher Montesquieu declared that “despotic government” was the special province of “Mohammedanism,” while moderate government is better suited to Christianity (Cohler 1989, p. 461). The scholar Kedourie (1992, p.6) echoed Montesquieu’s argument, saying that “Islam was profoundly bereft of the core democratic ideals of representation, of elections, of popular suffrage, of political institutions being guarded and upheld by an independent judiciary, [of] the secularity of the state and [of] society being composed of multitude of self-activating , autonomous groups and associations.” In an attempt to refute these claims, Stepan and Robertson (2003) noted that Muslim countries such as Turkey and Indonesia (I would add Malaysia and now Tunisia) have managed to sustain democracy. This is true for Turkey, Indonesia, and Malaysia, and Tunisia recently has been able to realize a successful transitional democracy and is now in a new phase of post transition (new democracy). Stepan,

Robertson, and I disprove the link between Islam and authoritarianism. Instead Stepan and Robertson suggest that it is Arabs, not Muslims, who have proven to be democratization-resistant. With the recent case of Tunisia, I may disagree with them. Although it is a unique Arab case, it could be viewed as an example of how even Arabs can endorse democracy. By contrast, Diamond (2010) has argued that the answer to the riddle of Arab authoritarianism lies not in the cultures, but rather in “political economy” and institutions – particularly the dynamism of rentierism and the machinations of the so called “liberalized autocracies” to keep societies weak and oppositionists fragmented. Ruling such a society would be easy; the divided opponents could allow any country in the MENA to have an uncomplicated political task, and as we have seen in the Syrian case, it could also give foreign powers an opportunity to intervene in the internal affairs of a country because of the fragmented and divided society.

In the second chapter we have discussed the interests of great powers in the MENA. It is unlikely that these interests will allow the United States and its allies to intervene to the extent of victory for democracy; in the countries that have already experienced protests, and radical Muslims were on the forefront to take the helm of the country (the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Al-Nah’da in Tunisia; the former failed to cope with democratic values and principles and the latter succeeded in endorsing democracy as outlined in hypothesis number two). Most radical Muslims, if not all, oppose Western interests in the region, and for this reason, there is a little chance that the path of authoritarianism to democracy in the MENA will garner support from Western countries. On the other hand, the MENA rulers (emirs, monarchs, and heads of state) always side with the status quo. Furthermore, there is the resistance of citizens to Western

cultures and political governing methods, as some Arab citizens will likely oppose Western styled democracy. Finally, Huntington (1991, p. 28) has declared that “Islamic concepts of politics differ from and contradict the premises of democratic politics.” All of these are serious factors that impede democratic endorsement by the MENA region. Nevertheless, the new model of the Tunisian government may influence other Arab governments and citizens to reconsider their leadership, to change their political behavior, and endorse democratic governance in the region. The below table summarizes the examined cases.

Table 8: Summary of hypotheses

<b>Hypotheses</b>	<b>Tunisia</b>	<b>Syria</b>	<b>Bahrain</b>
<b>Hypothesis 1:</b> The more accumulated political and socio-economic grievances, the more people are likely to experience dissatisfaction and to begin forming and joining social movements with the aim of changing the current social and political order to satisfy their needs.	Sparked by Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation and due to political and socio-economic concerns, Tunisians took to the streets, starting the Arab Spring at the end of 2010.	The Syrian people rebelled against the Assad regime because of the regime’s policies on political and socio-economic issues. Public discontent, especially among the Sunni Muslims, led to people taking to the streets to show their dissatisfaction for the regime of Bashar Al Assad.	Bahrain has also experienced political and socio-economic issues that have caused discontent among Bahrainis. Following the Arab Spring in the region, the Shia community seized the opportunity to show their discontent by taking to the streets against their own government.
<b>Hypothesis 2:</b> The more structured and united the leadership of a social movement; the more likely it is to gain success.	Unlike other MENA countries, Tunisia’s structured and united social organizations played a key role in its success.	Hypothesis 2 did not yield any positive result for Syria, as the protests failed to reach their goals of regime change and the country has fallen into civil war.	With regard to Bahrain, after Saudi and GCC military intervention, Bahraini security forces used force to quell protesters.

<p><b>Hypothesis 3:</b> Support of the state by an outside great power increases the resilience against regime change. By contrast, support of the state's opponent [protesters] by an outside great power increases the chances of regime change.</p>	<p>The hypothesis 3 did not test positive in Tunisian case.</p>	<p>Hypothesis 3 has tested positive in the Syrian case as the country split into two groups: one group is the Syrian government, supported specifically by Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, and China. The second group are the opposition groups (different factions) supported mostly by the Gulf States and other Sunni-leading Muslim nations such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and Turkey. And the U.S. played also a supportive role toward the rebel groups.</p>	<p>Scholars have raised the counterfactual question for Bahrain: Was the GCC intervention indispensable for the Bahraini regime to survive? The answer is no. They argue that the GCC military forces were not involved in repressing protestors; rather, they provided “a deterrent to further popular mobilization and offered some leeway for the Bahraini government” (Brownlee <i>et al.</i> 2015, p. 89). Gelvin (2012, p. 138) cited in Brownlee <i>et al.</i> (2015, p. 89) has gone as far as to say the GCC “freed up Bahrain’s own military and security forces to partake in a binge of repression.” Still, the auxiliary role performed by foreign troops does not indicate that the Bahraini regime itself lacked the coercive capacity to defeat the uprising (Brownlee <i>et al.</i> 2015). But again, these foreign military forces have offered support to the Bahraini government and security forces to stand firm against the demonstrators, and then, to suppress protests.</p>
<p><b>Hypothesis 4:</b> The more a government offers in payouts, the less likely protests will lead to change.</p>	<p>Tunisia was unlikely to match with this hypothesis.</p>	<p>Syria was unlikely to fall within this hypothesis.</p>	<p>The Bahraini government engages in sectarian game playing by giving incentives to minority Sunni political elites and citizens in order to control the majority Shia community (Ross 2013, p. 20 as cited in Brownlee <i>et al.</i> 2015, p. 86).</p>
<p><b>Hypothesis 5:</b></p>	<p>The Tunisian case</p>	<p>The Syrian</p>	<p>Brownlee, J. <i>et al.</i> (2015, p. 86)</p>

<p>The more unified the coercive apparatus of the state, the more likely it is to repress protests and allow it to survive with its illegitimate status.</p>	<p>did not test positive with this hypothesis.</p>	<p>government responded to the popular challenge to its rule by the time-tested use of mass violence, coup-proofing methods, ingenious military adaptation, and playing on raw sectarian fears, especially among Alawites and Christians (Hokayem 2014).</p>	<p>said, “the Bahraini coercive apparatus struck demonstrators and cleared the streets; and it was the first Arab autocracy to survive 2011 through a repressive crackdown”.</p>
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Compiled by the Researcher 2021

And as we have seen in our first hypothesis, if there are accumulated political and socio-economic grievances, then people are likely to experience dissatisfaction; thus, social movements are born, and protesters gather and take to the streets for mass demonstrations against the incumbent regime. At the very least, the world has witnessed a new energy and new sense of possibility thanks to the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Syria and beyond. Successful tools such as social media and satellite television have facilitated protests in being seen and heard around the world. Even though in these case studies we still encounter authoritarian regimes (Bahrain and Syria as the former failed revolution and the latter being in between failed and successful revolutions pending the outcome of the current civil war), “no regime will enjoy immunity from collective action or international exposure of its atrocities as was possible in the past” (Henry and J-Hyang, 2012, p. 48). However, international political order seems not to favor new waves of protests that would lead to radical change in the best interest of the Arab nations.

Authoritarian survivors across the Middle East have adapted to the challenges posed by the Arab uprisings. Yet the form that such adaptations have taken is a product of specific domestic resources (security apparatus and sectarian armed forces: Sunni against Shiite community) and external resources (Saudi military intervention) that define any given regime's "opportunity set." "There is a strong path-dependent quality to the adaptive choices of regimes: existential crises have not been moments of creative innovation among the Arab world's authoritarian survivors" (Heydemann 2013, p. 65). Instead, adaptations have tended to magnify regimes' existing attributes as rulers turn to strategies that have proven to be effective in the past. The adaptations can be seen as extensions of earlier strategies of authoritarian upgrading, but with a more compact, militarized, sectarian, exclusionary, and repressive core (Heydemann 2007). All of these active compacts of militarization, sectarianism, exclusion, and repression reflect the Bahraini and Syrian cases.

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