

1. INTRODUCTION: THE CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE

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The breadth, depth, and persistence of religiously inspired violence in the Arab world have made the region an outlier for many decades. While religious wars and pogroms feature in the history of many countries, the tensions that caused them have attenuated in the modern period. In the Arab world, however, religious and sectarian conflicts seem to have deepened and accelerated, coloring not only how Arabs see their own societies, but also how Arab states interact with non-Arab powers.

Varying explanations have been offered for this phenomenon. One is that the violence is a natural outgrowth of Islam itself. According to this view, Islam is a religion that brooks no compromise and is bent on domination; it has bloody borders because it is a religion of conquest. Further, Islam is coercive and patriarchal by nature, and thus it inspires coercive and patriarchal societies. It is essentially a premodern religion in a modern world, and it carries with it premodern levels of violence and repression.

Another explanation is that the religiously inspired discord in the Arab world is an outgrowth of the region's modern politics. This argument suggests that the colonial and mandate periods, followed by decades of authoritarian rule, have created publics who are estranged from their rulers and who naturally flow to the least regulated space in society—the mosque—to

express their discontent. The scant prospects of liberalization or more broadly participatory governance, this argument goes, pushed a hardened minority to support violent and/or revolutionary change. Rigorous repression of dissent hardened the opposition and made it more extreme; the growing extremism of the opposition frightened and alienated much of the general public and, in the eyes of many, justified increasing repression.

Most religions, it seems, have been used to justify most things at some point in history. It is hard to accept the idea that Islam is uniquely receptive to violence given the justifications religion has given for violence throughout the world. And yet, other regions have emerged from colonialism without the high levels of endemic violence of the Arab world. The durability of religiously inspired violence in the Arab world, and the seemingly widespread acceptance of violence against civilians, demands some explanation.

The terrorist attacks of September 2001 brought focus and urgency to the problem. The collective tendency in the West was toward the political explanation of the Arab world's malaise, and the George W. Bush administration made the Middle East's democratization a priority. If governance became more inclusive, the thinking went, it would push politics toward consensus rather than polarization. If political activity held out the prospect of victory, it would undermine the argument that only violent action could bring about change.

The Arab uprisings of 2011—often referred to as the “Arab Spring”—seemed to offer just the opportunity that democratization advocates sought. Suddenly political groups who believed they had no chance of ever sharing power found themselves holding power. At the same time, many who believed that they one day would be able to pass power to their children found themselves thrown from office.

For radical groups using violence, these political changes created a new set of challenges. If the new rulers were not violent, how could the use of violence by the opposition be justified? How could any opposition group long accustomed to saying “no”

transition to putting forward a positive agenda? How would opposition groups rising to power decide who is too extreme among them, and how would radical groups decide who is too radical? If groups had long accustomed themselves to being out of power, how could they accommodate themselves to the compromises and inconsistencies that complex modern government requires?

We began the study that follows in mid-2013 in order to explore the effects of the Arab transitions on radicalism in the region. At the time this study began, the trajectory of the Arab uprisings was still deeply uncertain. The Muslim Brotherhood was still in power in Egypt, the avowedly Islamist Ennahda Party led the government in Tunisia, and the Islamic State had neither consolidated its position in the anti-Syrian opposition nor proclaimed the resurrection of the caliphate. It was clear that all three contests for power would profoundly influence the shape of radicalism in the Middle East going forward. We also set out to understand Saudi Arabia's actions in this sphere, and not only because the country uses its custodianship of the holy mosques in Mecca and Medina and its vast oil wealth to have a prominent voice in Muslim matters. Saudi Arabia has also had a long struggle with domestic political Islam, which blended the austere puritanism of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab with the impulse toward action of Hassan al-Banna, the Muslim Brotherhood's founder. Any change in regional understandings of the connection between religion and politics would resonate deeply in the Kingdom, and Saudi Arabia would certainly seek to influence those understandings using its various tools of influence in the Arab world.

While the broader regional debate was about religion and politics broadly, we were especially interested in the effects of that debate on radicalism. It was clear that governments would have hard choices to make about whether to seek to include or suppress radical groups, and radical groups would have hard choices to make about whether they would seek to partner with governments or continue to struggle against them. It seemed possible that the region was facing a very different future.

The initial trends seemed to indicate at least short-term victories for radical forces. At a basic level, several of the secular governments that had sought to crush radical forces had been crushed themselves. While many of the new Islamist rulers differed with the radical groups on ideology and theology, they were certainly more sympathetic to them than their predecessors. The other advantage radical groups found regarded policing. On a practical level, the Arab uprisings represented the failure of internal security organizations to suppress uprisings in their early phases. For new governments, successful uprisings left internal security forces badly wounded, or worse. Those forces certainly lacked the trust of the new generation of politicians, many of whom they had been oppressing for decades. For existing governments, the threat of a mass uprising shifted the attention of the security services away from small and violent groups, on which they had focused for a decade, and toward the prospect of mass mobilization. While Osama bin Laden's death in May 2011 represented a profound blow to the jihadi movement, the contemporaneous melting away of police and security forces in many countries represented an opportunity for the movement. The endurance of anti-state violence in Syria, Iraq, and Libya gave a further boost to the radical camp, providing a cause for which young men could gather and fight, regardless of their origins around the world.

And yet, as we survey the Arab world in late 2014, radicals have not secured control over any country, although the Islamic State has at least temporarily carved territory out of two states. For all of the openings that the Arab uprisings provided long-time oppositions, it somewhat improbably reinforced most governments' advantages. In part, this is because the bloodiness of long-running conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Libya, and the further empowerment of radical groups throughout the region, persuaded many formerly disaffected—or even hostile—citizens that they were in fact better off with the governments they had and should not take a chance on a transition. The Bahraini government's ability to reassert control after large-scale pro-

tests, and the Egyptian military's ability to reinsert itself at the center of Egyptian political life after a year-long interregnum of Muslim Brotherhood rule, undermined the argument that the status quo could no longer hold. In many cases, governments relied on the old tools at their disposal: the mass media and the religious authorities to rally support, state repression to silence critics, and the promise of reward from state systems to consolidate alliances.

Jihadi groups and hard-line salafi groups sympathetic to them had not worked out the details of how to hold actual power, and they soon became marginalized. They seemed to take the attraction of their movement for granted, expecting that in the absence of repression they could swiftly become mass movements. Groups allied to the Muslim Brotherhood, by contrast, got more traction in the initial months of the uprisings. They had long aspired to political participation, seeing democratization as a vehicle to accumulate power and influence (even if actual control had once seemed a far-off prospect).

In practice, even groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, which had long labored among the public, had problems holding on to power. In places where Islamists won elections, such as Egypt, the new governments never fully established their control over the system. In many cases, elements of the old regime bitterly complained about what they called "*ikhwanat al-dawla*," or the "Brotherhood-ization" of the state, and they were able to resist it.

In that resistance was one of the most interesting phenomena of the Arab uprisings, and one of the most unexpected: the wide-scale vilification of the Muslim Brotherhood, which had been tolerated in much of the Arab world for decades. Although the Muslim Brotherhood as an organization has many authoritarian characteristics, its decades of effectively and efficiently providing schools, hospitals, and other public services persuaded many that the group's sights were firmly set on politics, not violence. Yet as populations reflected on the poor job performance of Muslim Brotherhood officials once in power, and as governments viewed themselves locked in a battle against

the Brotherhood for their survival, the Brotherhood went in the public eye from attractive alternative to failed experiment. Violence crept back, and much of it was ascribed to the Brotherhood. While many populations were merely disappointed that the Brotherhood had not met expectations, resurgent governments saw something more threatening in the organization. The Brotherhood's unabashed search for monopoly power had represented an existential threat to the status quo, and it had to be fought at all costs.

The establishment's conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood highlighted what was really at stake in the Arab uprisings: the exercise of legitimate authority. Governments had become used to not being questioned and to relying on religious authorities to support their claims. The religious community was essentially a conservative community, and it reminded Muslims of numerous teachings that call for loyalty to the ruler. What the establishment found most threatening about many of the opposition movements that flowered after 2011 was the unity of religious and secular forces. Historically, traditional interpretations of Islam led conservative forces to support legitimacy of the state, and horror at the excesses of the radical right led liberal forces to support the legitimacy of the state. The Arab uprisings unified conservative and liberal forces, and combined them with the energy and innovation of young people. This coalition threatened the entire arrangement. Governments tried desperately to tear it apart, and up to now they have been largely successful.

These findings and others are captured in the chapters that follow. Chapter 2 explores competition for authority in the jihadi-salafi sphere, and chapter 3 examines the jihadi context on the ground in Syria and Iraq and in surrounding countries. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 discuss the shifting relationships between oppositions and governments in Tunisia, Egypt and Saudi Arabia respectively, and chapter 7 draws some conclusions from what we have learned.

With the benefit of hindsight, we understand that the changes of 2011 were less fundamental than many had hoped. Jihadi groups have experimented, and governments have experimented. Each has adapted to the other. The threats have not gone away. Perhaps most surprising is continued uncertainty over what lessons one should draw from the events of 2011. Were the uprisings of that year a sign that the status quo could no longer prevail, or did they serve as a wake-up call for governments to attend to the needs of their people? Did the seemingly spontaneous organization of opposition groups inspire young people to take action on their own, or did it demonstrate to young people the futility of political activity? Does the ongoing violence in Libya, Syria, and Iraq serve as a warning to populations not to challenge authoritarian governments for fear of inviting chaos?

On balance, it seems clear that radical groups found opportunity in the Arab uprisings. Taking advantage of the decline of security services as well as governments' failures to address grievances, radical groups remained as a magnet for the region's disaffected young men. Despite early hopes, the Arab uprisings did not provide constructive domestic outlets for the energies and passions of the rising generation. Faced with the choice between mobilizing young people and anesthetizing them, governments have redoubled their pursuit of the latter course.

The whole range of exogenous challenges, possibly including sustained economic dislocation and certainly including more sophisticated and targeted use of social media and networking, will continue to test sitting governments. In addition, the Muslim Brotherhood is down but not out in many places. Many have turned harshly against the Brotherhood, yet it continues to enjoy strong support in numerous areas—far more than most jihadi groups. The Brotherhood will certainly seek opportunities to reintegrate into politics, and members and supporters may use a variety of tactics to make the rulers who pushed them from power fail.

One thing seems clear. The dynamism and innovation that have emerged among radical and opposition groups throughout the Middle East will continue. Governments will need to use many of their existing tools as well as some new ones to face the challenges of this emerging reality. They will need to be not only strong but (as the last four years have demonstrated) also agile. Many may seek to compel, but they will also need to accommodate, and to divide effectively between those who can be reconciled and those who cannot.