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The Arab Spring Aftermath: Catalyst Or Illusion For Democratization In The Middle East (2010–Present)

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Abstract

The Arab Spring, which began in late 2010, sparked widespread hopes for democratization across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). This paper critically examines the aftermath of these uprisings, assessing whether they served as a genuine catalyst for democratic transition or merely an illusion. Through a comparative analysis of key states—Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Bahrain—it explores the divergent trajectories that followed the uprisings. While Tunisia emerged as a relative success story, other states experienced democratic backsliding, civil war, or entrenched authoritarianism. The study identifies factors influencing these outcomes, including institutional resilience, military-civil relations, international involvement, and socio-political cohesion. Ultimately, the paper argues that while the Arab Spring exposed deep-rooted discontent and reshaped political discourse, its democratizing potential was largely curtailed by internal and external constraints, rendering its legacy complex and uneven across the region.

Key Words: Arab Spring, Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Democratic transition, Authoritarian resilience, Foreign intervention, Uprisings, Regime change, Political instability, Proxy conflict, Political reform

Introduction

The 2010–2011 **Arab Spring** uprisings marked an unprecedented wave of political mobilization across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), as millions of ordinary citizens took to the streets to demand the downfall of entrenched regimes, the establishment of democratic governance, and socio-economic justice. Sparked by Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in Tunisia, the movement rapidly spread across the Arab world, toppling longstanding dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, and challenging the survival of the Assad regime in Syria (Hajjar & Lisa, 2023). The uprisings generated immense hope, both regionally and internationally, that the Arab world was finally entering a democratic era. Headlines at the time celebrated the "Twitter Revolutions" and "Facebook Protests," hailing the empowerment of youth and civil society through digital mobilization and cross-class solidarity.

However, more than a decade later, the optimistic forecasts of 2011 have been sobered by political regressions, economic collapse, and protracted conflicts (CFR, 2024) (Hajjar & Lisa, 2023). In most cases, the regimes that fell were replaced not by inclusive democracies, but by military-backed governments, fractured states, or renewed authoritarianism. In Syria and Yemen, foreign interventions and deep social fissures turned uprisings into catastrophic civil wars, resulting in humanitarian crises of enormous scale. Even Tunisia—the Arab Spring’s lone perceived success—has in recent years experienced democratic backsliding under President Kais Saied’s consolidation of executive power.

This divergence between initial revolutionary momentum and the long-term political outcomes raises key questions about the Arab Spring’s legacy. Was it a genuine **catalyst for democratization**, or a temporary upheaval that exposed the resilience of authoritarianism and the fragility of political institutions in the Arab world? What explains why Tunisia initially succeeded in democratic transition while Egypt regressed into military rule, and Libya, Syria, and Yemen descended into violence and state failure? Scholars and observers have increasingly focused on a combination of **internal dynamics**—such as civil society strength, institutional structures, and societal divisions—and **external factors**, including foreign military interventions and geopolitical rivalries, to explain these varied trajectories.

This paper seeks to explore the post-Arab Spring political developments in five key countries—Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Yemen—and evaluate the extent to which the uprisings served as a turning point toward democratization or simply reshuffled authoritarian power structures.

Specifically, it addresses three central **research questions**: **1.** How did political developments in these five countries diverge after the 2011 uprisings? **2.** What internal (e.g. social, institutional) and external (e.g. foreign intervention) factors influenced their respective trajectories? And, **3.** What roles did civil society, authoritarian resilience, and foreign intervention play in shaping these outcomes?

By examining these cases comparatively, the paper aims to move beyond simplistic binaries of success and failure to highlight the complex interplay of domestic and international forces in the Arab world’s political transformation. In doing so, it contributes to a broader understanding of whether the Arab Spring marked the dawn of a new political order or the reassertion of an old one in new form.

Historical Overview of the 2010–2011 Uprisings

The Arab Spring began with a dramatic act of protest in Tunisia: on December 17, 2010 a street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in Sidi Bouzid to protest police corruption and harassment (Hajjar & Lisa, 2023). This incident ignited mass demonstrations across the country, and within 28 days President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali’s dictatorship collapsed. Tunisia’s “Jasmine Revolution” inspired similar rebellions: protests erupted in Egypt on January 25, 2011 and eighteen days later President Hosni Mubarak resigned under pressure. In Libya, prolonged protests and a NATO-backed military campaign culminated in the overthrow and death of Muammar Qaddafi by October 2011 (Hajjar & Lisa, 2023). Yemen’s pro-democracy movement forced autocrat Ali Abdullah Saleh to cede power in early 2012, and Syria saw widespread protests by early 2011 that met brutal repression. Across the region, millions of people chanted the slogan “ash-sha‘b yurīd isqāṭ an-nizām!” (“the people want to bring down the regime”) (Hajjar & Lisa, 2023).

Tunisians carried placards and Tunisian flags in January 2011 as they demanded “bread, freedom, and dignity”. These popular uprisings – often peaceful at first – quickly achieved regime change in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. The rapid fall of three long-standing rulers (Ben Ali, Mubarak, Qaddafi) within a year was unprecedented in modern MENA history (Hajjar & Lisa, 2023). The initial phase of the Arab Spring thus

appeared to be a democratic wave, as new political freedoms emerged (e.g. competitive elections in Tunisia and Egypt in 2012, referenda in Libya, etc.).

Yet the aftermath of the uprisings was tumultuous. By the mid-2010s, Tunisia's fragile democracy faced crisis, Egypt had returned to military-backed rule, Libya and Yemen plunged into civil war, and Syria's protest movement had morphed into a prolonged sectarian conflict. As one retrospective summary observes, "Collectively, these mass mobilizations constituted 'the Arab uprisings.' They are long over and the region is worse off than [it was] before" (Hajjar & Lisa, 2023). In Syria, what began as protests was transformed by a counterinsurgent campaign into a "humanitarian disaster unmatched since the Rwanda genocide" (Hajjar & Lisa, 2023). In Yemen, foreign interventions turned an uprising into a devastating proxy war (Hajjar & Lisa, 2023) (Robinson, 2023). Thus, the hopeful language of "spring" gave way to recognition that the Arab Spring's legacies would be mixed at best.

Comparative Analysis of Political Developments

Tunisia

Tunisia is often cited as the Arab Spring's sole democratic success story – at least initially. After Ben Ali fled in January 2011, Tunisians held free elections for a Constituent Assembly, drafted a progressive constitution (2014), and held multiple multiparty elections (Hajjar & Lisa, 2023) (Grewal, 2021). A broad coalition of secular and Islamist parties, trade unions (UGTT), and civil society organizations (e.g. women's and human rights groups) managed a relatively smooth transition. The country even won praise as a stable outlier while its neighbors descended into turmoil (Grewal, 2021).

Several factors underpinned Tunisia's initial success. The opposition was broad-based and organized: civil society and labor unions were strong and politically engaged (Grewal, 2021). Importantly, the security forces (especially the army) largely sided with protesters against Ben Ali (Hajjar & Lisa, 2023). Low levels of violence and a tradition of moderate politics helped, as did Tunisia's relatively high development and education levels. Civil society's willingness to compromise – including making peace with some Islamist elements – helped the fragile democracy survive its early years (Grewal, 2021).

However, Tunisia's democratic gains proved fragile. By 2014–2015 the country faced an Islamist insurgency and economic stagnation. In July 2021 President Kais Saied, citing paralysis, dismissed the prime minister and suspended parliament, effectively seizing authoritarian power (Hajjar & Lisa, 2023) (Grubman, 2024). Saied then dissolved the parliament and rewrote the constitution in 2022, concentrating power in the presidency (Hajjar & Lisa, 2023) (Grubman, 2024). Journalists and opposition figures have been arrested. In short, "Tunisia was the one country that made significant democratic gains as a direct result of the Arab spring... until 2022 when current president Kaïs Saïed began to reinstitute dictatorial powers and eliminate hard-fought freedoms" (Hajjar & Lisa, 2023).

Thus, Tunisia's trajectory underscores both hope and disappointment. It illustrates that a strong civil society and inclusive politics can yield a democratic transition (Grewal, 2021), but also that even the region's best case can succumb to authoritarian resilience if economic or security crises arise. At present, Tunisia's future remains uncertain: it temporarily broke the mold of its neighbors, but now risks backsliding into the familiar pattern of autocratic rule (Grubman, 2024) (Hajjar & Lisa, 2023).

Egypt

In Egypt, the Arab Spring ended the 30-year dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak in early 2011. Mass protests centered in Cairo's Tahrir Square forced Mubarak to step down after 18 days of demonstrations (Hajjar & Lisa, 2023). A military council took over and organized an election, which brought the Islamist party (headed

by Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood) to power in 2012. However, this civilian government was short-lived: in July 2013 the military deposed Morsi, installing General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi as president by 2014.

The net result has been the restoration of authoritarian military rule. Military figures have led Egypt from Gamal Abdel Nasser's 1952 coup through Mubarak and now Sisi. As one analyst notes, apart from the brief Morsi interlude, "all Egyptian heads of state have had a military career" (GIGA, 2020). Under Sisi, the regime has actively repressed dissent – jailing political rivals, shutting independent media, and cracking down on NGOs and even apolitical civil society groups. The security sector remains dominant and deeply intertwined with the economy (GIGA, 2020).

Economically and socially, many of the grievances that sparked the protests (poverty, unemployment, corruption) persist. Egypt's young population continues to face high unemployment, fueling nostalgia for the Army as a provider of jobs and stability. In sum, despite a fleeting glimpse of pluralism, Egypt's post-2011 trajectory is best described as authoritarian resilience: the military once again reasserted control, and democratic openings have effectively been closed (GIGA, 2020). No real civilian-led transition to democracy has occurred in the ten years after Mubarak.

Libya

Libya's uprising quickly turned violent in 2011. Initially peaceful protests were met by Muammar Qaddafi's brutal counterattack, prompting NATO's military intervention that helped rebel forces overthrow the regime. But the post-Qaddafi period has been marked by fragmentation. Instead of a smooth transition, competing militias seized power. By 2014 Libya was split between rival governments in Tripoli and Tobruk, each backed by militias and foreign patrons.

Political processes have repeatedly failed. A UN-backed unity government was formed (Government of National Accord in 2016), but it never controlled all territory. National elections scheduled for 2021 collapsed amid disputes. The country effectively split into two power centers, East and West. According to an EU-funded analysis, "Libya has lived in a state of fragmentation since 2011... and in a state of dual and confronting administrations since 2014" (Vidal, 2024). Civil society is weak, and rule of law absent. The pervasive insecurity and rival militias have also allowed jihadist groups to resurge in parts of the country.

Foreign actors complicate Libya's politics. Different militias are backed by outside powers – for example, the east is supported by Russia (via mercenaries) and Egypt, while parts of the west have received support from Turkey and Qatar. Even neighboring European states have interests (e.g. migration, oil). The result is a country still mired in conflict and lacking a stable central government. As one UN press release summarizes, "Libya's guns largely remain silent but it is neither stable nor at peace" (U.N., 2024). In short, Libya's Arab Spring produced state collapse rather than democratization.

Syria

Syria's uprising, which began with protests in spring 2011, quickly descended into civil war. Demonstrations in Damascus and other cities challenged Bashar al-Assad's rule, but the regime responded with overwhelming force (killings, bombardments) (Hajjar & Lisa, 2023). As rebels took up arms, the conflict escalated into a bloody multi-sided war.

A decade after the uprising, Assad's regime remains firmly in control of most of Syria (CFR, 2024). With decisive support from Russia and Iran, Assad's forces recaptured major population centers and crushed most opposition. (A 2020 ceasefire left parts of the northwest under Turkish-backed rebels, and the Kurdish-held northeast autonomous.) Yet even as fighting waned, Syrians paid a heavy price: by 2021 an estimated 90

percent of the population lived in poverty under crippling sanctions. Diplomacy has achieved little: UN-led talks have stalled, and competing peace initiatives have failed (CFR, 2024).

Thus, Syria's trajectory is effectively a counter-revolution: the Assad regime survived and is the central power, while the country is shattered by war. The political opposition has been marginalized or gone into exile. No democratic transition occurred; instead the conflict became "a globalized conflagration that produced a humanitarian disaster" (Hajjar & Lisa, 2023). Syria today has a nominal "government," but it rules over ruins and displaced people, with much of society under militia control or foreign troops (Turkey, US, Russia, etc.). In summary, Syria's Arab Spring failed utterly to yield liberalization or democracy – the old regime remains, reinforced by foreign allies (CFR, 2024) (Hajjar & Lisa, 2023).

Yemen

Yemen's uprising also quickly devolved into civil war. Protests in 2011 forced longtime ruler Ali Abdallah Saleh to hand power to his deputy, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. Hadi's interim government attempted a transition, but deep divisions emerged. In late 2014 the Shiite Houthi movement (backed by elements of the old regime) seized the capital Sanaa and ousted Hadi's government. In early 2015, a Saudi-led coalition intervened to restore Hadi, turning Yemen into an internationalized conflict (Robinson, 2023).

Today Yemen is largely lawless and split. The internationally recognized government controls parts of the south (with Gulf support), while the Houthis control much of the north. Southern separatists and jihadist groups (AQAP) further complicate matters. Hundreds of thousands have died in the fighting and one of the worst humanitarian catastrophes on Earth has unfolded. Analysts agree the war has become a proxy conflict between Iran (supporting the Houthis) and the Saudi-led coalition (backing the government) (Robinson, 2023).

In effect, the Yemeni Arab Spring ended democracy before it began. A power-sharing National Dialogue Commission in 2013 failed to produce consensus. The unity government that briefly existed collapsed under Houthi pressure. According to the Encyclopædia Britannica, Yemen's 2011 uprising "evolved into a brutal civil war agitated by foreign intervention and created one of the worst humanitarian crises in history" (Britannica, 2025). In short, Yemen saw a forced regime change (Saleh's exit) but no democratic transition – instead a protracted collapse of state authority (Robinson, 2023) (Britannica, 2025).

Internal and External Factors Influencing Outcomes

The divergent outcomes across these countries reflect a mix of domestic structures and external forces. Internally, the strength of civil society, the nature of state institutions, and societal divisions played key roles. Externally, foreign interventions and international support often determined whether a regime collapsed or consolidated.

- Institutional and social factors:** Countries with more open civic space and less repressive security forces were better placed for transition. Tunisia's relatively inclusive institutions and strong unions prevented a slide into violence (Grewal, 2021). In contrast, Egypt's deeply entrenched military and police apparatus quickly reimposed order when threatened (GIGA, 2020). Syria's regime commanded a loyalist security state and exploited sectarian divisions (Alawite vs. Sunni, rural vs. urban) to mobilize support (CFR, 2024). Yemen had long-standing north-south, tribal, and ideological fissures that undermined cohesion. Libya had virtually no state institutions after Gaddafi, making post-2011 governance virtually impossible. In each case, pre-uprising authoritarian legacies influenced how power was contested: where the military and party remained unified (Egypt, Syria), transitions failed; where the regime's pillars were weaker (Tunisia) or absent (Libya, Yemen), chaos ensued (Hajjar & Lisa, 2023) (Vidal, 2024).

- **Economic and demographic pressures:** High unemployment, food insecurity, and inequality fueled the protests (Hajjar & Lisa, 2023). These pressures also influenced transitions. For example, Egypt's rapidly growing population has put strain on resources, making governance difficult (GIGA, 2020). In many cases, entrenched elites controlled wealth (military-owned businesses in Egypt, oil revenues in Libya) and had little incentive to liberalize. Countries with better development (Tunisia's higher literacy rate and smaller population) had more resilient social contracts, which partly explains Tunisia's relative early success (Grewal, 2021).
- **Foreign intervention and geopolitics:** Outside powers frequently intervened to protect their interests. In Libya, NATO forces (led by the US, France, UK) intervened militarily in 2011 to overthrow Qaddafi, but left a power vacuum (Hajjar & Lisa, 2023). Russia and Iran intervened decisively in Syria (directly militarily) to shore up Assad (CFR, 2024). Saudi Arabia and the UAE intervened in Bahrain and Yemen to suppress revolts seen as threats to Gulf monarchies (Robinson, 2023) (Britannica, 2025). Western governments were uneven: quick to support Tunisia's elections in 2011, but reluctant to get embroiled beyond Libya's toppling. The result was that international actors often prioritized short-term stability or strategic alignment over democracy. For example, Western powers withdrew support from Morsi's Egypt after 2013, while Gulf States poured money into the new Sisi regime to ensure order. In Yemen and Syria, proxy wars broke out because regional powers (Iran vs. Saudi Arabia) treated those uprisings as battlegrounds.

Overall, these factors show that internal conditions (political institutions, civil society strength, social cohesion) and external pressures (intervention, foreign support for regimes) combined in complex ways. Where domestic forces for democracy were weaker or divided, authoritarian forces (backed by patron states) prevailed. Where civic resistance was strong but also facing hostile external actors (as in Libya and Yemen), peaceful transition proved elusive. The interplay of these factors is captured in analytical frameworks: for instance, Hajjar (2023) highlights how the state's institutions, the autonomy of civil society, and foreign interventions each "mutually reinforcing" affect outcomes (Hajjar & Lisa, 2023).

Civil Society, Authoritarian Resilience, and Foreign Intervention

Civil Society

Civil society played a decisive but uneven role. In Tunisia, powerful unions (UGTT) and networks of activists organized political dialogue and compromise after 2011 (Grewal, 2021). These groups helped mediate conflicts (between secularists and Islamists, north and south) and maintain momentum for elections. Tunisian civil society acted as a check on power and as a space for participation, which "helped [its] transition to democracy survive its difficult early years" (Grewal, 2021).

By contrast, in Egypt independent NGOs and journalists were quickly crushed. The Sisi government has repeatedly banned civil society groups, revoked licenses, or accused organizations of foreign collusion. In Syria and Yemen, grassroots activism was violently repressed. Libya's nascent associations were sidelined by militias. In short, where civil society was strong and autonomous, it bolstered democratic change; where it was weak or attacked, democratic movements faltered. As scholars note, the presence and autonomy of civil society was one of the four key variables explaining Arab Spring outcomes (Hajjar & Lisa, 2023). In practice, Tunisian NGOs and unions filled gaps in political representation; in other countries, the absence of such mediating institutions left societies fragmented or silenced.

Authoritarian Resilience

The Arab Spring also showcased the resilience of entrenched regimes. Most incumbent powers managed to adapt or reassert control after initial defeats. Military establishments proved especially resilient. In Egypt, the armed forces swiftly removed two presidents (Mubarak in 2011 and Morsi in 2013) and remained the ultimate

power broker (GIGA, 2020). Similarly, the Syrian military and allied militias remained loyal to the Assad family, enabling the regime to endure a popular uprising. Algeria (not a main focus here) weathered protests by promising reforms. In essence, many MENA militaries acted like the one in pre-2011 Egypt: intervening when elites wavered, and sustaining autocracy. Indeed, analysts observe that “with the exception of Mohammed Morsi, all Egyptian heads of state have had a military career,” underscoring how deeply the army is tied to politics (GIGA, 2020).

Beyond the military, broader authoritarian tactics proved durable. Populist and nationalist appeals were used to rally support (as in Syria and Egypt), while coercive measures (mass arrests, curfews, surveillance) were employed widely. Economically, regimes maintained patronage networks. Even Tunisia’s democracy faced this issue: as Grewal (2021) notes, some success factors (like political compromise) ironically limited rapid change, since parties remained unwilling to cede ground (Grewal, 2021). In many countries, violence against dissenters resumed once initial uprisings were suppressed. The notion of a “third wave” of democracy in MENA quickly gave way to talk of a “fourth wave” of autocratization (Szmolka). In short, authoritarianism in the region demonstrated high resilience – often rebounding to a familiar status quo. Region-wide indices confirm that democracy levels ten years later were mostly unchanged or lower, especially outside Tunisia (Szmolka).

Foreign Intervention

As noted, foreign intervention was a decisive factor shaping outcomes. In some cases (Libya, to an extent Yemen), it gave crucial support to one side of the conflict. NATO’s 2011 intervention in Libya had the ostensible goal of civilian protection, but it also ensured Qaddafi’s ouster. However, without a plan for stability, Libya was left in anarchy (Hajjar & Lisa, 2023) (Vidal, 2024). In Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the UAE launched military campaigns in 2015 to restore the government; these interventions prolonged the war and a humanitarian catastrophe (Robinson, 2023). In Syria, Russia’s 2015 intervention (including airstrikes and troops) was critical to Assad’s survival (CFR, 2024). Iran’s role (both Iranian advisors and Hezbollah fighters) likewise tipped the balance. The combined effect of these interventions was to transform internal uprisings into proxy wars, making compromise and democracy nearly impossible.

Even outside of outright war, foreign powers influenced politics. The United States and European Union initially supported transitions in Tunisia and Egypt (e.g. by encouraging elections), but lost interest as authoritarian figures returned. Gulf monarchies backed authoritarian trends: for example, Saudi Arabia and the UAE openly supported Sisi’s 2013 coup in Egypt, and the GCC quickly absorbed Tunisia’s ousted regime members (Hajjar & Lisa, 2023). These external backers feared that revolutionary change would empower Islamist or Shiite forces in the region. As a result, rather than facilitating democracy, many interventions aimed to stabilize friendly autocrats. The Arab Spring’s democratic momentum thus collided with geostrategic calculations. In the end, it was foreign wills, more than popular ones, that often settled the fate of these uprisings.

Conclusion: Catalyst or Illusion?

Reviewing the evidence across these five countries suggests a sobering answer: the Arab Spring largely proved an illusion of democratization for the MENA region, with only a transient opening in Tunisia. In Tunisia, the uprising did lead to a genuine political transition – at least for a time (Hajjar & Lisa, 2023) (Grewal, 2021). But even that outlier has now veered back toward autocracy under President Saïed’s rule (Hajjar & Lisa, 2023) (Grubman, 2024). In Egypt, initial hopes evaporated within a few years as the military re-established full (GIGA, 2020). Libya’s popular rebellion did topple a dictator, but no stable government followed – instead the country fragmented (Hajjar & Lisa, 2023) (Vidal, 2024). Syria and Yemen both slid immediately into war, leaving no functioning democratic institutions (Hajjar & Lisa, 2023) (Robinson, 2023).

These outcomes were not for lack of desire: in each country, a substantial portion of the population mobilized for change. Civil society actors momentarily galvanized demands for rights and accountable government. But authoritarian resilience – in the form of disciplined militaries, regime adaptability, and elite networks – ultimately overpowered those demands outside Tunisia. Foreign intervention often cemented this authoritarian bounce-back. As Hajjar (2023) notes, the unrest that began with hope and “blossoming” politics ended up with most regimes intact and the region “worse off than [it was] before” (Hajjar & Lisa, 2023).

In short, while the Arab Spring undeniably **catalyzed** political upheaval (overthrowing regimes in several countries), it *failed* as a sustained catalyst for democracy. Except in Tunisia’s brief experiment, the rhetoric of freedom, justice, and dignity turned largely to disillusionment. The “Arab Spring” may have sown seeds of political awareness, but most have not taken root into freedom. The weight of autocratic structures and the geopolitics of the region meant that the post-2011 period saw a return to authoritarian norms in most place (Hajjar & Lisa, 2023) (Szmolka). Thus, based on the evidence, the Arab Spring appears to have been more an **illusion of democratization** in the Middle East rather than a genuine, lasting transformation toward liberal democracy.

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