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Middle East Brief

The Great Thaw in Arab Domestic Politics

David Siddhartha Patel

It has been a tumultuous decade in the Middle East since the beginning of the Arab uprisings in 2010–2011. Bouts of popular mobilization recur and echo across borders. Six long-standing Arab rulers have fallen. Civil wars erupted and continue in Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Regional and global powers jockey for influence, and, throughout the region, states interfere in one another's internal affairs. All this is typically described as part of a regionwide revolutionary hangover—the “post-Arab Spring period”—that will inevitably subside as the dust settles.

This Brief argues that, on the contrary, the unrest of the past decade seems like an aberration only because, in several important ways, domestic political life in Arab states was frozen from the late 1970s until the 2000s. It is that period of authoritarian stability—when Arab leaders almost never fell—that was the real anomaly. Before a huge increase in oil rents from 1973 to 1986 dramatically strengthened states and regimes, the domestic politics of the Arab Middle East were just as tumultuous as they have been since 2011. But today oil prices are lower and states are weaker relative to their societies than they were during the oil-enabled “ice age” of stable Arab states, making a return to durable authoritarian governments unlikely. This decade, then, is not an interregnum between eras of internal stability in the region; rather, in a sense, disorder is the (not so) new order.

The Freezing Agent: Oil

In the decades before 1973, domestic politics in the Arab region were dynamic. It was a period marked by turmoil and change, embracing both mass politics

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and the interventions of colonial powers. Transnational ideologies—including communism and varieties of Arab nationalism—flourished and spread across borders, which were often nascent and contested. Newly established political parties articulated meaningful policy positions to try to gain broad appeal. Marginalized ethnic and religious groups challenged status quos. And throughout these decades, and particularly after the achievement of formal independence, leaders of states rose and fell and the transfer of power through the use of military force was relatively common. Iraq, for example, witnessed successful coups in 1936, 1941, and 1958; two in 1963; and another in 1968. During that time, it went from a kingdom to (briefly) a confederation and then to an unstable republic. Syria's political history was just as turbulent. Revolutions occurred in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. Both global and regional powers intervened in other states' domestic affairs.

The situation changed rapidly after 1973. After hovering around USD\$24 for several decades, the inflation-adjusted price of a barrel of crude oil doubled in January 1974 and then doubled again in 1979. As figure 1 shows, high oil prices continued until 1986, when they crashed to the low \$30s. Over the next decade and a half, prices largely remained in the \$30 to \$40 range, until a steady climb began in late 2003—after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq—and roughly continued until plummeting in mid-2014. This Brief argues that broad periods of domestic political unrest versus stasis in Arab states roughly track these changes in the price of oil.



Figure 1: Crude oil prices over 75 years¹
(Barrel of West Texas Intermediate, inflation-adjusted)

With the post-1973 influx of oil rents, Arab governments built robust welfare systems alongside pervasive and overlapping coercive apparatuses. States throughout the region provided free or inexpensive education and health care, public sector jobs, pensions, and subsidized food, electricity, and fuel. Many states in the region had initiated such plans in the 1950s, using the relatively modest oil rents available to them at the time; but this expanded dramatically after 1973. Oil also provided the resources to build multiple intelligence and security agencies that could deter popular political mobilization, prevent successful coups, and limit external involvement in domestic affairs.²

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This expansion of states was not limited to oil producers: Oil rents trickled down from the oil-rich to the relatively oil-poor through several routes. Non-oil producers exported excess labor to oil-producing states, and income was sent back. After 1974, oil producers—particularly Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and, for a time, Iraq—became generous providers of bilateral assistance to other Arab states, usually in the form of direct grants or low-interest concessionary loans.³ It has been estimated that Arab states gave 13.5% of total world assistance between 1974 and 1994,⁴ over half of which went to other Arab countries. Private investment also flowed from wealthy individuals and companies in Gulf states to oil-poor Arab countries, where governments often captured a share.

Explaining the robustness of authoritarianism in the Middle East, Eva Bellin has emphasized how access to extraordinary rents from oil, gas, and geostrategic location allowed states to generously fund coercive apparatuses.⁵ But her article could just as well have focused on the robustness of authoritarians instead of authoritarianism. If you were a leader in power in an Arab state by the mid-1970s, you were likely still there in 2010—or else your son or other designated successor had succeeded you. When weeks of popular protest forced President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia to resign in January 2011, the average age of the extant regimes in the 18 Arab polities in the Middle East and North Africa was over 40 years.⁶

There were, of course, exceptions in this period of domestic stasis. The Lebanese state collapsed; a civil war occurred in Algeria; and a failed coup led to a short conflict in South Yemen in 1986. And some Arab regimes were long-lived *before* the rise in oil prices. The Egyptian regime, for example, consolidated under Gamal Abdel Nasser in the late 1950s, and the Hashemite monarchy in Jordan survived a series of challenges after 1951. But the durability of regimes and leaders became pervasive throughout the Arab world after 1973. Without the oil shock of 1973, it is possible that Saddam Hussein and Hafez al-Assad would not have consolidated their rule in Iraq and Syria, respectively. Even on the rare occurrences when leaders were assassinated, such as King Faisal of Saudi Arabia in 1975 and President Anwar Sadat of Egypt in 1981, their respective regimes easily survived.

Flush with resources from oil revenues, Arab states bought acquiescence from their populations in this period and developed ways to monitor society and limit the spread of information. With only a few exceptions, states became domestically strong, in the sense that central governments were able to exercise significant control over their societies. After 1973, Arab domestic

politics changed in several important ways. Popular mobilizations were prevented or contained; political parties were controlled; regimes and leadership calcified; successful coups ceased; and states' interventions into other states' domestic affairs were curtailed. The political turbulence that was common in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s was no more.

Greg Gause aptly differentiates the notion of a “domestically weak state” from one that is relatively weak in international power or influence. He gives the example of Kuwait, a state that is strong in terms of state-society relations but unable to defend itself against external enemies.⁷ Interstate wars still occurred during this period, most notably the Iran-Iraq War, but the stability of regimes and strength of states limited opportunities for states to invest in non-state allies or proxies in other countries. A major reason why the revolution in Iran did not spread to the Arab world is that Gulf states could identify and contain groups that Iran supported in the early 1980s.

The spread of Islamic political movements in the Arab world is often attributed to the failure of alternative ideologies, especially communism and varieties of pan-Arabism, after 1967. But an alternative explanation is that Islamic movements had comparative advantages relative to other popular movements during this “ice age,” when states were strong. These include control over or access to physical spaces with *de facto* autonomy from state control—such as private mosques—as well as the ability to couch recruitment and outreach in a language that was hard for regimes to effectively monitor and control.⁸

The Great Thaw

Although oil prices declined steadily from their high in early 1980, figure 1 shows that prices during the so-called “oil glut” of the 1980s remained far above their pre-1973 average until 1986, when prices collapsed to below \$30 a barrel (adjusted for inflation). Prices largely remained in the \$30–\$40 range until after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. The crash in oil prices in 1986 sent ripples throughout the region. Oil rents plummeted; exports to Gulf states decreased; and flows of bilateral aid, investment, and remittances dried up. But the subsequent thaw in Arab domestic politics was slow and would take more than two decades to fully be felt.

The first signs of a thaw in the region's frozen domestic politics occurred in states with the lowest amount of oil rents. Jordan, for example, was one of several governments that by the early 1990s had to borrow

extensively to cover expenditures. It experienced a severe financial crisis after 1986 and, after resorting to structural adjustment in 1989, some amount of political change seemed imminent. Parliamentary life resumed and meaningful elections were held in 1989 after anti-austerity protests spread among southern towns. Other factors certainly played a role in the economic crises of the late 1980s and the popular mobilizations that followed much later, but the decline in oil prices after 1981 and especially in 1986 created the conditions for change.

Throughout the 1990s, the decline in oil revenues—compounded by population growth—forced governments to roll back welfare systems. Food and energy subsidies were reduced; public investment declined; and the purchasing power of wages failed to keep up with rising inflation. Much of the economic discontent that contributed to the rising up of Arab publics in 2011 has roots in this contraction of the welfare state in the 1990s. And it was the 1986 oil crash that started the reversal of the strengthening of Arab states that had begun in the 1970s.

After the crash, states were gradually weakening, in the sense of having less control over their populations. The growth of states' coercive apparatuses had slowed. The rise of satellite television and the spread of mobile phones and the internet increased people's access to information and made it both easier to mobilize and harder for security services to monitor that mobilization.⁹ By the early 2000s, frequent and large protests had become commonplace in some countries. One study, for example, found that over two million Egyptian workers engaged in 3,239 strikes and other forms of protest from 2004 to 2010.¹⁰

The 1990s and 2000s, then, were decades of a slow thaw in domestic political life—which took time to unfold because the immensity of oil rents from 1973 to 1986 had, to some degree, “frozen” strong Arab governments in place. In particular, rent-funded investments continued to provide a return for decades in two specific ways. First, intelligence and security forces remained strong long after oil rents declined. Their infrastructure, penetration of society, and machinery of coercion endured: States still had the capacity to control civil society and inhibit popular mobilization. Second, it took time for the next generation of citizens to realize that the state would not be able to provide them with a life similar to that which it had afforded their older siblings, cousins, and parents. That first factor speaks to society's capacity for popular mobilization; the latter to the demand for it. The 1989 protests in Jordan were a

bellwether for the region. Those protests began in Ma'an, a southern town traditionally associated with support for the Jordanian monarchy, after food prices rose following a cut in subsidies.

From 1989 to 2002, the Arab world seemed to be entering a period of economic and political liberalization. National parliaments began, resumed, or were revitalized in Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Yemen, Algeria, and Bahrain. Many opposition groups, including Islamic political movements, increasingly engaged in institutionalized political life and elections. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) multiplied, and civil society grew in visibility. Several states relaxed press restrictions, and the role of the secret police in controlling society appeared to be decreasing. Economic reforms were undertaken, nominally to invigorate private sector growth.

For analysts at the time, democratization in Arab states seemed likely, perhaps inevitable. The zeitgeist of the 1990s is reflected in the titles of prominent political science books, such as the two volumes of *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World* (1995, 1998) and *Democracy without Democrats? The Renewal of Politics in the Muslim World* (1994). By the early 2000s, however, it was clear that authoritarians and authoritarianism both remained robust, even if they faced increasingly mobilized and networked populations. Analysts came to see the political liberalization of the 1990s as authoritarians' survival strategy: dividing oppositions by structuring political openings to include some but not others; shifting blame for difficult economic reforms; using bureaucracy to control NGOs; and institutionalizing competition for access to scarce state resources.¹¹ But, in retrospect, what appeared to be authoritarian “upgrading” was more akin to updating the software on a phone to the next operating system.¹² It might work smoothly, but the hardware remains the same.

Oil prices increased after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. As shown in figure 1, the price began to rise rapidly in late 2004 and passed \$100 a barrel in September 2007. Except for a relatively brief crash in 2008 during the global recession, it remained in the broad range of \$90–\$120 for several years before dramatically plummeting in mid-2014, falling from \$114 in June to \$53 by year's end.¹³ Oil prices bottomed out during the COVID-19 pandemic and are widely expected to remain at or below \$50 for the foreseeable future. This new period of high oil prices came too late to reverse the regionwide thaw that began after 1986, but it does help explain why the states with the highest per capita oil revenues—including most Gulf

monarchies—avoided much of the domestic tumult of the later Arab uprisings.

Back to the Future

With respect to the Middle East, the period between the two world wars is often described as one of colonialism and anti-colonial mobilization. And the initial post-independence decades in the region are seen as a period in which popular movements subsequently challenged the elites who held power after the retreat of colonialism. But, in a number of respects, the domestic politics of Arab states since 2011, as well as their interventions across national borders, look a lot like they did from the 1940s to 1973, and certainly resemble that period more than they do the intervening decades. Now, as then, citizens have mobilized, and sustained those mobilizations, in the face of state repression. Anti-government protests—and inchoate ideologies—have spread across national borders. Leaders have fallen—in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Algeria, and Sudan; the Middle East has witnessed more regime change in the past decade than it did in the prior three decades combined. For a variety of reasons, military coups are unlikely to become as common as they were in the 1940s and 1950s—although regime changes in Tunisia in 2011, in Egypt in both 2011 and 2013, and in Algeria and Sudan in 2019 might be characterized as coups. But militaries today in Algeria, Egypt, and elsewhere are playing a more direct role in governing than they have in decades.

Although changes in oil prices created the conditions for popular mobilizations to occur, it does not explain everything. Many underlying developments in Arab societies over the past few decades (e.g., education, urbanization, demographics) contributed to the uprisings. And several scholars have examined why—in the face of sustained protests and after police were overwhelmed—militaries in some states removed embattled leaders while others either remained loyal to their leader or fragmented, with some units joining protesters while others defended the regime.¹⁴

State weakness and civil wars have created opportunities for states, both within the region and outside of it, to cultivate allies and clients in other states; Gause notes that the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and the subsequent Arab uprisings opened up new playing fields for international competition. He argues that what he calls the “new Middle East Cold War” between Iran and Saudi Arabia is intensifying because of these changes in state weakness.¹⁵ The domestic strength of Arab states had been gradually declining since the 1986 oil crash, and

Iran’s and other states’ ambitions were held in check only by a lack of opportunities to spread their influence. The events of 2003 and 2011 sped up what would otherwise have been a more gradual opening up of such playing fields.

Echoing Gause, a number of scholars have directly compared the regional power struggles in the Middle East today with those in the 1958-1970 period, famously analyzed by Malcolm Kerr.¹⁶ But, as Fred Lawson reminds us, Kerr’s argument is often misstated.¹⁷ Kerr argued that the axis of conflict and cooperation during the earlier period did not delineate a clean division between revolutionaries and conservatives: Struggles were over power and prestige, not ideology or sect. And relations between regional states often played out independently of the actions and interests of outside powers. Similarly, the international politics of the Middle East today cannot usefully be understood as breaking down neatly along the lines of a “Shia” north and a “Sunni” south, or as Iran and proxies versus the Saudi-led GCC. Truly revisiting—by taking seriously—both the domestic and international struggles of the pre-1973 decades, though beyond the scope of this Brief, might help us better understand the Middle East today.¹⁸

Implications

The overthrow of Ben Ali in January 2011 and the beginning of the Arab uprisings in 2010–11 accelerated a thaw already well underway since 1986: The domestic politics of the region are unfrozen. In 2018, anti-government protests occurred in several Arab countries, in what some commentators dubbed the “Second Arab Spring” or “Arab Spring 2.0.” The perspective offered in this Brief implies that this is a misnomer: Periodic waves of protests—as well as multiple wars and conflicts cutting across the Middle East and North Africa—constitute, rather, a new normal. But it is also a not-so-new normal, because it resembles, in many ways, the region’s earlier history. It is the oil-fueled post-1973 period of strong states and regionwide authoritarian stability and stasis that was exceptional.

Today’s instability is “normal” in the sense that there will be some amount of regime churning in the region, and civil conflicts will occur and persist. And powers from both inside and outside the region will continue to intervene in those conflicts and struggle for influence. Several capitals no longer control their entire country, and the reconstitution of domestic authority in domestically-weak states will not happen quickly. Yet, states are not disintegrating in the sense that borders are

collapsing; partitions remain unlikely. The rise of ISIS, the 2017 independence referendum in Iraq's Kurdistan region, and the secessionist Southern Movement in Yemen have been the three significant challenges to the region's borders over the past decade: The first two were stymied by the international community, and the third has been as well, at least so far. We are not at the birth of a new dispensation.

Political change is messy, uneven, and non-linear. The domestic turbulence and political instability in the Arab world today is not an aberration, a temporary transition to something else, or a hangover from the Arab uprisings. There has been a durable shift in governing authority in the region, and this is the equilibrium for the foreseeable future.

Endnotes

- 1 Data from: <https://www.macrotrends.net/1369/crude-oil-price-history-chart>.
- 2 In Iraq, Kanan Makiya estimated that “one-fifth of the economically active Iraqi labor force (about 3.4 million people) were institutionally charged during peacetime (1980) with one form or another of violence.” Kanan Makiya [Samir al-Khalil], *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 38.
- 3 The Kuwait Fund, established in 1961, saw its capital increase fivefold in 1974, to USD\$3.4 billion; it doubled again in 1981 to \$7 billion. The Abu Dhabi Fund for Development was founded in 1971, the Saudi Fund for Development in 1974, and the Iraqi Fund for External Development also in 1974. See: Mara A. Leichtman, “Kuwaiti Humanitarianism: The History and Expansion of Kuwait's Foreign Assistance Policies” (Stimson Center Report, August 2017), 7, 9.
- 4 Espen Villanger, “Arab Foreign Aid: Disbursement Patterns, Aid Policies and Motives” (CMI Report R 2007: 2) [Chr. Michelsen Institute, Bergen, Norway], v, 1.
- 5 Eva Bellin, “The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective,” *Comparative Politics* 36. 2 (January 2004):139–57.
- 6 The 18 were Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Kuwait, Sudan, and the Palestinian National Authority (PNA).
- 7 F. Gregory Gause III, “Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War” (Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper Number 11, July 2014), 8.
- 8 See, for example, chapters 5-7 in Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism, and Political Change in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
- 9 On how satellite television transformed Arab politics, see Marc Lynch, *Voices of the New Arab Public: Iraq, al-Jazeera, and Middle East Politics Today* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).
- 10 Joel Beinin, “Workers and Egypt's January 25 Revolution,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 80.1 (Fall 2011):189–96. The data are based on collective actions reported in the media and coded by the Land Center for Human Rights. If a series of actions over a single workplace dispute are counted as one action, the number for the period 2004–2010 is 2,716.
- 11 For examples primarily focusing on the case of Jordan, see Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Civil Society as Social Control: State Power in Jordan,” *Comparative Politics* 33. 1 (October 2000):43–61; Ellen Lust-Okar, *Structuring Conflict in the Arab World: Incumbents, Opponents, and Institutions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Lust-Okar, “Competitive Clientelism in Jordanian Elections,” in *Political Participation in the Middle East*, ed. Lust-Okar and Saloua Zerhouni (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2008), 75–94.
- 12 I thank Daniel Neep for sharing this analogy, offered by one of his students.
- 13 This decline was initially driven by a supply glut caused by the expansion of U.S. shale oil production.
- 14 Bellin, for example, emphasizes the structural character of the military: if it is organized along patrimonial lines or “institutionalized” in a Weberian sense. See: Eva Bellin, “Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism: Lessons of the Arab Spring,” *Comparative Politics* 44.2 (January 2012): 127-149.
- 15 Gause, “Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War.”
- 16 Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal Abd al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958–1970*, 3rd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1971). For a summary, and critique, of many of these comparisons, see Fred H. Lawson, “The Resurgence of The Arab Cold War,” *Review of Middle East Studies* 49.2 (August, 2015): 163–72.
- 17 Lawson, “The Resurgence of The Arab Cold War,” 169–70.
- 18 Like Kerr's, Patrick Seale's (first) book on Syria—covering the period prior to that covered by Kerr—is also one that is often cited, but rarely read as closely as it should be. See: Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-war Arab Politics, 1945–1958* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965).



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