



## Revisiting the Arab Spring Ten Years Later: Uneven Outcomes of Obama's Do-Nothing Policy over Democratic Transitions in the Middle East

### Revisiter le printemps arabe dix ans plus tard : les résultats inégaux de la politique de ne rien faire d'Obama sur les transitions démocratiques au Moyen-Orient

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#### Résumé:

A decade after the Arab awakening, much ink has been spilt over the study of the long-term impact the Arab uprisings have on people's desire for democratic transitions across the Middle East. This article provides an overview and analysis of the Arab revolutions for their pro-democracy struggle that swept important Arab countries by the beginning of 2011 from North Africa to the Middle East. It focuses in particular on six of the major Arab Spring states: Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen and Bahrain and on how Obama's response resulted in the turmoil in the region. The study faults the United States for its support for the authoritarian regimes as a major contributor to the failure of democracy in countries of major protest.

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#### Abstract :

Une décennie après le réveil arabe, beaucoup d'encre a coulé sur l'étude de l'impact à long terme des soulèvements arabes sur le désir des peuples de transitions démocratiques à travers le Moyen-Orient. Cet article donne un aperçu et une analyse des révolutions arabes pour leur lutte en faveur de la démocratie qui a balayé d'importants pays arabes au début de 2011, de l'Afrique du Nord au Moyen-Orient. Il se concentre en particulier sur six des principaux États du printemps arabe : la Tunisie, l'Égypte, la Libye, la Syrie, le Yémen et le Bahreïn et sur la façon dont la réponse d'Obama a provoqué les troubles dans la région. L'étude reproche aux États-Unis leur soutien aux régimes autoritaires en tant que contributeur majeur à l'échec de la démocratie dans les pays de grande contestation.

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## Introduction

After decades of silence and inertia, a number of Arab countries from Tunisia in North Africa to Syria in the Middle East erupted unexpectedly in waves of protests expressing the people's discontentment with the western-backed tyrants over their socio-political and economic living conditions (Sly, 2021). Under the slogan of 'The people want the fall of the regime' echoed across the region, the uprisings appeared for a fleeting moment of enthusiasm as signaling the beginning of the unraveling of Arab autocracy giving way for fairer, more democratic societies and at times dizzying change (Melhem, 2021).

As a moment in time, the euphoria of the Arab popular uprisings soon gave way to disillusion. With Tunisia as the only notable exception, it created instead the feeling that changes of power in most of the region's Arab societies could sound immediate and peaceful. Yet seen over the subsequent decade, these uprisings were merely the first popular manifestations that no real attempt succeeded to bring about structural changes. While so much attention has been paid to considerable political elites, relatively too little has been given to social movements and public opinion.

Obama's approach towards the Middle East was challenged by the wave of demonstrations when thousands of people poured into the streets in 2011 to demand social freedom, democracy and change of the autocratic regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, Libya and Bahrain. The Obama administration initially hesitated and tried to balance its position between the regimes and demonstrators. Yet, under different pressures and circumstance, Obama responded to the uprisings differently with a mere silence or military intervention according to which these countries deemed essential to the U.S. national interests.

Over the years that followed, structural grievances that had triggered the protests in 2011 uprisings are still very much alive; however, their achievements remain ambivalent. From 2013 onwards, with the exception of Tunisia, there have been increasing democratic setbacks in many respects and their revolutions succumbed to counterrevolutionary forces or spiraled into Civil War or devastating conflict that continue even today (Hiltermann, 2021).

Frustrations rose to the surface once again with large-scale protests breaking out in 2019 in a number of countries including Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Sudan calling for more political engagement. These revolts show that the processes of transformation and liberalization initiated ten years ago are not yet complete. With COVID-19 pandemic, the series of demonstrations prompted further a discussion about the existing challenges which further intensified the political and socio-economic hardships across the region.

The questions that arise immediately are: how did Obama cope with the challenges of the Arab Spring in each country of popular uprisings, and how Obama's lack of action led to the failure of the uprisings? What is the long-term impact that the Arab Spring has on the Arab people of major protests, and how have the uprisings redefined the Middle East and North Africa nowadays?

Surely, the 10th anniversary offers an opportunity to assert that the answers to the abovementioned questions would vary from one major Arab Spring state to another, and thus 'one-size-fits-all' answers are not helpful. This article aims at examining the long term impact that the Arab Spring has on people's desire to establish a democratic government and to bring about structural change to

their countries across the Middle East. It also sheds light on the failure of Obama's policy in countries of major protests and how such policy influenced the outcomes of 2011 uprisings and being extended to the 2019 New Arab uprisings.

### **1. The Evolution of the Arab Spring**

Ten years ago, wave of pro-democracy protests and uprisings erupted the Middle East and North Africa, beginning in 2010 and challenged some of the region's entrenched dictatorial regimes whose mismanagement and corruption had mired in backwardness for decades (Sly, 2021). The wave of protests began first in Tunisia and Egypt, toppled their regimes in similar succession and inspired demonstrations across the Middle East on what was prematurely called the Arab Spring, most notably in Yemen, Bahrain, Libya, and Syria (Sly, 2021).

The initial impulse behind the rise of the Arab people in what was called the 'Arab Spring' lays in the precarious conditions of the Arab people highlighted in their political and social structure and relations between the people and their authoritative governments (Mabon, 2021). However, the outpouring of popular discontent in these countries led to violent civil wars between the opposing governments and ruling regimes, and the internal conflict onset continues even today (Mabon, 2021).

#### **1.1 Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution**

The first demonstrations of the Arab Spring took place in Tunisia, in December 2010, triggered by the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor, protesting the arbitrary seizing of his stand by local officials. Bouazizi's act dubbed as a catalyst for the 'new Revolution' that quickly sparked throughout the country (Melhem, 2021). The protest movements erupted in waves expressing people's discontentment and suffering from economic dislocation, political repression and denial of their basic human rights (Mabon, 2021).

Zine al-Abdine Ben Ali, who ruled Tunisia for more than twenty years was finally forced to step down from the seat of power and fled the country on 14 January 2011. In October 2011, the country's first free and democratic parliamentary elections were held to choose members of a council. The National Assembly drafted the new Constitution in December 2011. January 2014 was the date in which the new constitution was promulgated with a democratically chosen president and prime minister. In 2019, only then Tunisia became the first country of the Arab uprisings to undergo a vital democratic process and a peaceful transition of power particularly from one elected government to another (Britannica, 2021).

#### **1.2. Egypt's January 25 Revolution**

The revolutionary developments in Tunisia inspired similar revolt in Egypt, sorting out mass demonstrators across the Tahrir Square uprisings on January 25, in Cairo which in barely 30 days culminated in the overthrow of Mubarak (Cole 2014). Although, development in Egypt took another path different from that of Tunisia, owing to the vital role the Egyptian army played to refuse to use forces against protesters calling for the fall of Mubarak's regime (Owen, 2014).

Having lost the support of the military, Mubarak was forced to resign on 11 February after nearly 30 years, ceding power to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) until the next presidential election would be held in June 2012 (Owen, 2014). Although, the military enjoyed

public approval in the interim, yet its prioritization of stability at the expense of people's demand for transition to liberal, parliamentary democracy forced the corps to compromise (Cole, 2014).

Such movements that succeeded in toppling the authoritarian regimes of Ben Ali and Mubarak initially gave many hope to the Arab people. Yet in Egypt, the coup d'état that ousted Mubarak's first democratically elected president Mohammed Morsi reflected larger trends of regimes using mechanisms of control that render possible protest movements in the future all but real and successful (Mabon, 2021).

### 1.3. Libya

In Libya, mass demonstrations against the regime of Muammar al-Qaddafi began in mid-February 2011, and quickly descended into an armed conflict. The government's violent crackdown on pro-reform protestors led more people to join the protests even from the Libyan army forces which are supported by large (Haas, 2018). Libya was being dragged into a civil war where the opposition appeared to have taken control of Tripoli (Britannica, 2021). When al-Qaddafi forces advanced into the oppositions headquarter, the Security Council led by USA, Britain, and France authorized a resolution to take the necessary measures for protecting civilians being threatened by Qaddafi's attack in the country (Haas, 2018).

Although, the declared objective of the resolution was protecting the Libyan civilians, however, the resolution aimed at targeting regime change by tipping the military balance of power in favor of the opposition to overpower Qaddafi's forces (Haas, 2018). On March 19, the NATO imposed a blockade on Libyan ports to prevent any possible intrusion of weapons to the country. Several months later, Qaddafi was captured and killed after the rebel forces took control of Tripoli (Haas, 2018).

Only then, the Libyan parliamentary elections were held with the National Forces Alliance as a leading party under the leadership of Mahmoud Jibril. The Muslim Brotherhood's Justice and Construction Party came as a second. An Interim Constitution declared Libya as a democratic country with protections for minority rights; the Islamic Law as the main source of legislation and the year of 2013 was scheduled as the time for drafting a permanent constitution (Haas, 2018). However, the struggle to exert greater control over the country resulted in widespread the civil war and anarchy in 2014 (Britannica, 2021).

### 1.4. Bahrain

A series of anti-government protests led by peaceful Bahraini opposition, human rights activists and members of Shia-dominant gripped Bahrain in mid-February 2011 demanding political and economic reforms and equality for all Bahrainis (Ulrichsen, 2014). The protests were violently suppressed by the security forces using all available means of coercion. Instead of being criticized for the human rights violation against non-violent demonstrations targeting regimes' policies of fomenting sectarian division and high corruption at the heart of the government, Bahrain was highly supported by a Gulf Cooperation Council security force led by Saudi Arabia to save al-Khalifa dynasty (Melhem, 2021).

### 1.5. Yemen

In Yemen, the protest movement began in late January 2011 when the country's most powerful tribes and military leaders threw their support behind the pro-democracy protestors to ride out

demands for president Ali Abdullah Saleh's immediate exit. Following the failure of Yemeni subsequent negotiated settlement to remove his 33 years of rule from power, a violent confrontation broke out in Sanaa between pro opposition and loyalists which led to several more deaths (Britannica, 2021).

In June, it seemed that a raising hope for transition to a new government began among opposition after Saleh was injured and left the country, however, he returned unexpectedly after several months adding to the uncertainty about the Future of Yemen. In late November, an internationally mediated agreement was signed by Saleh to transfer power to vice president AbdRabbuh Mansur Hadi. The agreement called for assuming the presidency for Hadi as the only candidate in a presidential election to be held on February 2012, leaving Saleh as a president until that time. Yet an escalating series of confrontations raised later on under Hadi's government that failed to maintain stability and that in 2014 turned into a civil war (Britannica, 2021).

### 1.6. Syria

Similarly, anti-government protests erupted in southern Syria in mid-March 2011 that spread through the country calling for the ouster of President Bashar al-Assad. The Syrian security and military forces responded with brutal crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrations, drawing widespread human rights violations. The Syrian opposition formed a representative body in Istanbul known as the Syrian National Council with the opposition militias have taken significant steps against government forces (Britannica, 2021). In spite of the upheaval, Assad remains and continues to consolidate his power in the country, as he was able to maintain military forces composed largely of members of Alawite minority, to which he also belonged (Melhem, 2021).

Unlike Libya, division in the wider international community made it difficult for the international military to intervene in Syria. In particular, Russia and China have employed their vetoes to block any action in response to violence and reprisals and to oppose any measures that would lead to foreign intervention in Syria or Assad's removal from the seat of power. Although, the Arab League mission in Syria was a poorly planned fiasco in doing little to reduce violence, the escalation of this latter culminated in a devastating civil war and an ever massive refugee crisis (Britannica, 2021).

### 1.7. Events in other Countries

The effects of the Arab uprising movements were felt elsewhere *across North Africa* and the *Middle East*. This has been shown at least from pro-democracy protests in other countries where they were relatively absent in the Arab popular uprisings of 2011. This time is mainly in Algeria, Lebanon and Iraq, and Sudan calling for political change and the fall of the ruling class. These underlined how the new wave shares similarities over popular grievances throughout the region (Hiltermann, 2021).

In February 2019, Algeria's protestors ousted president Abdelaziz Bouteflika. In April, Sudan's president Omar Al-Bashir has been overthrown by the military after months of protests against his 30 years in power. Between 2019 and 2020, Iraq and Lebanon also faced massive demonstrations and protests against their governments (Fahmi, 2020). Although, these new revolutionary waves were not inspired by one another (Schwedler, 2019), but the weak and corrupted power-sharing systems led many observers to refer to these movements as a second Arab Spring (Fahmi, 2020).

## 2. Obama's Response to the Arab Spring

The evolution of Obama's response toward the events and demonstrations in Tunisia was taken by surprise when the Tunisians went through uprisings and it was difficult to expect the result (Drissi, 2020). Hillary Clinton, Secretary of State, ensured the necessity of conducting political reform in Tunisia and safeguarding the right to peaceful protest and free expression. She pledged that Washington was not taking sides between protesters and their own government (Ghattas, 2011).

It was only after the ouster of the long-ruling dictator of Ben Ali that the U.S. finally expressed its willingness for Tunisian people to move towards free and fair elections in the near future, and Obama praised its people "where the will of the people proved more powerful than the writ of a dictator" (Obama 2011a), asserting the U.S. support for the "democratic aspirations of all people" (Obama 2011a).

In Egypt, the Obama administration did not expect the outbreak of the revolution and did not even exert pressure on Egypt toward regime change. Obama seemed initially hesitant and cautious about how to react to the January 2011 uprising and his administration sided differently. On one side, Gates, Clinton and Biden feared that regime change in Egypt would damage American interests. Others, typically the new generation of the White House argued that preferring stability at the expense of people's will would put the president on the wrong side of history (Jervis, 2017). Obama quickly took a moderate position calling Mubarak to take the demands of protesters seriously and to step aside, so that he could begin negotiations over a smooth transition to a new government (Pinto, 2012).

Hence Obama's wait-and-see policy in reaction to the protests revealed that the U.S. tried to balance its position between the voice of people for democracy aspirations and a transition with America's friendly ally, fearing that later on the uprising could get out of control and shook the region (Pinto, 2012).

Regarding the U.S. response to the Libyan case, once protesters began the U.S. responded quickly calling for Qaddafi removal from power (Jervis, 2017). Clinton stated that he had "lost the legitimacy to govern," and it is "time for Qaddafi to go-now" (Clinton, 2014, p. 297). When Qaddafi was determined to remain in power, even if it was intended to kill large numbers of protesters, only then Obama decided to support a no-fly-zone and conditioned his support on the participation of the Arab League, only then some members took side on the coalition under the guise of humanitarian intervention (Jervis, 2017).

This action assigned to NATO force led mainly by Britain and France revealed the cautious policy of the U.S. to choose to lead from behind and preferred indirect intervention in the region (Drissi, 2020).

In the U.S. response to the Syrian uprising, the Obama administration took cautions approach refraining from calling for regime change and instead he urged his government to adopt political reform which meets the Syrian expectations. In this case, Obama held out hope for transition before the situation has escalated calling for the ouster of Assad and declaring his rule illegitimate (Pinto, 2012).

The administration's constraints to intervene in Syria have to do with some concerns. The U.S. turned a blind eye to the crackdown by Syrian government forces mainly because the Iranian support to Assad's regime along with Hezbollah and Hamas undermined U.S. interests in Syria. Unlike Lybia, there was little regional support for U.S intervention in the zone and little support in the U.S. to go for another military intervention in the Middle East (Zohny, 2021).

In Yemen, the U.S. intervention was less overt. The Obama administration withdrew its support after the pro-democracy protesters forced Ali Saleh to resign (Haas, 2018). However, Obama's action as his support to forces loyal to Saleh still exert influence further triggered the civil upheaval in the country. Saudi Arabia then got involved in Yemen in 2015 to secure its interests against Yemeni rebellions and against Iran (Bentley, 2021).

Bahrain, home to the 5th Fleet of the U.S. navy, received suggestions from the Obama administration to avoid the political crisis and criticism which directed to other countries and encouraged the ruling family to go through democratic reforms (Haas, 2018). Obama stated that "the only way forward is for the [Bahraini] government and opposition to engage in a dialogue, and you can't have a real dialogue when parts of the peaceful opposition are in jail" (Obama, 2011b).

Unlike other Arab Spring countries, the Obama administration did not impose sanctions on the Bahraini government where the uprisings turned violent or call for the removal of its ruler. Yet, it continued to sell weapons to Bahrain (Haas, 2018). Such action revealed Bahrain, America's long-standing ally, as a stronghold for U.S. efforts to deter Iran (U.S. Resumes Bahrain Arms Sales despite Rights Concerns, 2012). Also it showed Obama's double standards when he failed to condemn the crackdown of the protesters by the Bahraini government (Drissi, 2020).

### **3. The Failure of Arab Uprisings**

A decade ago, the Arab Spring's failure dated back to the lack of a clear policy or action by Barack Obama. After the U.S. president called for a new beginning with Muslims in the Middle East at Cairo Speech in 2009, many Arab people thought that he would promote democracy once the revolutions swept out several places of the region; this turned all but true (Bentley, 2021).

Despite the administration's cautious and inconsistent response to the uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa, Obama's foreign policy has ignored others' call for standing by dictatorial regimes in the region. Obama had a clear agenda to serve the U.S. long-term interests; however, the way he responded to the Arab spring also revealed that he has not been reluctant to balance between America's national interests, freedom and democracy promotion. He also sought to distance his foreign policy from the way the former president's doctrine was served after the Iraq invasion (Drissi, 2020).

It seems that the U.S. belated response to the so-called Arab Spring was dominated by three major problems. The first one was how to secure America's national interests, including Israel's security without affecting the promotion of democracy in the region. The second problem was how to guarantee democracy in Muslim countries that does not fall prey to political Islam. The third problem was how to apply a foreign policy approach that does not rely on interventionism and regime change by force (Drissi, 2020).

The events in Egypt posed yet a more challenging situation for Obama, since Mubarak has long been a partner to the U.S. and his regime has long been served the Israeli interests in the region. This challenge became even sharp following the election of Morsi because his presidency was critical for both Egypt's peace treaty with Israel and other regional security structure. Nevertheless, the U.S. tried to cope with his government, aiming at the Muslim Brotherhood's inclusion in the political system would work with any government deemed to be democratic. However, in the aftermath of the military coup led by General al-Sisi, the U.S. acted less decisively following the ouster of Morsi and never went as far as to qualify the military's intervention as a coup (Jervis, 2017).

Despite the fact that developments in Tunisia and Egypt offered hope to demonstrators, following the overthrow of the authoritarian regimes of Ben Ali and Mubarak, the coup d'état that deposed Mohamed Morsi, the country's first ever elected leader reflected regional trends of coercive regimes with orderly mechanisms of control to deter protest movements, seemingly frustrating the hopes of protesters for genuine reform (Mabon, 2021). The Bahraini case indicates the limits of U.S. support for its people seeking democratization process (Haas, 2018).

#### **4. Happy Ending?**

In the last 10 years that followed the revolutions and the overthrow of successive regime heads, the results took different trajectories and things have deteriorated overall in terms of civil society. In Tunisia, which is often deemed as the single shining star of peaceful transition swept by the uprisings into a fledgling democracy, has been distorted by a number of ISIS terror attacks, political dysfunction, economic hardship and poverty that remain the country's greatest threat to its stability and a major source of Tunisian's discontent over their government's failure to meet their economic needs. This fact pushed many of them either to immigrate to Europe or to join radical Islamists abroad (Melhem, 2021).

For most other nations involved in the uprisings, Syria is still a country of devastation, chaos and ruin. In Yemen, the results are disastrous as it still tears itself apart for its unrest in many parts of the country with no help from its neighboring countries. As Saudi Arabia maintains control in the Gulf region, Bahrain becomes a Saudi province living in its shadow. In Libya, the situation is deteriorated so much that it finds itself an arena with two governments vying for power, either of which wanted to extend its control over the country and supported by foreign rulers such as Russia, Turkey, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, coming either for plundering its resources or for defining its political future. Today, Libya becomes a theater of cynical proxy wars (Melhem, 2021).

After the revolution in Egypt, the short-lived success that Muslim Brotherhood witnessed is perceived as a threat to established elites (Sly, 2021). Now under the rule of President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, it is currently a nation under the worst authoritarianism that is ever experienced in its modern history. According to Human Rights groups, it is estimated today that there are 60,000 Egyptians detainees in prison for their political views compared with 5,000 to 10,000 in the final years of Mubarak's presidency. Egypt is still suffering from the higher rate of unemployment and poverty, and its people are still cowed into silence (Sly, 2021).

Even in Tunisia, the socio-economic frustration and dissatisfaction over unemployment where jobs are becoming scarce and stagnant economy have precipitated a series of violent demonstrations with young protesters and security forces clashing in cities around the country (Sly, 2021). Since

2010, Tunisia has experienced a sharper decline in its economic growth of -7% in 2020 (Abderrahmane, 2021). Although steps were taken towards political reforms which allowed new freedoms, a source of frustration still felt among many people who are struggling to consolidate the grasp of the country's politics and fragile democracy. Even in Tunisia, the mirage of the previous regime remains present with many people nostalgic for the old days of Ben Ali (Abderrahmane, 2021).

Despite these outcomes, the new wave of mass protests that broke out in Sudan and Algeria after 2019 reveals that these socio-political movements did not end in 2011. Demonstrations in Sudan for freedom and democracy reflect how these demands are similar throughout the region. Likewise in Algeria, the slogan 'Yitnahaw gaah' ('they must all leave') underlines that their people want a complete dismantling of the old political system. Therefore, these new popular uprisings in Algeria and Sudan are merely an extension of the 'Jasmine Revolution' or even before (Abderrahmane, 2021).

Mass demonstrations that erupted in Iraq in late 2019, demanding the end of long corruption nepotism and the rule of militias, resulted in killing more than 500 civilian Iraqis by government forces and the assassination of several activists by Iranian allied militias. Though, the protesters succeed in forcing the Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi to resign, however, the country's future still seems to be influenced by Iran (Melhem, 2021). Anger over economic setbacks continues to roil Iraq and frustration remains high among Iraqi people (Sly, 2021).

Like Iraq, Lebanon's revolution over political and economic crisis succeeded only in forcing the resignation of the Prime Minister Saad Harir. Anger and disillusionment soon muted the initial moment of hope and enthusiasm of those who initially took to the streets because these demonstrations were not as powerful as a movement to challenge the ruling class who has long served as the country's proxy abroad and to resist the onslaught of the government and Hizbollah that wields significant power in Lebanon (Melhem, 2021).

Overall, the situation has even deteriorated in the whole region as economic crises are worsened by covid-19 pandemic. According to the International Labor Organization, young people have a hard time in the labor market and youth unemployment rate over the last ten years has increased from 32.9 percent in 2012 to 36.5 percent in 2020 (Sly, 2021).

### **Conclusion**

Revisiting the Arab Spring after 10 years reveals that U.S. national interests in countries experiencing mass political protests for democratic freedom have offered considerable variations, from major support of the protests in some cases, to acquiescence of governmental crackdowns in others. This can be seen through the failure to support the Bahraini uprising by the Obama administration and the fear that Iran would control Bahrain certainly count more than the desire to see Bahrain more democratic. Hostility to Islam would definitely make Obama prefer stability over reform in such countries as Egypt. It failed to condemn the Egyptian coup d'état and Egypt-Israel ties would unquestionably make Obama turn a blind eye to the coup.

Given the short-lived democratic experiment in Egypt which has been restored to an authoritarian regime and other countries' initial political reforms which have given way to backsliding as in Tunisia have fallen from high expectations for democratization. Not least, the political situation

which remains unresolved in other countries and the outcome of the 2011 Arab uprisings was civil unrest and lethal conflict including in Libya Syria and Yemen.

The image of the protests and demonstrations fashioned in the Middle East a decade ago was not a simple one-off. There are also new uprisings that erupted in other important Arab countries by the beginning of 2019 in Sudan, Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon. This fact underlines how popular grievances and demands are all more common in the region. Instead of addressing the growing concern of people and delivering any sort of reform, the surviving regimes have tended to employ more repression by entrenching people's security states. Today, the same unresponsive regimes remain in charge using the same coercive methods and their people face the same precarious conditions of living such as political instability, repression, poverty and unemployment which further create a feeling of hopelessness. Hence the illusion of political liberalization led many to conclude that these popular Arab Uprisings were failures and that the ruling elites were too strong to break.

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