

# **From Resilience to Revolt**

## Making Sense of the Arab Spring

*Executive Summary*



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## Executive Summary

Early 2011 waves of protest started rolling through the Middle East. Though in many states the status quo was only shaken without any actual transformations, the popular uprisings, which have since become known as the “Arab Spring”, did manage to remove a series of leaders from their figurative thrones.

The purpose of this research, funded by the Research and Documentation Centre (WODC) of the Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice, is to provide a broadly-scoped understanding of the Arab uprisings, aggregating also what research has already been done, in an effort to pinpoint what factors or dynamics can be found to be useful in trying to make sense of the sudden mass mobilization in the Middle East in 2011. Notwithstanding some methodological limitations that were imposed, the intentionally very general research question has yielded a series of valuable insights, mostly centered on endogenous factors that can help elucidate the complexities of the Arab uprisings.

The first matter to be addressed was how such a ground-breaking turn of events had been predicted by so few, if any. It quickly became apparent that periods of revolutionary upheaval are nearly impossible to predict due to their inherently complex nature, and can only be properly explained in hindsight. Nevertheless, it should be possible to identify stress factors carrying valuable information on the viability of a complex social system. In the case of the Arab Spring, very few managed to connect the build-up of those stress factors to the impending breakdown of authoritarian systems, or the wave of popular upheavals that trashed through the region.

This was explained by the traditional focus within academic circles on the robustness of authoritarianism. Suggested reasons for this regime resilience were the phenomenon of “authoritarian upgrading”, which entails the reaction of autocrats to changes in the political, economic or social environment, often converging around a policy built to preserve and stabilize their rule, and other similar factors based on fluctuating levels of authoritarianism. However, in light of the Arab revolts the idea has resurfaced that these processes of adaptation have generated their own problems, for example by undermining authoritarian stability in the long run because of the absence of a robust political society, or the reinforcement of a growing cynicism among Arab populations.

The question *why* the Arab Spring came about was answered through the acknowledgement of structural imbalances, mainly socio-economic, political and demographic, that over the course of decades weakened the foundations on which authoritarian regimes were built. The economic hardship regimes endured in recent years, due to macro-economic shocks, forced rulers to revert money away from socio-economic appeasement of populations. The result quickly showed when prices of commodities started increasing and (youth) unemployment grew. At the same time, due to widespread corruption and cronyism, inequality had also risen to new heights. The hardship was only further worsened because of a youth bulge, which is what occurs when the fraction of young

people in a population is unbalanced relative to other cohorts, finally leading to the collapse of the implicit social contract the autocrats had entered in with their populations.

Nevertheless, the explanation of why pressures mounted is not enough to explain *how* autocrats that had remained in power for decades were suddenly forcibly removed from office. For that purpose, the concept of social nonmovements – passive networks that bring change through unintended consequences of individual practices as a result of “politics of presence” – was discussed extensively, in order to elucidate how public frustration managed to crystallize into protest movements, and subsequently how these movements due to that mobilization grew to a critical mass, where repressive force was no longer able to contain it.

To subtly combine these matters of *why* and *how* the concept of triggers (or catalysts) was introduced, such as the death of Mohammed Bouazizi. In light of the factors discussed, it is difficult to imagine these seemingly small occurrences as having much impact, but it were nonetheless these apparently innocuous events that were the eventual straw that broke the camel’s back.

Still, in only a fraction of states were the revolts successful in the sense that they eventually managed to remove an autocrat from his throne. Now that the smoke has cleared somewhat, it is easy to specify how the “domino” factor ended up playing a smaller role than was initially envisioned, but it would be a loss to downplay the contagion effects of the initial revolts for the rest of the region.

The aftermath of the situation in the four countries that saw actual change was discussed in some detail. For example, the socio-economic situation, an important cause of the revolts, has by no means improved which could prove itself a future source of conflict. Meanwhile, a possible source of conflict is also arising as a result of the recent electoral successes of Islamist parties. The rise of political Islam is viewed with some caution, both in the region as well as beyond.

In a comparison of the Arab Spring with a selection of historic accounts of revolutions and popular uprisings elsewhere, asking the question whether any lessons should be distilled, the answer is best summarized by the idea that even though there are always similarities to be found, these will only hold up on a general level. There appears to be no model formula for revolution, with each case being unique.

With that in mind, our gaze was nevertheless directed to the future, addressing the opportunities for Western-style democratic transitions, based on prior research dealing with possible sets of preconditions and chances of success. It was concluded that Tunisia has by far the best chances of successfully experiencing a move towards liberal democracy. Though for Egypt the transition process will most probably prove more difficult, this state is also well ahead of Libya and Yemen, which will have to deal with building both a state, a nation, as well as governing structures to keep them together.

Finally, a series of possible security risks were discussed. Most urgently in this matter is the deterioration of the conflict in Syria, and the set of national, regional, and international repercussions that would accompany such deterioration. Also, the growing influence of al-Qa`ida in Yemen was debated, as well as the fear of a fragile state in Libya. On a more

general note, the possible effects of populist politics were examined, and how sources of conflict that would previously be contained should now perhaps be expected to make more of a ruckus, such as the position of Israel in the region, its actions, and the support it gets from its Western allies, including the Netherlands.

To conclude, in a region where academic research had mainly been focusing on the longevity of autocracy, explaining how established structures prevailed and seemed impervious to change, the unexpected revolts and subsequent removal of autocrats such as Ben Ali, Mubarak, Qadhafi and Saleh is at least a break with past decades. At the very least then, the Arab revolts, also those that were not (yet) successful, tell an impressive story about the human will and how to overcome fear.