Selected developments in human rights and democratisation during 2015: Middle East

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Abstract: *This contribution aims at providing a synthetic analysis of the process of political changes which has been driving and continues to drive a wave of unrest across the Middle East. It presents a slightly different understanding of Arab uprisings by dividing the ongoing process into three different phases: During the first period, namely, in the pre-revolutionary context, a set of socio-economic and political factors mutually reinforcing Arab discontent will lead to mass mobilisation. Subsequently the revolutionary momentum will pave the way for a second phase, the instant outcomes of Arab upheaval, in particular the toppling of authoritarian regimes and the call for free elections won by Islamist groups. Finally, the third and last stage, namely, the demobilisation process, will lead to the current situation of disintegration and chaos that is prevailing in some countries, the exacerbation of the sectarian rift and the return of a new authoritarianism as a result of counter-revolution strategies launched and led by Saudi Arabia.*

Key words: *Arab upheaval; phases; resilience; counter-revolution; refugees; authoritarianism*

1 Introduction

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, stretching from the Kingdom of Morocco in the west to the Sultanate of Oman in the east, is one of the most disturbed regions in the world as it is one of the most diverse in terms of ethno-linguistics and religious pluralism. According to the Economist Intelligence 2015 Unit Democracy Index, MENA remains the most repressive area in the world, with 14 out of 20 countries categorised as 'authoritarian' (Economist Unit Intelligence 2015).[1] Only Tunisia has recently seen some significant progress in terms of democratisation and human rights. The unprecedented rise of mass mobilisation calling for political change in the Arab world led many to expect a new wave of democratisation two decades ago after that occurring

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1 The Democracy Index is based on five categories: electoral process and pluralism; civil liberties; the functioning of government; political participation; and political culture. Based on their scores on a range of indicators within these categories, each country is itself categorized as one of four types of regime: 'full democracies'; 'flawed democracies'; 'hybrid regimes'; and 'authoritarian regimes'. Economist Unit Intelligence, *Democracy Index 2015. Democracy in an age of anxiety*, available at http://www.eiu.com/Handlers/WhitepaperHandler.ashx?fi=EIU-Democracy-Index-2015.pdf&mode=wp&campaignid=DemocracyIndex2015 (last visited 30 June 2016).

in Eastern Europe and South America. However, five years after the outbreak of regime-changing revolutions, it has become apparent that democracy in the MENA region remains a highly-uncertain prospect, and, what is even worse, the return of 'paranoiac' authoritarian states, more violent and dominant, have cracked down on freedom of speech, stifled protests, and arrested activists.

We are currently witnessing critical times in the history of the Arab world. The revolutionary spillover affected all states in different ways: Some were directly impacted with major changes (Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Libya and Yemen), while others faced minor political adjustments (Jordan, Morocco, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates). On a more global scale, the shock waves that started in the Middle East reach all the continents that are facing at least a double short-term impact of the Arab uprising: On one hand, the rapid spread of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS), deeply entrenched within the failing Iraqi, Syrian and Libyan states, will lead to the globalisation of terrorism, relocating threats and attacks inside Western national territory. On the other hand, the protracted horrors of the Syrian and Libyan civil wars, combined with states' destabilisation, are forcing millions of refugees on the path of exile, seeking shelter and international protection in already fragile neighbouring countries or crossing into Europe, sparking a crisis as countries struggle to cope with the influx, and creating division in the European Union (EU) over how best to deal with resettling people at a time of rising local populism.

According to Kepel (2016), the Arab revolutions occurred in three distinct phases across three separate 'zones'. The first phase stretched from Mohammed Bouazizi's self-immolation to early 2012, and was characterised by the mass movements which toppled, or failed to topple, regimes. Three different outcomes ensued: Zone A, North Africa, witnessed successful movements by civilians that toppled dictators; Zone B, the Gulf states, experienced stagnation, such as the deadlock and repression in Bahrain and Kuwait; and Zone C, the Levant, witnessed chaos, such as the bloody crisis that emerged in Syria. In phase two, that is to say the revolution's direct outcomes, the launching of electoral process resulted in the rising power of the Society of Muslim Brotherhood in countries such as Egypt, and of political Salafism in Tunisia and Egypt. Phase three is the current phase in which the inter-Sunni divide is added to the Sunni-Shia sectarian rift, the latter shaping the main regional struggle since the 2003 American military intervention that toppled the Saddam Hussein government and led to renegotiating the underling rules of political game to the benefit of the long-oppressed Shia's community. This illustrates the strong Saudi desire to run Arab affairs as unrivalled regional *hegemon*. This ambition embodies both an anti-Ikhwan regional counter-revolution strategy that ends up with the return of authoritarian states and the exacerbation of sectarian tensions opposing Iran and Saudi Arabia leading either to a proxy war in Syria and Yemen or internal competition in Lebanon, Iraq and Bahrein.

This contribution is a contextual analysis of events that have unsettled the region since 2011. The revolutionary momentum encourages a reconsideration of one's understanding of the stability and resilience of authoritarian regimes. All these countries share a common denominator in the omnipresence of *Moukhabarat* or secret police, and one wonders how

such autocratic and police regimes could have been taken by surprise by these uprisings. Arab revolutions raise a series of questions: Why do people decide to confront their ruling regime? Why did the Arabs rebel? How is a revolutionary wave of social protest likely to topple well-established authoritarian states? In others words, the Arab regimes, thought to be strong and resilient to any political change, started to collapse one after the other. Although the Arab revolutions did not succeed in leading to relevant political changes, it is too early to judge the successes of the Arab turmoil, except for Tunisia, whose success depends both on its strong and educated middle class, who have taken the revolution into their own hands, and on a civil society that functions differently from many Middle Eastern countries. The long-term process it has initiated may be the first phase of a slow pace of deep transformation that should be put into the perspective of radical changes that are taking place, namely, the unleashing of a new social force, the youth or 'twitter generation' that is becoming the fuel for Arab mobilisation.

Building on these three distinctive phases of the ongoing process of change in the MENA region, as detailed above, the contribution argues that Arab revolutions are driven by a common set of longstanding economic problems, deep societal transformations and political grievances. However, their outcomes vary from one country to another, considering the availability of a state's resources, in particular foreign interventions, repression, institutional structure stability, cohesion of the challenged elite, shared interests between the regime and significant or influential segments of the population and civil society dynamism.

2   Roots of Arab discontent

The Arab upheaval was triggered on 17 December 2010 by the self-immolation of a Tunisian street vendor, Muhammad Bouazizi, who became the symbol of frustration and a sense of injustice and indignity felt by many. Anger and the mobilisation of hope have produced organised collective action (Aminzade & McAdam 2001). The Tunisian uprising was primarily a social protest movement which later became a fully-fledged revolution when people of all social classes formed a unified front determined to oust the Ben Ali regime. Starting with the Jasmine revolution in Tunisia, this event initiated what later turned into a wave of protest and revolutionary situations throughout almost the entire Arab world. In fact, during its first year, cascading popular democracy movements that started in Tunisia inspired Egypt, and consequently animated other movements across the region. Four of the world's longest-reigning military dictators, Ben Ali of Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, Muammar Gadhafi of Libya and Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen, fell after decades in power.[2]

Social protests in the Arab world have spread across North Africa and the Middle East, largely because the digital media caused communities to realise that they shared grievances and because they nurtured

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2   Zine-Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia stood down as president mid-January 2011 after having been in power for 24 years; he found exile in Saudi Arabia. Hosni Mubarak reigned in Egypt for 30 years and is still facing trial for the deaths of hundreds of protestors. Mouammar Gadhafi held Libya in a tight grip for 40 years. In late August 2011, after

transportable strategies for mobilising against dictators (Howard & Hussein 2013). These dissents drew out networks of people, many of whom had not before been activists in any kind of political organisations: young entrepreneurs; government workers; women's groups; civil society actors; and – in the case of Tunisia – the urban middle class. During the early months of Arab upheavals, traditional political actors, such as unions, political parties and Islamist movements, were not involved. It was a popular mass rally initiated outside institutionalised political forces. This new form of activism implied a profound transformation of the dynamics of contention. First, the traditional political forces suffer from a loss of legitimacy because of their failure to impose and achieve reforms. Second, the efficiency of formal organisations depends on the particular political context in which they operate, and in the MENA region collective action emerges in a hostile and repressive environment so that civil society organisations can hardly challenge the regime or the political system (Wiktorowicz 2004). Finally, to escape state control, contenders retreat to personal networks based upon individuals with shared beliefs, where social ties provide bonds of trust and solidarity (McAdam 1986; Della Porta 1995). Thus, the use of informal social networks, nurtured and regenerated by the spread of digital media, is often appropriate in a less open political system. Overt protestors and formal organisations face harsh reprisals, so that activism and the rise of collective action are sustained through 'basic structures of everyday life'. These 'micromobilisation contexts' (McAdam 1988: 125) 'suggest a wide variety of social ties within people's daily rounds where informal and less formal ties between people can serve as solidarity and communication facilitating structures when and if they choose to go into dissent together' (McCarthy 1996: 143).

After more than five decades of independence from European colonialism, autocratic rulers have failed to meet the legitimate aspirations of the Arab people. These include political freedom, economic prosperity and human dignity. The unifying and overriding elements of the socially-heterogeneous protests were moral and ethical principles, above all justice (*adalah*), freedom (*hurriyah*), dignity (*karamah*) and respect (*ihtiram*). The current situation is a corollary of decades of failed policies, exacerbated by a unique economic crisis. The claims of this rebellious youth rising against the reigning gerontocracies were wide-ranging, and also evolved as protest movements developed. In Tunisia, for instance, protests which primarily began over economic frustration, injustice and indignity grew to anger at corruption in ruling families and elites. The 'operative master frame' (Goffman 1991; Benford & Snow 2000) on which protest waves were based was an inclusive ideological frame that had a better chance of success (Osa 2005). According to Bayat (2000: 900):

anti-Gadhafi fighters backed by Western military intervention had captured Tripoli, he retired to his stronghold, Sirte, where he was captured and killed. After his 33-year rule, Ali Abdallah al Saleh of Yemen handed over power late in 2011. However, unlike his counterparts in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya – who ended up exiled, imprisoned and murdered, respectively – Saleh managed to step down in exchange for immunity.

> In general, contemporary social movements by their very nature carry a multiplicity of discourses espoused by diverse fragments and constituencies, although they may be dominated by one. Shaped in a complex set of concentric circles (like the whole set of circled waves on a calm water surface), social movements possess various layers of activism and constituency (leaders, cadres, members, sympathisers, free riders, and so on) who are likely to exhibit different perceptions about the aims and objectives of their activities.

So what binds these fragments together? In what way is commonality-assured consensus built and solidarity achieved among differentiated actors? The result is that the diverse participants tend to converge on the generalities, but are left to imagine the specifics, to envision commonalities (Bayat 2000: 904). The mass mobilisation was a social justice movement protesting the severe economic and human rights violations ('injustice frame'), particularly in the Tunisian and Egyptian states. Interestingly, Islamists did not manage to control the terminology of these upheavals. This situation stands in sharp contrast to the Iranian revolution that occurred 30 years ago. At that time, Ayatollah Khomeini managed to impose his rhetoric and discourse on the democratic riot against the Shah and thus subverted it (Kepel 2003). On the contrary, Egyptian or Tunisian 'participatory' Islamists did not manage to establish their own rhetoric to convey what was taking place. Even Shiites from Bahrain use the terminology of human rights and democracy. Contention was structured by civic and not religious movements, even though Islamist groups were important core components. These observations highlight the failure of political Islam to find deep roots among the people to convince the masses to act. Indeed, the Arab upheaval derives from an explosive combination of factors which, if taken separately, would not necessarily be determinative and is located in a long chain of actions and contentions, dating back to long before 2011. Above all, to a considerable extent two popular grievances – the deteriorating economic conditions and the yearning for dignity and freedom – galvanised the masses in triggering the popular unrest across the region. First, a common causal motivation behind all the uprisings is the further deterioration of the economy due to the 2008-2009 global financial crisis that exacerbated longstanding structural economic problems endemic to the Arab world, such as high unemployment, particularly among the youth; rising social inequalities; rampant government corruption; clientelism; rising food prices; and so on (Gause III 2011; Malik & Awadallah 2011; Achcar 2013; Hertog et al 2015).[3] As the demographic profile is transforming, the region's economic structure has remained unresponsive to the growing needs of its population.

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3   Indeed, during the years 1960 to 1970, Algeria, Egypt and Tunisia, like much of the Arab world, pursued ambitious state-driven economic strategies which, by the mid-1980s, were generating only modest economic results and proving fiscally unsustainable. The end of the oil boom (1971-1981) further aggravated the economics of the region. With vast deficits and high levels of debt and inflation, Tunisia and Egypt were forced to seek help from the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). These international organisations provided a loan package in return for structural adjustment programmes consisting of a series of market-oriented reforms, with the objective of limiting the state's intervention in the economy, promoting private sector growth and integrating their economies into the world market. As a result of the implementation of reforms called for by the IMF and WB, in Egypt, and to a greater extent in Algeria, the state welfare system was going through a serious crisis, with a dramatic worsening in the quality of and access to healthcare, education and the provision of housing. To make matters worse, during the last decade, ordinary citizens

The deeply-rooted socio-economic problems outlined above were inseparably linked and combined with a set of political grievances primarily originating from the widening gap between the regimes and the public in the Arab world. Authoritarianism certainly has reinforced popular discontent. Being either autocratic republics or monarchical autocracies, except in the case of Lebanon and Israel, most Arab states are facing massive legitimacy deficits entrenched in a more lengthy historical background going back to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In particular in the Levant and Fertile Crescent, the processes of state formation result from the British and French imperial powers that drew the boundaries of political entities that later were to become independent states in line with their own interests and influence, considering a few national yearnings of ancient peoples (Salame 1987; Hourani 2010; Corm 2012). By implication, unstable entities were created that were unable to integrate and harmonise communities but simply tried to neutralise conflicts among classes, nationalities and ethnicities (Ayubi 1995). Looking at North African countries (with the exception of Libya), prior to the colonial period state formation processes had already acquired functioning bureaucracies and centralised state systems. Thus, they had already developed a sense of statehood before the physical arrival of the French and the British, who remodelled them before endorsing them as their local agents. The same process applies to the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, where the British drew the frontiers in the early twentieth century, creating sparsely-populated territories populated by nomadic peoples. In these countries, the state formation process may be attributed largely to political tribalism where a contract emerged between merchant tribes who needed to protect their commercial activities and trade (al-Naqeeb 1990). During the period of independence, weak states would appear and would be pushed aside by military *coups* (Iraq, Syria, Egypt). Throughout regional turbulences, the newly-founded authoritarian regimes would succeed in surviving, particularly by using repression and legitimising discourse based on Arab nationalism and socialism. They settle down into a phase of 'routinisation', in the sense that they tend to stabilise by being assimilated into normal states that come along with a relative opening up of public space through elections, while fighting leftist and later Islamist opposition. Therefore, public space and political opposition remain under tight control by the ruling elite, who monopolise all economic and financial leverages, security and military sectors and ideological resources by imposing official Islam that legitimises and maintains the existing regime. The brutal appearance of the revolutionary event was in reaction to decades of authoritarian drift (the violation of human rights and the denial of basic rights by regimes) and to its stabilisation without any prospect of change.

faced a gradual erosion in their purchasing power as their salaries stagnated, and inflation, particularly in terms of food prices, grew. In Egypt, soaring food prices were the main cause of rising poverty over the last decade as world prices of flour and sugar almost doubled. Therefore, by early 2011, deteriorating labour market conditions, particularly among the educated youth, an erosion of purchasing power and a crisis in the welfare system all contributed to a growing tide of popular agitation.

3   Outcome of the Arab upheavals

The momentum of the revolution has led to a second phase, namely, the overthrow of authoritarian regimes. In Tunisia and Egypt, the Arab upheaval has certainly resulted in a change of regime, and free national elections were the first step in this transitional process. The difficult part is after votes and ballots have been counted and when constitutions are being discussed and the rules of the political game renegotiated. Not surprisingly, the first national elections in Tunis were won by the Salafi of Annahda and by the Muslim Brotherhood and their affiliates in Egypt, sweeping 70 per cent of parliamentary seats, mainly because they were the most consistently-organised force that benefited from the socially-constructed perception of martyrdom of the fallen dictatorships and of non-corrupted and upright people.

The demands for full citizenship and for the recognition of individual political rights were a powerful unifying theme across the Arab revolutions. However, now that four autocrats have been driven from power, the crucial questions at the centre of these transitions are as much economic and social as they are political. Furthermore, beyond a collective sense of endeavour and empowerment, the social movements were not united by a concrete or programmatical agenda for post-regime transformation. The pressing demands for economic transformation, social well-being and the implementation of human rights will be sidelined and the newly-empowered but largely inexperienced Islamist political forces will now clash over secondary issues, such as dress codes and the policing of morality, on which they have clear positions but which do not deliver hope for meaningful change or prosperity or economic growth.

However, the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions have differed in both environment and outcomes. After the Muslim Brotherhood candidate, Mohamed Morsi, acceded to power in June 2012, he did not manage to take over the 'deep state'. The quasi-institutionalised system that lay inside the state agencies, namely, the army, the intelligence services, the judiciary, or the top levels of the bureaucracy (Scott 2014), were left intact and in a central position to influence the shape of the transition. The former authoritarian state remains, together with the ruling elites it has created, the state structures it has built, and the powerful secret services and friendly capitalists it has nurtured. The 'deep state' did not disappear when the despot was deposed. The battle during the Morsi reign saw a confrontation between state institutions and the Muslim Brotherhood, which the Brotherhood lost. In July 2013, a military *coup* deposed the Egyptian President and brought General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, appointed commander-in-chief of the armed forces and minister of defence, to power. Elected in May 2014 as the head of state, Marshal al-Sisi won the presidency and Egypt reverted to an authoritarian and repressive regime, the most openly militaristic since the days of Gamal Abdel Nasser (Rougier & Lacroix 2015; Kienle & Sika 2015).

The post-revolutionary transition in Tunisia followed a different path. The departure of Zineddine el Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011 created a political vacuum that neither the old nor new forces could fill. The election of the National Constituent Assembly, a body that would draft a new constitution and form a transitional government, took place in October 2011. It was evident that none of the main three socially-

embedded political forces, namely, the Tunisian General Labour Union (TGLU), Ennahda, the Islamist party, and the aging veterans of the Habib Bourguiba period, had a dominant position which would have allowed the winner to manage the transition on its own. The election results confirmed that the political spectrum was both diverse and fragmented. Although Ennahda received by far the most support, the Secular Congress for the Republic (CPR) and the socialist Ettakatol were also main actors. This led the three main forces to form a coalition government, the so-called *troika*, with Ennahda taking the premiership, the CPR the presidency, and Ettakatol the presidency of the Constituent Assembly. In Tunisia, by contrast, the judiciary was unable and the military unwilling to perform the substitute function. Without state institutions to partner with, the Tunisian opposition ultimately had no choice but to come to the negotiating table with Ennahda, facilitating consensus. In an overall context of instability, with normal political mechanisms derailed and under pressure from a coalition of political and civil society groups, Ennahda and its partners in government were forced to accept a second new transition process. The legislative and presidential elections, widely deemed free and fair, took place in 2014, shifting the balance of power from the Ennahda party to the Nidaa Tounes party, widely described as secular and made up of a broad range of supporters from former Ben Ali loyalists to some leftists and secularists (Marzouki 2016; Willis 2014).

Elsewhere, great uncertainty surrounds the potential outcomes and the development of conflicts in Syria, Libya and Yemen. The uprisings against Gaddafi's regime triggered the 2011 NATO-led military intervention that drove the Libyan leader and his entourage from power. A chaotic post-revolution period followed, with a complete disintegration of state institutions that plunged Libya into a civil war and facilitated the entrenchment of terrorism. Like the Syrian and the Yemeni wars, the inextricable complexity of the current conflict in Libya is the result of the entanglement of different layers and stratums, both at the domestic and international levels. At the local level, conflict emerged between old and new elites, and partially overlapping divisions between secular and Islamist, on one hand, and economic competition between coastal and desert regions, on the other. Since 2014, Libya has had two transitional and separate governments: the self-declared Islamist government based in the capital Tripoli; and the 'Tobruk government' recognised by the international community. At the regional level, the conflict is destabilising the North African and Sahel regions, as Libya is the regional stronghold of jihadism and smuggling of all kinds. The ongoing war in Yemen, the southern neighbour of Saudi Arabia, with its population of 25 million people in a state of absolute poverty, represents a major security risk for the monarchies of oil producers. The Yemeni revolution was in fact muted by petrodollars, and tribal competition and sectarian divisions, combined with the 2015 Saudi-led military intervention against the Houthis rebels, reveal a mosaic of multifaceted local and regional power struggles.

Finally, the Syrian pro-democratic upheaval that erupted in March 2011 in the southern city of Deraa soon resulted in civil war opposing the anti- to pro-President Bachar al-Assad. Besides the civil society mobilisation against dictatorship, the conflict has acquired sectarian overtones, pitching the Sunni majority against the President's Alawite sect backed by a coalition of minorities of Christians, Druze, Kurds, as well as some Sunni. A fault line extends across the Middle East region, of which Syria has

become the epicentre, with the Shiite-Sunni 'clash' opposing the Shiite 'crescent', led by Tehran and supported by Maliki's Iraq, Assad's Syria, the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Shiite populations on the Arab side of the Gulf peninsula, on one side; and a Sunni front, whose principal leaders are Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and Egypt, on the other side. Moreover, the rise of the *takfirist* group Islamic State (IS) and the establishment of the Caliphate in June 2014 have added a further dimension. IS has capitalised on the chaos and taken control of large territories of Syria. Its many foreign fighters are involved in a 'war within a war' in Syria, battling rebels and rival jihadists from the al-Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front, as well as government and Kurdish forces. The latest actors involved in the protracted conflict are the two major powers: With different agendas and interests, Russia and the US-led international coalition have separately launched airstrikes inside Syria since 2014 to degrade and ultimately destroy the terrorist groups. Despite the confused situation, the regime is not really militarily threatened by the revolt. The majority of the armed forces have remained loyal and defections have not escalated to a point where the coherence of the state is in a state of uncertainty. However, unlike the previous extended revolt faced by the regime from 1979 to 1982, Bashar's government does not have the coercive capacity to suppress the revolt. Its use of sectarian ideology has solidified its base amongst the Alawite community, and fears of radical Islam and uncontrolled violence have forced other minorities to offer their support. The exiled organisation formed to represent the opposition, the Syrian National Council, has failed to establish coherent and meaningful links with the revolt within Syria, which remains highly localised and fractured. Attempts at international mediation have thus far failed to break this bloody stalemate, forcing millions of Syrians to flee their country, divided between regime, opposition, radical groups and the Caliphate of the Islamic State turfs.

The ongoing war in Syria has caused the largest humanitarian crisis since World War II, with more than half of the population directly affected by the armed conflict: Around five million Syrians are refugees in neighbouring countries (95 per cent have found shelter in Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan and Egypt) and more than seven million people are internally displaced. The challenge of migration is likely to continue for many years, even decades, destabilising a fragile Levant area and giving rise to a large and unanticipated flow of war refugees from the Middle East to Europe, unsettling the European Union (EU) like no crisis before it. This sudden and massive flow of population has already had a substantial impact on the domestic politics of most Arab and European countries. It has generated new tensions, and exacerbated pre-existing tensions in host countries. The extra burden on neighbouring countries caused by economic hardship, social problems, changing ethnic and sectarian balances, additional pressures generated by the influx of Syrian refugees on extremely limited public resources, already in crisis, has resulted in conflicts between nationals of the host countries and the Syrian refugees (Alsharabati & Lahoud Tatar 2016). This unprecedented mass displacement highlights the challenges and the limits of the humanitarian system.

4   Conclusion: The reinvention of authoritarianism

The Arab unrests have generated unexpected short-term consequences and the results are clearly disappointing for those who held the view that the time had come for people's emancipation after decades of authoritarian rule. Authoritarianism has resisted and even reinvented itself. Five years after the Arab upheaval, the picture is bleak. On the one hand, states like Iraq, Syria or Libya have collapsed, abandoning territories to civil war and political chaos that benefit organisations such as the Islamic State. On the other hand, some authoritarian regimes have survived or, in the case of Egypt, returned to power under a new shape, at the great cost of brutal repression and often deeply damaging to the social contract. The rest of the Middle Eastern states retain the ruling elites of before the start of the Arab upheaval. Monarchies have initiated superficial reforms without surrendering power. Successful revolutions are very rare indeed. The Arab unrests have led to a regional counter-revolution piloted by Gulf autocracies, to the extent that it may even be said that these subsequent developments have taken hostage the revolutionary dynamic in the name of regional geopolitical interests. The Saudis have their own understanding of the crises in the region from their national interests without any real concern for the aspirations of the people of the region. Thus, the Saudis, obsessed with maintaining the *status quo*, have almost always played the counter-revolutionary card, except in Syria, where the rivalry with Iran has been at its strongest, leading them to frame their struggle as anti-Iran rather than in the name of revolution. The recent experience strongly suggests that the MENA region has a long way to go before meaningful political changes would be achieved. What could have been a process of transition to democracy seems more like a return to stronger autocracies. The Middle East has sunk into the abyss of war and terrorism directly affecting other regions, mainly Europe.

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