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The State of the Arab Transitions: Hope Resilient Despite Many Unmet Demands



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Executive Summary

Three years after the citizens of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen took to the streets demanding freedom, dignity, and greater economic opportunity, they are struggling with a harsh reality: political change is a slow, painful process. In many cases, the goals of the revolutions are far from being realized. Yet despite the lack of momentum—and in some cases, notable setbacks—there is a recognition that the wall of fear has been broken. This profound shift means that citizens in these countries will continue to demand basic freedoms and more accountable governments that deliver for their people.

Dire economic conditions were one of the main catalysts for the protests, yet the new governments in these countries have failed to implement the needed but painful economic reforms or improve the standard of living. While the four transition countries have differing economic challenges, they all share one commonality: their economies are either stagnant or in decline, with simultaneous rises in unemployment, inflation, and deficits. To date, these governments have lacked the vision or the political will to make difficult decisions. Instead, they resorted to populist measures such as increasing wages and continuing budget-draining subsidies to curry public support. These have done little to stimulate growth or ameliorate deteriorating economic conditions aggravated by domestic political turmoil.

On the political front, the track record is mixed: the return of a military-backed government in Egypt, tenuous compromise amidst political polarization in Tunisia, security crises that prevent basic state function in Libya, and fear that tribal power struggles and former regime loyalists will thwart progress toward a more peaceful and democratic future in Yemen. At the same time, however, there have been significant political gains. Despite months of political impasse in Tunisia, the country's constituent assembly passed one of the Arab world's most progressive constitutions in January 2014. In Yemen, its National Dialogue completed a ten-month, inclusive dialogue representing the key stakeholder groups to develop recommendations addressing the most contentious issues and will soon begin its constitution-drafting process. And in Libya, where an unstable security environment and the power of the

militias have made it challenging for the government to rule, much less lead a reform effort, the prime minister officially launched a national dialogue that could mitigate militia and separatist violence. An election date has been set for a constituent assembly that will draft Libya's new constitution. In Egypt, President Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood was ousted in July 2013 by a military-led coup, following mass demonstrations against him. In January 2014, Egyptians overwhelmingly passed a new constitution in a national referendum, but the repression of Muslim Brotherhood members and arrests of human rights activists, journalists, and others who might oppose the military-backed government are threatening to hobble Egypt's democratic transition.

The transition countries are facing other challenges in achieving key demands articulated through popular protests. None of the countries have made much progress in implementing a framework or mechanism to address transitional justice or reforming the security sector and ministries of interior. There has been a rise in media freedom, but this has not resulted in a corresponding rise in ethics or standards, and the media has become increasingly divisive and partisan. The fall of authoritarian leaders in Libya and Tunisia led to an upsurge in new civil society organizations that provide unprecedented channels for citizen participation on social, political, and cultural issues. But this new space has led to fierce cultural and social battles; in Tunisia, debates have politicized civil society space over issues of religion in public space, the rights of women, and morality codes. Egypt has witnessed a heightened suspicion of nongovernmental organizations (NGO), particularly those dealing with human rights and receiving foreign funding, and a new draft NGO law sends mixed signals about whether it sufficiently improves conditions for NGO activity.

The role of external actors remains in question. While there was initial rhetorical support from the United States and the European Union for the aims of Arab Awakening, the level of tangible support has been disappointing. Many in the region feel that their Western allies have failed to respond to unfolding events with innovative policies, remaining

consistently behind the curve with mismatched approaches that do not respond to ever-changing realities. However, despite this disappointment, there are still voices in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen who argue the United States and Europeans do have a role to play, advocate for even deeper engagement, and propose that they should work together to push the governments in Arab transition countries to enact much-needed political, economic, and civil society reforms.

There are still opportunities for positive steps toward reform. Perhaps most importantly, the revolutions broke the barrier of silence that often stifled dissent with self-censorship. Calls for change will not dissipate until the original demands of the revolutions are met and this pressure will continue to push governments to adopt a new approach to provide greater economic and political opportunity and reform the old, corrupt systems. This will be a gradual, and often frustrating process, but it is the only viable path for a long-term sustainable future for the Arab world.



Photo credit: Wikipedia

Despite Setbacks, Unceasing Demands for Reform

Three years after the start of the Arab Awakening, the people of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen are struggling with the harsh reality that the uprisings were only the first step on a long, perilous road to freedom and dignity, and that the political uncertainty of revolution and economic prosperity rarely go hand-in-hand. Heightened polarization and the quashing of dissent underway in Egypt are hobbling efforts to transition to a more democratic system. Despite delays and several political assassinations, a coalition government in Tunisia has propelled the transition forward. Libya, with militias blocking oil exports and a security situation so dire that the prime minister was kidnapped, teeters on the edge of becoming a failed state. The National Dialogue in Yemen was an important success in terms of bringing together a number of old and new actors to discuss the future of the state, but secessionists in the South may not accept the final outcome, which calls for a federal system of governance to keep the state unified.

The transition countries are coping with complex economic and political issues that accumulated over decades and will take years to resolve. Unemployment is stubbornly high and the euphoria of toppling reviled autocrats is of little use in creating a framework to address transitional justice.¹ The urgency of citizens' demands for immediate relief is understandable; however, the reality is that the transition process will be lengthy, riddled with setbacks, and unpredictable.

Amid troubling recent events—a resurgence of authoritarianism in Egypt, political mistrust in Tunisia, continued security crises in Libya, and the return of tribal politics in Yemen, there is one constant: demands for change are here to stay. Calls for dignity, economic opportunity, freedom, and social justice in these countries are not new; however, the determination behind them is unprecedented, even in the face of disappointing setbacks. Protests, petitions, and violent confrontation are fast replacing decades of self-censorship and fear. Indeed, people are “appropriating dignity and freedom,” even if the state has not yet enshrined these basic rights, according to a prominent Egyptian journalist who participated in a recent Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East conference at the Atlantic Council.² Protesters' demands are often destructive rather than constructive, though. Ousting the autocrats was only half the battle of the revolutions; the pressure for real, systemic change continues to mount on the new governments to deliver.

This report addresses a number of cross-cutting themes in each transition country, including heightened polarization, the process of rewriting constitutions, economic challenges, transitional justice, the role of civil society, and the future of political Islam, as well as the opportunity for greater US and European engagement in promoting genuine transitions in the Arab Awakening countries.

1 “Unemployment: Arab Spring Not Springing Back,” NPR, September 9, 2013, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=219725270>.

2 Off-the-record discussion with authors.



Photo credit: Amine Ghrabi, Flickr.

Heightened Polarization

After the initial euphoria dissipated, the past year and a half has been characterized by a profound and significant rise in the polarization between the various political forces in each country. In Egypt, overwhelming dissatisfaction with both the government of Mohamed Morsi, the country's first democratically elected president, and the Muslim Brotherhood he hails from led to a coup ousting him. At the same time, Egyptian activists are struggling to maintain the degree of freedom of expression won since the January 25 revolution. Tunisians, angered by assassinations of two prominent secular opposition figures and emboldened by events in Egypt, held mass protests that forced the Islamist-led government's early resignation. The months that followed witnessed contentious negotiations between secular and Islamist parties that slowed the transition's progress. The polarization in Libya is felt in the breakdown of security as militias challenge central government authority, separatists impose oil blockades, and a power struggle between Prime Minister Ali Zeidan and the General National Congress (GNC) paralyzes government functions and may lead to a no-confidence vote that results in a new government. In Yemen, divisions among Houthis, Northerners, and Southerners about the very nature of the state threaten to unravel the tenuous gains won to date.

Despite these troubling dynamics, popular pressure for greater participation in the political process and a government that addresses economic woes effectively remains firm. While the transitions can be steered onto a more democratic path, the increasing polarization that prevents compromise and consensus is a major obstacle that must be overcome.

Such polarization is pitting citizens against each other rather than uniting them to find common ground on mutual interests. In Egypt and Libya, the overall result, thus far, has been stalemate, conflict, and setbacks. The cases of Tunisia and Yemen offer more hope; despite political divisions, a number of parties have shown willingness to dialogue and compromise.

In the face of this increasing polarization, moving too fast on meeting roadmap deadlines may result in more harm than good. There has been consistent pressure, both internally from the local populations and externally from international observers, to speed up the transitional processes. The popular demands for change are hardly surprising considering the economic and political uncertainty those populations have lived with since the start of the revolutions. However, while the Arab Awakening ushered in new space for participatory politics and civil society, it will take time to build democratic institutions and inculcate civic values in the population at large. Internal and external pressure could lead to problems with constitution-drafting and development of political systems, and could result in the institutionalization of dysfunction and instability. Rather than rushing through a checklist of process-oriented steps such as drafting a new constitution or holding elections as quickly as possible, sufficient time should be allowed to develop inclusionary, participatory processes.



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Setting the Rules of the Game: Rewriting Constitutions

Each of the Arab Awakening countries has faced the question of how to amend or write a new constitution in order to redefine political systems and enshrine the rights and freedoms demanded by those who took to the street in protest. Unsurprisingly, the process of *how* the constitution is developed and who gets a seat at the drafting table has been just as controversial as the content of the actual document.

In Egypt, the constitution-writing process has been characterized by *de facto* exclusion, not once, but twice. The Muslim Brotherhood, overconfident following its significant victory in parliamentary and presidential elections, sidestepped the daunting process of consensus-building and compromise and instead forced through a new constitution that secular groups and outside analysts felt represented only Islamists. With his November 2012 constitutional declaration, then-President Morsi went even further, committing what former Member of Parliament Amr Hamzawy termed an “absolute presidential tyranny” by granting himself broad powers, including immunity from judicial oversight through a constitutional declaration.³ The removal of the Muslim Brotherhood from power has not changed the zero-sum nature of Egyptian politics. While the fifty-member committee tasked with developing yet another new constitution in December 2013 included several Islamist members, it did not include any Muslim Brotherhood

members. The Brotherhood had initially been asked to participate, but it had steadily refused any discussion with the new government. By the time the Constituent Assembly was in session, most of the Brotherhood’s leadership was in prison.⁴

In mid-January 2014, Egyptians went to the polls to vote on the new constitution in a national referendum. Critics cited the overwhelming pressure for a “yes” vote from both official and unofficial sources while dissenters were sidelined or, in some cases, detained. However, these concerns were largely irrelevant to the many Egyptians who voted to approve the document in large part because they hoped its passage would allow the government to better address the pressing issues of stability and social and economic reforms demanded during the January 25 Revolution. The constitution passed overwhelmingly, with 98.1 percent voting in favor. At 38.6 percent, the turnout was slightly higher than the participation rate in the 2012 referendum on the previous constitution.

While the new constitution contains an expansion of rights and freedoms over the 2012 constitution, granting equal rights for women, for example, it also contains several problematic clauses guaranteeing the privileges of the judiciary and the military. Foremost among them is the latter’s ability to try civilians in military courts, although the conditions for doing so have been specified, reduced from the previous, more wide-ranging

3 David D. Kirkpatrick, “Citing Deadlock, Egypt’s Leader Seizes New Power and Plans Mubarak Retrial,” *New York Times*, November 22, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/23/world/middleeast/egypts-president-morsi-gives-himself-new-powers.html?_r=0.

4 Hicham Mourad, “De-Islamising Egypt’s constitution,” *Ahram Online*, September 20, 2013, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentP/4/81919/Opinion/-DeIslamising-Egyptys-constitution.aspx>.

The issue of representation in the Libyan constitutional committee is potentially problematic; there are concerns that ethnic minorities and women will not be adequately represented in the drafting process.

provisions in the 2012 version. The military is also granted the prerogative to name the defense minister for the next two presidential terms, stoking concerns about the armed forces' mounting accumulation of power. While in the short term it seems likely that the new constitution will bolster the military and serve as a fulcrum for opposition, constitutional expert Nathan Brown reminds us that "political context always shapes the meaning of constitutional texts."⁵ In short, it is possible that future governments will choose to interpret constitutional clauses in ways enabling the drafting of laws that promote inclusive, democratic processes and protect human rights, but the opposite is also true.

Unlike Egypt, Libya has been cautious in issuing constitutional documents. Since Muammar Gaddafi's overthrow, revolutionaries and political figures across the spectrum have acknowledged the pressing need to reinstate a new constitution, yet debilitating security conditions and political challenges have impeded progress. In July 2013, the GNC decided that a popularly-elected constitutional committee would draft the new constitution, but delays in setting an election date for this committee has put Libya behind on the steps laid out in the Constitutional Declaration adopted after Gaddafi's ouster.⁶ In late January, the GNC finally announced that the committee members would be elected on February 20, 2014. However, the issue of representation in the constitutional committee is potentially problematic; there are concerns that ethnic minorities and women will not be adequately

represented in the drafting process.⁷ To illustrate, twenty seats each were allotted to the three historical regions: Cyrenaica, Tripolitania, and Fezzan. However, the first region has approximately 1.6 million inhabitants, the second is the most densely populated with approximately 4 million, while Fezzan has approximately 300,000 inhabitants. To further complicate matters, only six seats were allotted to minorities; the Tuareg, the Tabu, and the Amazigh. However, the latter make up 10 percent of the population as a whole. Accordingly, they have declared they will boycott the process by taking themselves out of the running for elections, lending further credence to the charges of exclusion leveled at the Assembly. Drafting a new constitution will be a key step in strengthening the credibility and efficacy of formal institutions but ultimately, credibility will depend on the perceived degree of inclusivity.

Despite several drawbacks, Tunisia's constitution drafting process has been the most positive by taking an inclusive path and empowering an elected body, the National Constituent Assembly (NCA), to carry the mandate of constitution development; on January 27, 2014, the NCA overwhelmingly passed one of the Arab world's most progressive constitutions. Competitive elections had allowed broad-based representation through a dynamic spectrum of political parties, including the Islamist Ennahda party, which received the largest share of votes, as well as several leftist and secular parties. This provided a degree of balance and ensured that the constitution would reflect a compromise among the perspectives of Islamists, labor unions, and other interest groups. The process was a thorough and somewhat laborious endeavor that began in January 2012. It included multiple committees,

5 Nathan Brown, "Egypt's Constitution Conundrum," *Foreign Affairs*, December 9, 2012, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/138495/nathan-j-brown/egypts-constitution-conundrum>.

6 Mohamed Eljarh, "One Step Closer to a New Libyan Constitution," *Transitions* (blog), *Foreign Policy*, September 26, 2013, http://transitions.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/09/26/one_step_closer_to_a_new_libyan_constitution.

7 Karim Mezran and Duncan Pickard, "Negotiating Libya's Constitution," Atlantic Council, January 2014, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/issue-briefs/negotiating-libya-s-constitution>.

international technical assistance, numerous drafts, and formal public consultation. By June 2013, these efforts resulted in a final version of a constitution that had broad support. A key factor in Tunisia's success was that Ennahda, taking heed of the mistakes the Muslim Brotherhood made in Egypt, was willing to make enormous compromises during the process.

The process was hardly smooth. The work on completing the constitution came to an abrupt halt after two high-profile assassinations and an outpouring of public frustration with the Ennahda-led government paralyzed the government. Both Ennahda and secular parties wanted guarantees that the other would not dominate the political arena and force its will on the other; a national dialogue process helped address this tension and led to a new caretaker government. Despite the significant setback and delay in finalizing the constitution, the constitution-development process itself is a source of hope because it was representative and "not coopted by authoritarian forces," as Hariri Center fellow Duncan Pickard notes.⁸ This outcome was due in large part to two important factors; first, the post-revolutionary government decided to sequence constitution-writing before parliamentary elections; and second, the coalition nature of the government helped promote power-sharing and consensus. Speaking about the constitution-drafting process at a Hariri Center conference, an NCA member from Ennahda highlighted the premium placed on dialogue and inclusiveness rather than speed:

"We decided it would be important to write a new constitution and tried to get everyone involved, including hearing from those who lost elections and from small religious minorities. We wrote four different drafts. It took quite a bit of time, but we avoided what happened in Egypt [where parliamentary elections were held before a constituent assembly was elected]."⁹

These comments reflect both the strong desire to avoid the allegations of exclusion that so marred the Egyptian experience and a willingness to draw lessons from it.¹⁰ Despite the protests and a

suspension of the Assembly, Tunisians have shown willingness to work together and negotiated a roadmap that ended the stalemate. Ennahda agreed to take the step—unprecedented in modern Arab politics—of stepping down in favor of a caretaker prime minister, trusting that new elections will return it to power. As an Ennahda-affiliated NCA member noted, his party is not afraid of resigning because party leaders believe they have enough popular support to win again in elections.¹¹ The fate of the Brotherhood in Egypt, largely the result of its own intransigence, was a powerful motivator for Ennahda's willingness to find workable solutions with its political adversaries. Ennahda knows that an attempt to cling to power would only reinforce the longstanding "one vote, one time" accusation leveled at Islamists. Still, despite Tunisia's success in writing a new constitution, a number of thorny issues such as high unemployment rates and security sector reform will need to be addressed going forward.

Yemen is just entering the constitution-development phase: the 2011 transition agreement set forth a plan beginning with a comprehensive national dialogue, followed by constitution-drafting and referendum, then national elections. After considerable delay at the outset and then an extension in the six-month mandate, Yemen has spent the past year and a half engaged in the preparation and implementation of its national dialogue process, which just concluded on January 25, 2014. The National Dialogue Conference (NDC) brought together 565 members representing the major stakeholder groups to address the most contentious issues facing the country and determine the principles that will inform the new constitution. The final reports of the nine working groups within the National Dialogue determined how the committee to draft the new constitution will be selected and specified that Yemen will be divided into a new federal system of regions. One big concern for Yemenis is how to ensure that the new constitution enshrines the gains made through the National Dialogue and advances the rights of women, youth, and disenfranchised communities. Although Yemen's National Dialogue should be recognized as a significant success, as it brought new political actors into the process and broke down some important cultural barriers, there is one glaring flaw. The country's political

8 Duncan Pickard, "Tunisia's Constitutional Process: Prospects and Hurdles," German Marshall Fund of the United States, December 2013, http://www.gmfus.org/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files_mf/1387398595Pickard_TunisiastConstitutionalProcess_Dec13.pdf.

9 Comments to the authors, October 6, 2013.

10 Al Arabiya, "Moussa Criticizes Assembly in Charge of Drafting Egypt's Post-revolution Constitution," March 29, 2012, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/03/29/203927.html>.

11 Comments to the authors, October 7, 2013.

leadership was not successful in gaining the buy-in of the majority, or even a plurality, of the Southern population, many of whom have been advocating for secession with increasing intensity over the past several years. Historically, the South has been systematically disenfranchised, with jobs and political power concentrated in Sana'a. The 1990 civil war culminated in a unity agreement in 1994, unleashing nearly two decades of discrimination and marginalization of the Southern population at the hands of the more powerful Northerners. This lack of consensus will prove to be a major obstacle in terms of implementing the outcome of the National Dialogue, which mandates a federal system in which the South remains unified with the North, as well as approving a constitution that reflects a process that most Southerners reject entirely. Unless considerably more effort is put forth to generate trust and confidence among the Southerners, "it is not difficult to imagine a situation in which the majority of Southerners boycott a constitutional referendum, reject the constitution, refuse to register as part of the new voter registry, or massively reject [President] Hadi (or any candidate) if he chooses to run in upcoming elections."¹² While certain Yemeni political leaders and some within the international community might be willing to accept this outcome, it would significantly undermine the legitimacy of the constitution and the transition process moving forward.

¹² Danya Greenfield, "Yemen's Final Stretch," *The Middle East Channel* (blog), *Foreign Policy*, October 24, 2013, http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/10/24/yemen_s_final_stretch.



Photo credit: IRIN Photos, Flickr.

You Can't Eat Freedom: Struggling with Economic Challenges

Some demands of the revolutions are difficult to quantify; dignity and freedom are essential but often intangible aspirations. This is not the case with bread. When a Tunisian street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in December of 2010, sparking the Arab revolutions, it was to protest the loss of his livelihood as much as his dignity. Indeed it is difficult to separate those aspirations—there is little dignity in being unable to earn a decent enough living to feed one's children.

While each of the four countries in transition has differing economic challenges, they all have one thing in common: their economic fortunes have either declined or stumbled, with simultaneous rises in unemployment, inflation, and deficits. While the particulars of causality might differ, all four cases have factors in common: a breakdown in the social contract, a lack of political will by transient policymakers to carry through difficult economic decisions, and an uncertain security climate.

The lack of political will may be the greatest hurdle, since the last three years have witnessed rapid turnover in government, and none have displayed the foresight or commitment to tackle longstanding problems.

Another significant hurdle is the growing difficulty the governments face in providing basic economic security for their populations. All four of these countries previously functioned under the authoritarian bargain model. There was a social contract between the ruler and those being ruled: security and economic stability would be guaranteed in return for political acquiescence. In

most cases, economic stability was ensured through national subsidies, primarily through food and energy subsidies, in both the energy exporting and importing countries. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, 8.5 percent of regional gross domestic product (GDP), or 22 percent of government budgets, goes into energy subsidies.¹³ That number differs from one country to another. In Egypt, energy subsidies make up a hefty 13 percent of the GDP¹⁴ as compared to 9 percent for Yemen, or 4 percent for Tunisia.

The problem is not just that subsidies swallow up large chunks of the budget; it is also that they are notoriously inefficient. Typically, the poorest 20 percent of any population benefits from less than 10 percent of all fuel subsidies.¹⁵ The problem is further exacerbated by the sheer inefficiency of the subsidy delivery system. Many subsidized goods, be they fuel or foodstuffs, wind up on the black market. In Egypt, one third of subsidized bread and a fifth of all subsidized sugar and cooking oil wind up on the black market. Bottled liquefied petroleum gas, used in cooking, can be found for resale at ten times the official price. In Libya, much of the tribal fighting has to do with the smuggling of subsidized products, especially oil; this is

13 International Monetary Fund, "Energy Subsidies in the Middle East and North Africa: Lessons for Reform," March 2013, <http://www.imf.org/external/np/fad/subsidies/pdf/menanote.pdf>.

14 Dalibor Rohac, "How to End Egypt's Subsidies Addiction," Cato Institute, November 2013, <http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/how-end-egypts-subsidies-addiction>.

15 Coady et al, "The Unequal Benefits of Fuel Subsidies: A Review of Developing Countries," IMF Working Paper, September 2010, <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2010/wp10202.pdf>.

hardly surprising when one considers that Libya's neighbors sell oil for about ten times the price it is sold at in Libya.¹⁶

The problem is even more acute in Yemen, where the World Bank estimates that around 45 percent of the population was food insecure in 2012 and yet the government budget disproportionately funds inefficient fuel subsidies instead of social safety nets like targeted cash transfers that would better assist the poorest in the population. Although the IMF and international donors have consistently urged Yemen to reduce its fuel subsidies, the perceived political cost of disrupting patronage networks has prevented any action to date. Reducing subsidies requires an institutionalized subsidy reform system. There is a decent starting point for expanding the social safety net, through the Social Welfare Fund (SWF) and the Social Fund for Development (SFD), yet neither has sufficient funds currently to cover the resulting gap should subsidies be reduced. Although the World Bank recently provided some \$100 million¹⁷ in funding to the SWF, significantly more would be needed to offset subsidy reductions.

In addition to the need for subsidy reform, these countries are suffering from mounting debt and staggering deficits that have not been addressed, and in fact, are worsening due to reliance on populist policies to curry public support. Egypt's public debt is a ticking time bomb with a budget deficit at \$10.8 billion in the current fiscal year, 2012/2013, representing 3.6 percent of GDP, up \$0.7 billion from the same period the previous year, according to a Ministry of Finance report. While the deficit was expected to close the year at 9 percent of GDP as compared to 14 percent of the previous year, the Arab world's most populous country is struggling. Unemployment weighed in at 13.4 percent during the third quarter of 2013, up from 8.9 percent during the same period in 2010. Over 70 percent of those unemployed were youth.¹⁸

However, Egypt's future is looking significantly more hopeful due to more innovative economic policies. Since the January 2011 revolution, neither the Supreme Council of Armed Forces nor any of the successive governments had been able to articulate, let alone commit, to an economic plan. The current government has now formulated a plan relying on the following elements: tackling energy and input shortages; introducing an innovative fiscal stimulus program aimed at increasing consumption and tackling Egypt's serious unemployment problem; and reducing pressure on the exchange rate by improving external balances.¹⁹ This approach has been partly possible due to aid given by the Gulf countries following Morsi's ouster (an initial \$12 billion was pledged by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait) to stimulate its economy. It is important to note that the IMF has endorsed this fiscal expansion, and it seems likely that Egypt will enter into negotiations with the IMF in 2014. In addition to the endorsement offered by an IMF agreement, Egypt's economy may receive a domestic helping hand. Almost 9,000 local startups were registered between June 2012 and June 2013, the highest number since Egypt began publishing statistics on startups in 2004,²⁰ reflecting increased Egyptian investor confidence.

Egypt's future is looking significantly more hopeful due to more innovative economic policies.

In Libya's case, the post-revolution strife meant a rollercoaster dip in oil production, which fell from 1.7 million barrels a day (mbd) to 0.5 mbd in 2011. The presence of armed militias has made for a precarious security situation, hobbling any chance

16 Sami Zaptia, "The IMF and the Vexing Issue of Reforming Subsidies: Ramifications for Libya," *Libya Herald*, April 17, 2013, <http://www.libyaherald.com/2013/04/17/the-imf-and-the-vexing-issue-of-reforming-subsidies-ramifications-for-libya/#axzz2rFSCJfhq>.

17 Abdulla Zaid, "Subsidy Reform in Yemen: Between Risk and Solution," Muftah, November 11, 2013, <http://muftah.org/subsidy-reform-in-yemen-between-risk-solution/>.

18 Sara Aggour, "Unemployment rates reach 13.4% in 3Q 2013," *Daily News Egypt*, November 17, 2013, <http://www.dailynewsegyp.com/2013/11/17/unemployment-rates-reach-13-4-in-3q-2013/#sthash.qLJBXeQS.dpbs>.

19 Mohsin Khan, "The Turnaround of the Egyptian Economy in 2014," *EgyptSource* (blog), Atlantic Council, January 16, 2013, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/egyptsource/the-turnaround-of-the-egyptian-economy-in-2014>.

20 Ahmed A. Namatalla and Tamim Elyan, "Egypt's Record Startups Confront Economy Paralyzed by Unrest," *Bloomberg*, October 1, 2013, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-09-30/egypt-startups-at-record-confront-economy-paralyzed-by-unrest.html>.

at normal operations and leading to an overall drop in GDP of 62 percent. Nominal GDP plunged from \$75 billion in 2010 to \$35 billion in 2011. By the end of 2011, inflation had shot to 30 percent. However, there is still little vision for Libya's economy beyond oil production. To move the country forward, the economy needs to be diversified, youth unemployment needs to be tackled, and a modern financial system needs to be developed.²¹

In Tunisia, the lack of economic dignity was certainly the driving force prompting the Jasmine Revolution, echoing the frustration expressed by Mohamed Bouazizi's desperate act of self-immolation. Yet Tunisia's unemployment is higher today (17 percent) than it was in 2010 (13.3 percent).²² More disturbingly, Tunisia ranks a low 132nd of 138 countries on labor market efficiency (measuring effectiveness versus mere employment) on the Global Competitiveness Index.²³ If Tunisia is to climb its way out of the abyss, addressing structural unemployment will be a priority.

The IMF is playing an important role in providing a lifeline to many of these countries, but this will be effective on a long-term basis only if the transitional governments are able to implement necessary but painful economic reforms. Tunisia will likely be the most successful in taking advantage of such assistance; in April 2013, the IMF board approved a \$1.74 billion two-year Stand-By Arrangement (SBA) for Tunisia to "support fiscal and external buffers."²⁴ Of that amount, \$150.2 million was available immediately and was essential in shoring up Tunisia's dwindling reserves.

Yemen is also pursuing a medium-term arrangement with the IMF and by mid-December 2013, Yemen's Minister of Planning Mohamed Al-Saadi announced that his country was close to a \$550 million deal with the IMF that would provide much-needed budgetary support, but no further developments

have been announced. Such an agreement would be contingent upon gradual subsidy reform and it remains to be seen if the fragile government will be able to make that commitment.²⁵ Even Libya, despite oil reserves of 46.4 billion barrels, natural gas reserves of 1.5 trillion cubic meters, and foreign assets of approximately \$158 billion,²⁶ faces dire circumstances because oil exports have come to a complete standstill due to militia control of the oil fields. If a political resolution is not found to pacify the militias, Libya too might pursue IMF assistance.

With or without an IMF agreement, ultimately economic success will depend on whether politicians in the transitioning countries are able to muster the will to take steps to implement economic reforms. If not, citizens will continue to demand greater economic opportunity and stability, and security will remain elusive until their calls are heeded.

21 Mohsin Khan and Karim Mezran, "The Libyan Economy after the Revolution: Still No Clear Vision," Atlantic Council, August 2013, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/issue-briefs/the-libyan-economy-after-the-revolution-still-no-clear-vision>.

22 Joel Toujas-Bernate and Rina Bhattacharya, "Tunisia Weathers Crisis Well, But Unemployment Persists," IMF, September 10, 2010, <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/survey/so/2010/car091010a.htm>.

23 *Global Competitiveness Report 2013-2014* (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2013), <http://www.weforum.org/reports/global-competitiveness-report-2013-2014>.

24 IMF, press release no. 13/202, "IMF Approves a 24-Month & 1.74 billion Stand-By Arrangement with Tunisia," June 7, 2013, <http://www.imf.org/external/np/sec/pr/2013/pr13202.htm>.

25 Ahmed Hagagy, "Yemen Sees Deal on \$550 Million Loan from IMF in Early 2014: Minister," Reuters, December 11, 2013, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2013/12/11/us-yemen-imf-loan-idUKBRE9BA00220131211>.

26 IIF, press release, "Arab Spring' Countries Struggle, GCC Prospects Favorable," October 2013, <http://www.iif.com/press/press+440.php>.



Photo credit: NDC.ye

The Long, Difficult Road to National Healing

In each of the countries in transition, the majority of the population had suffered decades of injustice—moral, legal, and economic—under authoritarian rule. Those who took to the streets during the revolutions demanded redress for past abuses. Transitional justice processes may be defined in different ways, but according to international law this could include four elements: truth and the establishment of facts; justice, including investigation and, where possible, prosecution; reparation such as financial compensation or even public apology; and guarantees of non-repetition through the appropriate laws and punishment of previous offenders.

Despite the post-revolutionary efforts outlined below, none of the countries have had any great success with transitional justice. Tunisia seemed to start in the right direction by creating a Ministry for Human Rights and Transitional Justice in January 2012 that was tasked with pinpointing and dealing with human rights violations “based on searching for truth, judgment and reconciliation as adopted at the national level in order to reinforce the democratic transition and contribute to the national reconciliation.”²⁷ However, the unity that led to the ousting of a dictator did not translate into national unity on how to proceed. More than one hundred political parties registered for the 2011 parliamentary elections and few of them agreed on how Tunisia should pursue a process of transitional justice. As journalist Sarah Mersch puts it, “the work

of the investigation commissions has been largely ineffective. Even trials of former regime figures that took place shortly after the government overthrow, including the trial—in absentia—of Ben Ali himself, were hurried, botched up, and eventually considered show trials.”²⁸

Pablo de Greiff, the UN special rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation, and guarantees of non-recurrence, issued a report on Tunisia’s process in November 2012 and concluded that there had been too much of a focus on compensation instead of truth-seeking, prosecutions, and institutional reform. He warned that the process was highly politicized and favored some political groups over others. Little progress has been made since then, and it is unclear when a transitional justice mechanism to deal with past abuses will be put in place. Many Tunisians feel the process has dragged on for too long, mostly due to lack of a clear and unified vision on the way forward.

Yemen took an approach at the other end of the spectrum with a 2011 transition agreement brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) that granted complete immunity to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh in exchange for leaving power. Yemen’s parliament then passed a law solidifying this immunity, and the law also shields Saleh’s aides from prosecution for any “political crimes” that are not terrorist acts. While the GCC agreement arguably prevented untold bloodshed and enabled a national dialogue, it has left a bitter taste for many

27 “Human Rights and Transitional Justice in Tunisia: One Step Forward, Two Steps Back?” Verzetmuseum and Amnesty International, March 14, 2013, https://www.amnesty.nl/sites/default/files/public/geuzenpaper_def.pdf.

28 Sarah Mersch, “The Road to Justice,” *Sada*, June 25, 2013, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2013/06/25/road-to-justice/gbvz>.

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Yemenis. Some members of the National Dialogue's Transitional Justice Working Group tried to promote a proposal that parliament rescind the law, since in fact it violates Yemen's international legal obligation to hold accountable those responsible for human rights violations, but this did not gain sufficient support. MENA Director of Human Rights Watch Sarah Leah Whitson has pointed out the troubling precedent the law sanctions, noting that "allowing the worst human rights violators to escape prosecution puts all Yemenis at risk of future abuses."²⁹

Libya decided on its own path to transitional justice. In May 2013, the General National Congress (GNC) overwhelmingly passed Libya's Political Isolation Law. It was a means of ensuring that those allied to the former Gaddafi regime would never hold public office during the country's transition. It is essentially a lustration law that determines whether citizens can or cannot hold public office if they have been associated with a discredited former regime. Historically, such laws are not unusual for addressing demands for transitional justice. However, it also seemed to reflect Libyan post-revolution accountability characterized by acts of vengeance and partisan justice aimed at anyone associated with the defeated regime. Despite the novelty of the situation, it smacked of business as usual.³⁰ By contrast, Libya's Transitional Justice Law, on ice for almost a year, has yet to be passed.

Nor has Egypt, which prides itself on the strength of its institutions, fared much better. Post revolution, transitional justice has suffered the

same political machinations. A political isolation law was approved by the then-ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) in November 2011 only to be struck down by the Supreme Constitutional Court as unconstitutional less than six months later. While many Mubarak-regime figures were tried and found guilty of various crimes, (including Mubarak himself) with many currently behind bars, the narrative has changed. In July 2013, interim President Adly Mansour appointed Judge Mohamed Amin as Egypt's first minister of transitional justice and national reconciliation. Three weeks later, the media was full of rumors that Amin wanted to resign.³¹ The minister certainly has his hands full: following Morsi's ouster, there is a public appetite, fed by an overheated media, for a crackdown on what is left of the Brotherhood as a means of transitional justice, given the Brotherhood's own abuse of power.

And in none of these countries is there much of an appetite for security reform. In Egypt, Morsi not only failed to undertake any reform of the sector, he attempted to coopt it. He appointed Ahmed Gamal Al-Din as minister of the interior, known to be loyal to Mubarak's former Minister of the Interior Habib Al-Adly, who was serving a life sentence for failing to prevent loss of life during the January 2011 revolutions. In light of the current volatile security situation in Egypt, as one Egyptian human rights lawyer put it, "There is no public appetite for security reform. We're becoming more repressive than under Mubarak."³²

In Yemen, the status quo has also largely continued with very little effort to reform or restructure the ministry of the interior, which handles security and policing functions and often contradicts other security or intelligence bodies. Reorganizing the military forces overseen by the ministry of defense is a key priority of the United States in order to ensure more effective counterterrorism cooperation, whereas reforming and integrating the myriad of security forces and private militias that fall under the auspices of the ministry of interior has not been a front-burner issue, and current President Abd Rabo Mansour Hadi has left this domain mostly untouched. More broadly, the state does not possess a monopoly

29 Human Rights Watch, news release, "Yemen: Strike Down Immunity Law," November 20, 2013.

30 Mark Kersten, "Libya's Political Isolation Law: Politics, Justice or the Politics of Justice?" Academia.edu, http://www.academia.edu/5257004/Libyas_Political_Isolation_Law_-_Politics_Justice_or_the_Politics_of_Justice.

31 Al-Masry Al-Youm, "Justice Minister Mulls Resignation," *Egypt Independent*, August 7, 2013, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/justice-minister-mulls-resignation>.

32 Interview with authors.

over the use of legitimate force, and in many areas the tribal militias are better equipped to dispense justice and resolve disputes. Without full buy-in by all the major stakeholders—including former regime elements and other potential spoilers—to the political agreement forged through the National Dialogue, security sector reform is largely an academic exercise.³³

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In Libya, the police forces had always been viewed with suspicion. As one Libyan politician put it, Libya during Gaddafi's times had an internal and an external police force, "The internal police was to control people at home. The external police was to chase opposition movements abroad." The only thing that has changed is that there is now a multiplicity of security forces—Libya's many militias are all keen to have a hand in the game and share in the power and wealth. Whether the government can dismantle them or integrate them is the question. The situation is further complicated by what one Libya analyst termed "the sheer inefficiency of a divided and polarized government which is attempting to buy the ephemeral loyalty of armed militias." The judicial system is in a shambles, and each militia has its own prisons. However, a new cadre of Libyan troops is currently being trained by the United States and other European partners in an attempt to ensure an independent and professional Libyan army.

³³ *Yemen's Military-Security Reform: Seeds of New Conflict?*, Middle East report no. 139 (Sanaa and Brussels: International Crisis Group, April 4, 2013), <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-iran-gulf/yemen/139-yemens-military-security-reform-seeds-of-new-conflict.aspx>.



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The Civil Factor

In politically restrictive environments lacking open political party competition, civil society institutions are often the most relevant vehicles to channel citizen discontent and opposition. The role of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and media are often good indicators of the relative strength and freedom of civil society, and assessing how they have fared from the pre- to post-revolution era provides an important barometer of the freedom of expression and association.

Much has been made of Tunisia's pre-revolution civil society but in fact, NGOs were only welcome as long as they gave politics a wide berth. In the post-revolution environment, there has been a massive proliferation of civil society organizations representing interests and communities across the spectrum. The veil of fear from the repression of the Ben Ali regime has been lifted, and there are now countless opportunities to organize, advocate, and critique without worry of retribution. The diverse Tunisian civil society scene is split between charitable (often religious) organizations, secular political groups, and those without an explicit political orientation or agenda, such as environmental groups, and there is relatively open space for all to operate in parallel with little government interference. That said, the past year has witnessed fierce cultural and social battles in Tunisia over issues of religion in public space, the rights of women, and morality codes that have politicized civil society space across the country.

Egypt has a long and deep tradition of active civil society organizations dating to the early twentieth century, but growing polarization and increased

nationalism has resulted in a heightened suspicion of nongovernmental organizations, particularly those dealing with human rights and receiving foreign funding. Any challenge to the accepted nationalistic narrative is met with aggressive disbelief; as one Egyptian human rights lawyer puts it, "Recycled propaganda about foreign actors and foreign intervention is being recycled and believed." Egypt is currently awaiting a decision on the latest draft of a new law to regulate NGO activity. On the positive side, the draft indicates registration requires only simple notification to the relevant ministry, and refusal is limited to extremely specific circumstances; yet on the more troubling side, the language is still restrictive by requiring prior government authorization for NGOs to receive foreign funding.

In Libya, civil society organizations were virtually nonexistent under Gaddafi, particularly ones that would have played any kind of political or advocacy role. Since the revolution, the emergence of nascent civil society groups—channeling concerns of citizens on issues from human rights to youth engagement—has been one of the most encouraging and inspiring aspects of Libya's development. As of now, there are no laws organizing civil society although, according to a prominent Libyan lawyer, the suspicion of foreign funding is also present and a danger to future operations. Another Libyan activist pointed out that the number of civil society organizations was not a sound metric to measure impact, rather one had to see if their demands were being met. At present, he says, the best way to articulate a demand in Libya appears to be with

Prior to the uprisings, the Middle East and North Africa had one of the most restricted media environments in the world.

a Kalashnikov. However, the rapid growth in the number of civil society organizations and their activities should be viewed as an encouraging development.

Yemen's political space was tightly controlled by former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, yet at the same time, there was a great deal of fluidity and room for movement for nongovernmental organizations who sought to fill important gaps where the government was incapable of acting. Often this focused on health, education, or social development, but it also touched on political participation and inclusion of women and youth. The uprising gave a tremendous boost to youth organizations, which proliferated during the revolution, along with many other interest groups. The National Dialogue recognized the value of civil society input and inclusion, yet the ability of many of these groups to translate their newfound voice into impact remains to be seen. Of the 8,317 civil society organizations (CSOs) in Yemen, 828 or were created after 2010. This rapid growth in civil society activity is attributed to the social and political openings associated with the political transition and with growing demand for greater government accountability and improved public service delivery.³⁴ The degree of effectiveness of these organizations may be eroded by competition for international donor funding, yet there is relative freedom for them to operate without interference.

Media freedom and independence is another means of gauging the strength of civil society to counterbalance and hold government and political leaders accountable for their actions. Prior to the uprisings, the Middle East and North Africa had

34 *Yemen Civil Society Organizations in Transition* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2013), <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2013/06/18267983/yemen-civil-society-organizations-transition>.

one of the most restricted media environments in the world. In a region with a permanently throttled media, Tunisia's stood out as particularly restricted. Consumers had a choice of two papers owned by the state or two owned by the ruling party. Alternatively, they could try one of the several privately owned ones, all of which were owned by friends or relatives of the Ben Ali family. The Ministry of Communications oversaw all media operations and the Ministry of Interior vetted all print publication applications. Libya was even worse; in pre-revolution Libya, the law allowed for freedom of speech, as long as it did not undermine "the principles of revolution," as defined by Gaddafi. The media was controlled entirely by the Gaddafi regime with the police "enjoying almost complete immunity for acts of violence against journalists," according to Freedom House.³⁵

Egypt's media was significantly more permissive with several respected, independent newspapers; particularly in the later years of Mubarak's reign, the regime allowed some space for contentious politics, and Egypt's media took full advantage of it. Yet the overall media environment suffered from draconian press laws, which permitted imprisonment for libel or defamation, with the sentence doubled if the person libeled was a public official. Similarly, pre-revolution Yemen had a number of party-affiliated newspapers and a few relatively independent newspapers published online, but news outlets still had to obtain permission to operate from the Yemeni Ministry of Information and Culture and were required to submit copies of all printed material to the ministry. Article 41 of the constitution allowed freedom of expression "within the limits of the law," however, in July of 2010, Reporters Without Borders counted no less than seven incidents of journalists who were intimidated, arrested, assaulted, had their homes fired upon, or were kidnapped at gunpoint.³⁶

Since the uprisings took place, the record has been mixed on media freedoms and independence. In 2013, the Freedom House Freedom of Expression Index has registered improvement in Libya and Yemen. Libya climbed one point in the rankings,

35 "Libya" in *Freedom of the Press 2011: Signs of Change amid Repression* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2011), <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2011/libya#UuLfWBAo6Uk>.

36 Reporters without Borders, press release, "New Threats to Press Freedom in Yemen," August 3, 2010, <http://en.rsf.org/yemen-new-threats-to-press-freedom-in-03-08-2010,38084.html>.

to 59th place, just reaching what Freedom House classifies as “partly free” status. Yemen, while still in the “not free” category, made the greatest strides forward from 83rd place to 79th, largely as a result of the new government having allowed private radio stations. Increased polarization between Islamists and the more secular opposition forced Tunisia down one place to 52nd. Egypt slipped five places from last year’s 57th to 62nd in 2013 and lost the “partly free” status it had achieved the year before³⁷ thanks to a superlatively brutal attempt at suppression under Morsi. Among other transgressions, twenty-four cases were brought against journalists and public figures for “insulting the president.” While insulting the head of the country has been illegal in Egypt since 1897, there have been 14 cases brought for this offence in those 115 years until 2012. There were 24 during the first 200 days of Morsi’s presidency.³⁸

The revolutions have brought mixed blessings for the media environments in these countries.

The revolutions have brought mixed blessings for the media environments in these countries. On the one hand, there have been vast improvements in freedom of expression, a basic requirement for any free media but one that had been sorely lacking before the revolutions. The Freedom House figures cited above may appear marginal but they must be read in their global context; when Yemen, for example, moves upward four places in the rankings, it does so by beating out other countries competing for that same place. In other words, the revolutions have allowed for very real gains in freedom of expression, be they in print, broadcast, or online.

However, those freedoms have come at a price. For media that had been used to operating in repressive

environments, the sudden increase in freedom was not accompanied by a corresponding rise in or adherence to professional ethics or standards. In Yemen and Libya, despite nascent moves toward independence, media are accused of representing various warring factions. The situation is worse in Tunisia and Egypt; the media in both countries are currently mired in a partisan environment that seems to have put aside reporting for shrill demagoguery. In Egypt, the tone of independent media is becoming difficult to separate from that of state media, in terms of support for the government and anti-Brotherhood feeling (a reflection of the intensely liberal/secular-bashing encouraged under the Morsi government by Islamist media organizations). In Tunisia, an organization set up to monitor post-revolution media, the National Authority for Reform of Information and Communication (INRIC) reports, “TV channels, radio stations and newspapers have suddenly become political arenas, where political disputes are settled, including misinformation and, quite simply, defamation...which represent a clear violation of the basic ethical rules of journalism.”³⁹

³⁷ *Freedom of the Press 2013: Middle East Volatility amid Global Decline* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2013), <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/freedom-press-2013>.

³⁸ Arab Rights Network for Human Rights Information, press release, January 20, 2013, <http://www.anhri.net/en/?p=10921>.

³⁹ *INRIC Report*, April 2012, <http://www.inric.tn/fr/INRIC-Report-Eng-final.pdf>.



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The Future of Political Islam

The Arab Awakening gave Islamists an unprecedented level of political power and expanded their reach and influence in all the transitioning countries. The Muslim Brotherhood had participated in elections in Egypt for decades, winning 20 percent of parliament in 2005. However, its candidates had always run as independents, a necessity given that the Brotherhood was banned. In Libya and Yemen, while Islamists had not faced the same legacy of state-led aggression, the removal of autocratic regimes cleared the way for a more robust role in society and politics. In Tunisia after decades of repression, Ennahda won a plurality of parliamentary seats in post-revolution elections, but soon faced ire from secular-minded parties and protesters who accused them of failing to govern effectively and allowing conservative Salafis too much free reign.

Three years after the revolutions, Islamist hopes for a new political beginning have faded. Islamists currently face a fundamental threat in Egypt and deep suspicion elsewhere as to their ability to govern and their commitment to democratic principles. Just as troubling, the chasm between those who support Islamist movements and those who are critical of them has grown so wide that it threatens the stability of the countries.

In Egypt, Morsi's year in power was marked by a litany of human rights abuses, attacks against freedom of speech, increased secular strife, economic hardship, and a deepening suspicion that his party was attempting to "Brotherhoodize" the country. Eventually, public anger resulted in a coup leading to Morsi's ouster, a subsequent crackdown

against his supporters, and a state of heightened national polarization.

In Tunisia, the Islamist Ennahda party took a far more moderate and conciliatory approach by forming a coalition with two secular parties and advocating for a model of consensus-based governing. Yet the assassination of two leftist opposition members (allegedly by Islamist groups) and inaction on the part of Ennahda fueled bitter divisions between Islamist and non-Islamist forces that threatened to destroy the tenuous balance that had allowed the government to function. This breakdown in trust was exacerbated by fierce antigovernment protests and accusations that the government had not responded to the demands of the people and failed to maintain security—ultimately this led to the forced resignation of the Ennahda-led governing coalition. Still, Tunisia managed to keep violence and utter stalemate at bay by negotiating a roadmap agreement that traded the relinquishment of Ennahda's power for ratifying the constitution and setting a date for new elections. Despite Tunisia's progress, there is still a significant secular-Islamist divide that is likely to resurface and could destabilize the country again. Unless these societal splits are addressed by regenerating trust between the two sides, setbacks are likely to continue.

The lessons from Egypt and Tunisia are being internalized elsewhere in the region. In Yemen, a spokesman for the Islamist Islah party noted that "it took years of internal discussion to accept democracy in theory and practice and now we want to avoid Islamists coming to the conclusion

that it will not work.”⁴⁰ Unless Islamist politicians take responsibility for policy failures, citizens will not want to support them, especially if they engage in repression or power grabs. Moreover, despite Islamist failures at governing in Tunisia and developing inclusive processes in Egypt, Islamists represent a considerable (if hard to quantify) contingent of the population in each transition country. Unless political actors of all stripes are allowed to participate in politics, the transitions will struggle to produce democratic, stable societies in the long term.

Arguments that political Islam is discredited or is somehow in danger of extinction are short-sighted. Political Islam has a truly unique platform of both economic and spiritual goals and in countries where much of the population is devout, the fusion of religion and politics will continue to appeal. There is a reason that Islamists dominated the post-revolutionary political scene in Egypt, were key figures in the Yemeni uprising, and won leading roles in Libya and Tunisia after the revolutions: they “have been reshaping the public culture of the Arab world for decades” and “have long been the best-organized and most popular political movements in most Arab countries.”⁴¹ Despite their mistakes and the uncertain political environment in the transition countries, Islamist parties will likely return to the political scene sooner rather than later in Egypt, and Islamist parties will continue to be important political actors in Tunisia, Libya, and Yemen.

In Egypt, no strong alternatives currently exist to Islamist parties as they still have the greatest organizational capacity and can draw on networks created through years of community outreach. The Muslim Brotherhood’s legendary grassroots organizational abilities were honed while providing the kind of basic social goods and services the government had failed to provide. In turn, the organization asked for, and received, loyalty at the ballot box. Egypt’s disparate band of secular parties may benefit in the short term from the exclusion of the Muslim Brotherhood from politics, but these groups “have failed to articulate clear political messages or to construct a solid electoral base” and “some of these groups are relying on the popular

40 Comments to the authors, October 7, 2013.

41 Marc Lynch, “Islamist Movements after the Arab Uprising,” in Marc Lynch, ed., *Islamists in a Changing Middle East* (Washington, DC: FP Group, 2012), pp. 6-8, <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/files/042ff47cd92e3ca8a4bc92e94b3f6ccc.pdf>.

Three years after the revolutions, Islamist hopes for a new political beginning have faded.

military or the pervasive anti-Islamist sentiment for political survival.”⁴²

Secularists in Tunisia are significantly more powerful than their Egyptian counterparts (capturing more than 30 percent of the seats in the National Constituent Assembly after the revolution), but “there is a good chance that they will become politically obsolete” if they “remain removed from the realities of the Tunisian population,” according to a founder of the League of Young Patriots in Tunisia.⁴³ The reality is that over the long term, as non-Islamist parties face similar challenges with governing—or perhaps even with winning elections—and leading transition processes, Islamists are likely to reemerge as top contenders for political power.

Islamists, humiliated and endangered by their ouster in Egypt, disappointed by swallowing the “bitter pill” of surrendering the cabinet in Tunisia and faced with the reality of seriously declining popular support,⁴⁴ may also reflect on their mistakes and devise new strategies while out of power. Over time, as the shortcomings of military-backed rule or new governments are apparent, Islamists in Egypt and Tunisia will have an opportunity to present a different narrative and vie for another chance as the ruling party. In Libya and Yemen, Islamists will likely seek to avoid the mistakes made by the Muslim Brotherhood and Ennahda. Whether or not Islamists will learn lessons from past missteps and try to govern more inclusively is another question entirely.

42 Erin Cunningham, “Egypt’s Secular Parties Hampered by Disorganization, Infighting,” *Washington Post*, November 12, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/egypts-secular-parties-hampered-by-disorganization-infighting/2013/11/12/79be5e70-4b19-11e3-ac54-aa84301ced81_story.html.

43 Montassar Jemmali, “Tunisia’s Secular Parties: Reconciling Ideology with Political Reality,” *Fikra Forum*, November 6, 2013, <http://fikraforum.org/?p=4015>.

44 Mohamed Bechri, “The Future of Tunisia’s Ennahda Party” *Fikra Forum*, November 7, 2013, <http://fikraforum.org/?p=4028>.



Photo credit: Chuck Kennedy, official White House photo

US and European Engagement Needed

At a time of reluctant, halting US engagement in the Middle East, conversations with Tunisians, Libyans, Yemenis, and Egyptians underscore the desire for Western support alongside indigenous transition processes. Yet, the United States seems determined to focus its foreign policy elsewhere. President Barack Obama's speech at the UN General Assembly in September 2013, for example, focused on nuclear negotiations with Iran and Israeli-Palestinian talks and clearly backed down from his commitment in 2011 to galvanize all available US resources to support democratic transition in the Arab world and "pursue the world as it should be" rather than accept "the world as it is in the region."⁴⁵

Though the Obama administration may prefer to ignore the seismic change underway in the Arab Awakening countries, the perils of inaction are manifold. If the United States does not take an active role in supporting the transitions, Tunisians, Libyans, Egyptians, Yemenis, and others in the region will remember the lack of follow through on grand proclamations of support for democratic change in the region, adding to negative perceptions of the United States abroad. Moreover, many interlocutors from the region have conveyed that if the United States fails to back up words with actions, a unique chance to help usher in positive change and reform in the region will be lost.

Despite rampant conspiracy theories and nationalistic, anti-US rhetoric in the region, many

Arabs believe that the United States could and should play a more constructive role in encouraging reform or, at the very least, maintaining a consistent policy. Since the United States long allied itself with corrupt, autocratic leaders, this places a special burden on it to ensure that the old pattern of silence in the face of repression is not repeated. The United States and the European Union (EU) could regain credibility by taking a clear stance when democratic transitions derail; otherwise, the region's citizens will view them as hypocritical, self-serving superpowers that cultivate relationships that ensure their security needs are met while ignoring government-led oppression. "Please do not be accomplices to corruption,"⁴⁶ a former Yemeni minister urges, pointing out that many in these countries are desperately trying to combat decades of state capture of the economy. According to him, Western silence in the face of deadly polarization, repression, and violence will only undermine the prospects for reform and contribute to instability.

Instead, many in the transitioning countries argue that the United States and the EU can play a key role in educating interested segments of the population about how to develop political parties and advocate for democratic processes in the new, post-Arab Awakening environment. One expert from a transition country argues that the international community should "play an advise-and-assist role, and more so on the economic front and less on the political" while a current Yemeni minister urges the United States and the EU to "persist in demanding real reform of state structure, better governance,

⁴⁵ Barack Obama, "Remarks of President Barack Obama: 'A Moment of Opportunity,'" *Washington Post*, May 11, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/remarks-of-president-barack-obama-a-moment-of-opportunity/2011/05/19/AFMP0F7G_story_2.html.

⁴⁶ Interview with authors.

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and empower societal demands.” Though there is disagreement on what the international community should prioritize, there is consensus that the West can play a constructive role by offering technical support and training that will help the people of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen build institutions and knowledge that support greater economic opportunity, freedom, and dignity.

One area where donors could have more of an impact is by encouraging the development of local government that both empowers the population and prevents a return to corruption and state capture of the economy. In countries without a strong central government (Yemen and Libya), this will offer more citizens the services they need as well as the chance to participate in government. For countries that have a stronger central government (Egypt and Tunisia), decentralization will help diminish cronyism and could spur greater economic growth, as well as increase prospects for political participation at the local level.

In the eyes of many Egyptians, Tunisians, Libyans, and Yemenis, the United States and the EU are still predominately focused on security rather than holistic policies that seek to advance political reform and development. As one Egyptian journalist argues, US and EU thinking about regional security is often divorced from other interests such as economic prosperity and political reform without regard to how they are closely interrelated. Rather than continuing to proffer aid regardless of events on the ground in fear of jeopardizing much-needed security cooperation, some in the region have advocated that the United States and its EU partners put clear conditions on economic assistance packages. As one regional analyst notes, “qualified assistance can

help push Egypt towards democratic policies and... more than superficial democratic change.” Attaching conditions to aid may help spur positive change rather than perpetuating diplomatic and security ties regardless of the government’s actions. Unless there are political processes that lead to stability, there will be no lasting security. Thus, international partners would be wise to look beyond a short-term security paradigm and listen to broader concerns from Egyptians, Libyans, Tunisians, and Yemenis about what will make their countries more stable and secure in the long term: institutional reform, inclusive politics, and economic growth.

Though there will inevitably be disagreements about how to promote inclusive processes and address economic woes, conversations with regional actors reveal that there is clear interest and desire for the United States and European nations to undertake a long-term policy of pushing for genuine change in the transition countries rather than ignoring the importance of these opportunities.



Photo credit: Ezequiel Scagnetti, European Parliament, Flickr

Conclusion

Three years into their transitions, how much closer are the four countries to realizing the demands of the people who took to the streets in protest? Each has discovered that overthrowing the autocrat was the easiest part of the revolution. The challenges ahead are putting an enormous strain on the people and governments of these transitioning countries.

The demands for a better livelihood have yet to be met, despite the fact that public sector wages have increased in Egypt and Tunisia and subsidies have been sustained. Most distressingly, many ordinary people feel that by demanding freedom, they sacrificed what small financial security previous dictatorships had offered: revenues are down while deficits and unemployment are up. However, IMF loans for Tunisia and Yemen may offer short-term relief, oil revenues will help Libya and, in the case of Egypt, currently pliant and helpful Gulf neighbors will provide a much needed (if temporary) boost. In order to ensure long-term stability, though, decisive leadership on implementing economic reforms is sorely needed.

All four transition countries are still negotiating how their political systems will accommodate political dissent and struggling to reformulate electoral systems, constitutions, and the balance between judicial-executive authorities. All have made very few strides on national healing in the form of transitional justice, despite the considerable attention devoted to addressing the situation. Security sector reform, though a major demand of the revolutions, is no closer to being attained than it was three years ago. And, especially in Egypt, civil

society is still attempting to pick its way through the minefield of nationalism, polarization, and the ever-present suspicion of foreign intervention.

However, these difficulties notwithstanding, there is still room for hope, since the aspirations for freedom, for dignity, and for social justice remain undimmed. Protesters in Egypt took to the streets to denounce the restrictive new protest law, their counterparts in Tunisia expressed outrage over the arrest of rapper Ahmed Ben Ahmed whose song “Police are Dogs” provoked the ire of the security services,⁴⁷ youth in Yemen are forming new political parties that may eventually inject new leadership into the government,⁴⁸ and Libyans are pressuring the current ineffective rulers to step down. Moreover, upcoming elections in Tunisia, Libya, and Yemen may recalibrate the balance of power and offer a new set of political leaders the chance to tackle economic, security, and governance issues. In Egypt, the majority of Egyptians are hopeful. The July coup followed massive popular demand for the removal of both Morsi and the Brotherhood and despite the current instability, Egyptians appear convinced of two facts: the first is that the current changes will eventually be for the better. The second is that regardless of current political crackdowns, the revolution has ensured that the ability to dissent and the demands for freedom have become too ingrained for any state to override.

47 “Rapper Klay BBJ Freed,” *Tunisia Live*, October 17, 2013, <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2013/10/17/rapper-klay-bbj-freed/>.

48 Gabool Al-Mutawakel, “Voices: Youth Will Define Yemen’s Future,” *Middle East Voices*, Voice of America, February 13, 2013, <http://middleeastvoices.voanews.com/2013/02/voices-youth-will-define-yemens-future-49839/>.

The revolutions have ushered in a space for participatory politics, public accountability, and greater freedom of speech and assembly, and though elements of the old state and the security apparatus are working to preserve their power, the public is mobilized and will not tolerate authoritarian governments indefinitely. While the populations of these four countries might not agree about what they want in terms of specific steps that promote economic growth, participatory government, and human rights, they are clear on what they do not want and will no longer accept—a government that impinges on the people’s dignity and violates fundamental human rights. This is a lesson that any would-be ruling party will have to learn.

About the Authors



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Mirette Mabrouk is the deputy director for regional programs at the Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, where she manages the regional nonresident fellow network and writes on Egypt. She was formerly director of communications for the Economic Research Forum, the foremost economic think tank for the Arab Countries, Turkey, and Iran. In January 2009, she relinquished her post as associate director for publishing operations at the American University in Cairo Press to take up a fellowship at the Brookings Institution. She is the founding publisher of the *Daily Star Egypt*, (later renamed the *Daily News Egypt*) the country's only independent English-language daily newspaper. Mabrouk started the paper in May of 2005 and it rapidly became the leading English newspaper in the country. She also

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Stefanie A. Hausheer is an assistant director for programs at the Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East. In addition to coordinating Washington-based and regional events for the Center, she conducts research on Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, and Yemen. Before coming to the Council, she was a graduate research assistant at George Washington University's Institute for Middle East Studies. Stefanie holds a master's degree in Middle East studies from the George Washington University. Her graduate capstone project examined the potential social, economic, and political impacts of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program, which has sent over 100,000 Saudis to study abroad. Stefanie has traveled throughout the Middle East and has advanced proficiency in Arabic. She speaks the Saudi dialect, which she learned while hosting and

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The Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East brings North American and European voices together with experts from the Middle East, fostering a policy-relevant dialogue about the future of the region at a historic moment of political transformation. The Hariri Center provides objective analysis and innovative policy recommendations regarding political, economic, and social change in the Arab countries, and creates communities of influence around critical issues.

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