



PROTEST AND DEMOCRACY

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The Ebbing and Flowing of Political Opportunity Structures: Revolution, Counterrevolution, and the Arab Uprisings

Paul Kingston

The concept of political opportunity structures has come under significant fire in recent years by social movement theorists. Defined most generally as “the opening and closing of political space” (Wiktorowicz 2004, 14), the political opportunity structure has been described as being too broad—soaking up almost every contextual aspect of the social movement environment like a “sponge” (Robinson 2004). It has also been criticized for being too focused on objective conditions rather than perceptions, emotions, and cultural norms—ignoring in particular the possibility that political and normative threats (as opposed to political opportunities) could be of equal importance in motivating contestation and collective action. Finally, it has been critiqued for being too static—focusing for the most part on a snapshot analysis of political structures rather than on the dynamic and contingent ways that openings come and go as a result of the iterative interaction of structures and social movement agents.

These critiques can be usefully analyzed in the context of the Arab world prior to the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011. The Arab Spring was an unprecedented wave of popular mobilization across the Arab world, particularly within the region’s republican regimes, that toppled dictators in four countries, led to political reform in several more, and precipitated

the outbreak of civil conflict in others, especially in Syria, whose brutal civil conflict is still ongoing. These developments caught observers and experts of the contemporary Arab world off guard—mainly because the overwhelming focus of most scholars had been on the remarkable resilience of authoritarian systems of governance in the region (see Gause 2011). Even a recent volume on social movements in the Middle East—an excellent collection of articles published just before the Arab Spring broke out—worked from the premise that the resilient authoritarian conditions that characterized the region provided little in the way of objective conditions, let alone movement resources, for popular mobilizations and revolt (Beinin and Vairel 2011).¹ In short, scholars of social movements, political scientists, and/or the whole array of policy experts assumed that the resiliently limited political opportunity structures in the Arab world were the decisive factors militating against the possibility of widespread social and political mobilization in the region.

Given the apparent strength of authoritarianism in the region, why did political opportunities suddenly open up in January of 2011? Why were those openings so transitory? In short, how can one explain the sudden ebbing and flowing of political opportunity structures during the Arab Spring and its aftermath? To that end, this chapter examines various components of the social movement framework—namely grievances, resource mobilization, and political opportunity structures—in the context of the pre- and post-Arab Spring Middle East. A wealth of scholarship has documented the widespread and intensifying grievances in the region fueled by deteriorating socioeconomic conditions, growing poverty rates, unaccountable repression, corruption, and the narrowing of networks of power and privilege. Scholars have also identified important facilitating conditions in the decade prior to the outbreak of the Arab Spring—ones driven by such factors as the spread of regional satellite television networks, the increased use of new social media, and the rise of a new generation of activists eager to experiment with new, informal forms of networking. Lynch (2012, 67) described these as contributing to a structural transformation in the Arab public sphere(s), increasing the possibilities of translating the simmering grievances in the region into collective action.

Yet, scholars of social movements tell us that grievances and facilitating conditions do not necessarily translate into popular mobilization,

especially in the face of what seemed to be a highly unfavorable set of political opportunity structures in the region. Hence, the third component of this chapter will investigate the dynamics that led to sudden openings in the political opportunity structures in many states of the region. In part, these can be explained by the cumulative effects of years of state repression—eventually surpassing “threshold levels” as a result of particularly arbitrary and lethal acts of state violence against ordinary citizens. The waves of popular mobilization that ensued, in turn, rebounded into the political arena, activating a parallel politics of contestation within many of the regimes that transformed minor cracks in their internal institutional alliances into genuine political opportunities for sustained social mobilization and, in some cases, regime change. In short, through a dynamic, if contingent, process, political opportunity structures that had at best been hidden and latent in the pre–Arab Spring era, were transformed and opened up overnight by the recursive dynamics unleashed by the process of social mobilization itself. In the concluding remarks, we will investigate briefly why it has been so difficult to sustain these dynamics, leading in most cases to the counterrevolutionary reconsolidation of previous authoritarian regime structures.

On the Eve of the Arab Spring(s): Widespread Socioeconomic and Political Grievances

On the eve of the Arab Spring, objective socioeconomic and political conditions in the region were ripe for oppositional mobilization. Initially, in the early postcolonial Arab world, many of the regimes had formulated “nationalist-populist social pacts” with their populations—a series of implicit, informal, but collective agreements specifying the norms and institutions that would underpin relations between these regimes and their societies. Heydemann (2007) has outlined several features of these postcolonial pacts that include: a preference for redistribution over growth; a preference for states over markets; a preference for protecting local markets from global trade; and an emphasis on the organic unity of the polity. The key to these informal agreements was both their reciprocal nature—bringing state and society together into a series of mutually binding obligations—and their relative success. Early on, the Arab world was able

to boast some impressive results. These included high rates of economic growth and significant steps, such as land reform, toward redressing some of the huge imbalances of wealth and power in the region that had grown up during the colonial period. Such redistributive successes were financed by the influx of significant amounts of both strategic and financial rent from investment and/or bilateral aid flowing from oil revenues.

Recent decades, however, have seen the substance of these “pacts” whittled away as the regime’s informal redistributive commitments have given way to increasing economic and political concentrations of power. While the regimes have shown remarkable “adaptive capacities,” keeping some of the normative and institutional elements of the founding pacts while creating new, more narrowly based and hegemonic governing arrangements, the substance of these informal pacts have gradually been emptied by a variety of processes (Heydemann 2007; Heydemann and Leenders 2013). I will touch on three such processes, which I argue have been particularly important in laying fertile soil for the Arab Spring revolt. They include: 1) the turn towards neoliberal economic policies in the region and the resulting increase in poverty levels, unemployment, and concentrations of wealth; 2) the narrowing of political networks of power in the region—as symbolized by the increasingly prevalent move toward family rule, if not dynastic succession, among the republics as well as the monarchies; and 3) the increasing reliance of all regimes on the coercive and surveillance power of their police and security forces.

Theoretically, the neoliberal turn in the Middle East was designed to raise productivity and improve living standards, especially in rural areas where many countries in the region were felt to have a comparative advantage. The reality, however, was quite the opposite. Despite the rigorous and “exemplary” implementation of market-oriented reforms in Tunisia, for example, conditions for the majority living in the rural and semi-urban peripheries were described as a “nightmare,” featuring as they did increased levels of poverty, rising levels of land concentration, and decreasing levels of employment. As noted by one analyst, “the workers have become beggars” (Droz-Vincent 2011a, 130). In Egypt, Lesch (2012) wrote of similar effects on rural society, including increasing rents for tenant farmers and decreasing delivery of state support in crucial areas such as subsidies for pesticides and fertilizers, the provision of electricity, water,

and phone service, along with a more general drop in state investment in rural infrastructure. Indeed, on the eve of Egypt's uprising, it was estimated that close to 50 percent of the population was living in poverty (Kandil 2012, 216).² In Syria, where a tentative program of market-oriented reform accelerated in the mid-2000s after the consolidation of power by Bashar al-Assad, the Ba'ath Party's policy of promoting a "social market economy" similarly led to increasing rates of poverty, unemployment, and falling living standards, especially in the more peripheral areas of the country outside of central Aleppo and Damascus. Indeed, while aggregate poverty rates in Syria have risen dramatically, reaching 33 percent in the years leading up to the uprising, these rates have been particularly high in the provinces where the revolts have been waged. The northeast, in the central areas around Homs and Hama, and in the south around Deraa, where the Syrian uprising first began, experienced the highest poverty rates (International Crisis Group 2011).

Socioeconomic conditions in the region's urban areas have also become increasingly precarious for the majority of the population. Unemployment levels have been among the highest in the world on a regional basis, reaching 25 percent as compared to the global average of around 14 percent (Filiu 2011, 32; Shehata 2012, 107), with unemployment rates in countries like Yemen reaching levels as high as 40 percent (Fattah 2011, 80). The intensification of privatization in the last two decades has had a particularly pernicious effect on the region's working classes. Veltmeyer has estimated that the number of workers in privatized corporations in Egypt fell precipitously, while the working conditions for those remaining have undergone "a massive downgrading" typified by wage reductions, the absence of medical and social insurance, and greater job insecurity (2011, 612). The employment prospects for the region's burgeoning youth population have also suffered a steep decline, with estimates of youth unemployment in Egypt as high as 50 percent. Indeed, Shehata (2012) reveals that 75 percent of new job entrants into the Egyptian labor market must wait at least five years for their first job. The situation is even worse for the educated youth of the country, over 95 percent of who were unemployed in the mid-2000s. This has severely disrupted the life path of many of the region's youth and contributed to high levels of social frustration, symbolized perhaps most poignantly by the fact that "the Middle

East has the highest rate of delayed marriages in the developing world” (Shehata 2012, 108).

In addition to growing rates of poverty and resiliently high rates of unemployment, a powerful engine of social frustration has been the perception and reality of rising inequality, a clear violation of the equity-oriented normative foundations of the social pacts of the early postcolonial Arab world. Scholars of Egypt’s political economy, for example, write of an “ever-widening gap between a few rich and the poor masses of society” (Holger 2012, 254), with neoliberal policies having effectively transferred wealth from the middle classes to “a tiny layer of the country’s elite” (Veltmeyer 2011, 612). According to some estimates, 15 percent of Egypt’s population controls virtually all of the country’s wealth (Lesch 2012, 28). A similarly regressive trend in the distribution of wealth has been reported in Ba’athist Syria, with 20 percent of the population consuming almost half of the country’s GNP, leaving the bottom 20 percent of the population to consume only 8 percent of the country’s GNP (Haddad 2012). Driving the increasing concentrations of wealth across the region has been the dual tendency within neoliberal policies to raise revenues through regressive taxation while decreasing levels of state social expenditure. Soliman, for example, writes of the shift from a rentier state to a “predatory tax state” in Egypt that has featured the implementation of an “inflation tax” (the printing of money) and a sales tax, both of which hit workers and lower-level civil servants with fixed salaries the hardest (2012, 54). At the same time, the new system of income tax has reduced tax burdens for corporate and professional elites. These changes have been coupled with broad-based reductions in state social expenditures, especially with respect to the subsidization of fuel and basic foodstuffs. Asya al-Meehy (2011), for example, has written of the deterioration in both the amount and quality of traditional *baladi* bread in Egypt; similar processes have been underway for years throughout the Arab world. When combined with the effects of the 2008 global financial downturn, consequent reductions in the flow of remittance income, and increases in food prices, the effect of this regional turn towards neoliberalism has led to “systematic economic pressures” being placed on the region’s popular and salaried middle classes, eventually driving them, as Soliman writes, into “the ranks of the opposition” (2012, 61).

Contributing further to the deepening popular resentment towards the political status quo has been the narrowing of networks of power and privilege in the region. This was symbolized by the growing hegemony of presidential families and their corrupt entourages, such as the Mubaraks in Egypt and the Ben Alis in Tunisia—especially the latter’s wife and her family, who was sometimes referred to as the “Marie Antoinette of Tunisia” (Gelvin 2012, 40). Also fanning the flames was the increasing power of the “sons of the regime” in Syria, which revolved around the president’s cousin Rami Maklouf, whose businesses (especially SyriaTel) in the early days of the Syrian uprising were targeted and destroyed by protesters (Haddad 2012). With respect to the “networks of privilege” around the Saleh family in Yemen, Carapico similarly writes of popular disgust at “the grotesque enrichment of the regime cronies at the expense of the many” (2013, 124). Meanwhile, the majority of Yemen’s citizens had to contend with “deteriorating standards of living; obscenely bad hospitals, and roads; skyrocketing price of meat, staples, and even clean water; the lack of jobs for college and high-school graduates . . . [and] grandiose pageants of presidential power.” According to Carapico, “these and other daily insults fed popular alienation, despair, and frustration, most notably among the youth” (2013, 124). Compounding and eventually igniting these frustrations was the move toward institutionalizing the power of these networks through dynastic succession—the transfer of political power within the family (as had already taken place in Syria in 2000). In Egypt, for example, scholars described the possibility of Mubarak passing power onto his son Gamal as “one of the most sensitive issues for the ‘Egyptian street’ ” (Holger 2012). This served to “galvanize unusual levels of popular outrage,” as was demonstrated during the 2010 assembly elections by the systematic destruction of election posters depicting Gamal (Filiu 2011, 87).³

The major underlying source of political frustration in the region has been the myriad legal, institutional, and coercive obstacles to any kind of civic or political life. Citizens of most of the region’s republics have lived within legal environments underpinned by longstanding emergency decrees that have resulted in numerous restrictions when trying to participate in civic life. Kienle has noted that, “authoritarian regimes in more or less subtle ways controlled almost all major [societal] organizations” (2012, 532). It has also rendered virtually meaningless their participation

in political life—with already highly restricted systems of “liberalized” autocracies experiencing processes of “deliberalization” in the years prior to the outbreak of the Arab Spring, notably in Egypt in the late 2000s (Lesch 2012), with elections being increasingly restricted across the region if not cancelled altogether.⁴ Finally, citizens in all countries have faced increasingly unaccountable and violent police and security forces. Gelvin, for example, noted in Tunisia an “all-pervasive security apparatus [designed] to monitor, frighten, and repress the population” (2012, 39).⁵ Kienle (2012) pointed to the complete unwillingness of any of the region’s regimes to respect universal standards of human and political rights. It was not surprising, therefore, that particularly brutal forms of state violence inflicted by police and security officials against ordinary citizens generated intense sociopolitical anger—referred to in the Algerian context as *hogra*, defined as “something worse than scorn and disdain, a mixture of vilification and humiliation” (Filiu 2011, 31). In trying to explain the salience of such anger, Filiu remarked that “it is impossible to categorize and measure the intensity of the disillusion of those Arab youngsters when confronting such an impasse blocking his/her legitimate desire to contribute to collective activity,” and that, “for many, there just seems to be ‘no future’ ” (2011, 35).

Hence, the Arab world prior to the outbreak of the Arab Spring was ripe with objective conditions conducive to widespread popular dissent. Rising levels of poverty and inequality, narrowing networks of power and privilege, and the consolidation of increasingly repressive and unaccountable systems of state violence across the region presented citizens of most countries in the Arab world with great cause to seek fundamental changes in their social, economic, and political circumstances. Yet, such widespread grievances do not translate by themselves into collection action—this depends on the existence of two crucial factors: the cultivation of mobilizational resources by agents of collective action; and the emergence of political opportunities through which agents of mobilization can push their collective agendas. It is to how these two crucial factors manifested themselves in the period leading up to the outbreak of the Arab Spring in the Middle East that we now turn.

Resource Mobilization Dynamics Prior to the Outbreak of the Arab Spring(s)

Despite the resilience of authoritarian systems of governance in the Arab world, the decade prior to the outbreak of the Arab Spring also witnessed a relatively hidden build-up of new forms of oppositional “social capital” that would become crucial in determining the impact and scope of the uprisings. Underlying this development of mobilizational resources in the Arab world was what Lynch has described as “deep structural changes in the Arab public sphere,” brought about, in particular, by the growth of new media in the region symbolized by the emergence of Al Jazeera (2012, 67). For many years, what existed of an Arab public sphere had been dominated by the sum total of the region’s massive security apparatus, which sought to control the flow of information both within as well as across borders. The Al Jazeera phenomenon not only technologically challenged these authoritarian instincts, making such rigid control “increasingly impossible,” it also began a process of constructing “a radically new Arab public sphere” that opened up space for trenchant critiques of politics in the region (Lynch 2012, 75).

Two particular impacts of the emergence of this new Arab public sphere were crucial to the dynamics unleashed by the Arab Spring protests: 1) the use of a common set of discourses and repertoires, and 2) the emergence of a cascading dynamic across much of the Arab world. Lynch, for example, argues that the Arab Spring uprisings “unfolded as a single, unified narrative of protest,” featuring common slogans such as “the people want the end of the regime,” the call for dignity (*karama*), bread (*aish*), and nonviolence (*silmiiyya*), and the declaration of Fridays as “days of rage” (2012, 8). This new, more open, critical, and bold Arab public sphere also contributed to the cascading effects of the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings across the Arab world. “The televised Tunisian miracle,” wrote Lynch, “is what galvanized the Egyptians and convinced them that they too could hope for real change” (2012, 88). This success, in turn, had a similar effect in more distant countries, such as Bahrain and Yemen, despite the latter’s very limited Internet penetration rates. As one protester in Yemen declared, “Thank you Tunisia for your inspiration” (Lynch 2012, 83). Even in Syria, a country that many felt would be immune from the

dynamics of the Arab Spring, commentators remarked on the existence of “a feverish atmosphere of anticipation . . . as people sensed that events in Tunisia and Egypt had changed political opportunity structures in their country as well” (Leenders and Heydemann 2012, 141).

The development of a more participatory regional Arab public sphere also reverberated back into the various national arenas in the decade prior to the Arab uprisings. The locus of this activism was less in the realm of the region’s formal oppositional representatives—be they political parties or civil-society representatives—which remained, to varying degrees, contained and controlled by existing authoritarian systems of “liberalized authoritarianism.” Rather, this participatory dynamic emerged, by and large, from within the ranks of extra-institutional oppositional movements. Although political analysts may have missed the political significance of these developments, they were not unknown, and did not come about completely unexpectedly. As Abdelrahman argued when writing of Egypt’s “decade of protest” prior to the outbreak of its Arab Spring, “social and political change . . . [did] not arise from a vacuum [but rather was] . . . the result of a long process of accumulation, mobilization, networking, and the evolution of a different, more inclusive political culture. Movements and groups almost always build upon experiences of previous groups and can, in the process, be absorbed into larger and newer projects” (2011, 423).

Throughout the region, these mobilizational experiences were numerous and took several forms. These ranged from huge foreign-policy-oriented demonstrations in a variety of Arab countries in the early to mid-2000s (in support of Palestine in 2000; Iraq in 2003; the rival mass mobilizations that surrounded the Lebanese Independence Intifada in 2005), to percolating activism by professional syndicates in many Arab countries. They also included dramatic increases in the protest activities of labor, especially in Egypt after 2004, where there emerged what was described as “the longest and strongest wave of worker protests since the end of World War Two” (Bishara 2012, 85). The rising extra-institutional activism of increasingly politicized youth networks throughout the region also contributed to the experience. This steady, if scattered, flow of protest activity in many Arab countries helped to explain the surprising scope of Arab Spring protests in at least three significant ways. The first revolves around

the cumulative, horizontal expansion of extra-institutionalized protest networks, a process that Abdelrahman (2011) argued facilitated diffusion and brokerage across a variety of protest constituencies—helping to spread new ideas, new strategic calculations, and new repertoires and modes of political activism, not only within particular national arenas but also between global and local ones.

The second important impact was the nascent development of cross-cutting ties within previously highly fragmented and localized political opposition movements. Youth activists across the region were particularly deliberate in trying to foster the development of cross-ideological and cross-class linkages—symbolized by the efforts of the April 6 Movement in Egypt to support that country’s budding grassroots labor movement in 2008. These networking processes helped to foster the development of “a new dynamic and inclusive political culture” among oppositional activists (Abdelrahman 2011, 408) that, during the heat of the Arab Spring protests, would complicate the efforts of incumbent regimes to employ successfully their long-standing practice of divide and rule (Goldstone 2011).

The third cumulative effect of this array of protest activity and networking was the nibbling away at the wall of fear that all regimes carefully cultivated. The propensity of pre-Arab Spring protest activity to target increasingly political issues of national (not local) importance is illustrative of this process. This included the signing of the Damascus Declaration by Syrian opposition activists in 2005 despite the post-Damascus Spring repression of oppositional activity, as well as the campaign against dynastic succession by the *Kefaya* movement in Egypt, whose activities were described as having “breathed new life into Egyptian politics” (Lesch 2012, 33). It also includes the rising militancy of labor in the region, particularly in Egypt and Tunisia, the scope of whose protests expanded to target national, rather than localized, leaders and institutions (corporatist trade union federations, parliaments, councils of ministers, etc.) (see Shehata 2012). Abdelrahman argues forcefully, for example, that all of these mobilizational developments were cumulative, with the success of each initiative contributing “to the creation of something bigger” (2011, 423).⁶

The final facilitating condition that emerged in the immediate pre-Arab Spring era was the learning processes that surrounded the skillful instrumentalization of new social media by youth activists. By the time of

its uprising, for example, Tunisia was reputed to have one of the highest rates of connectivity in the Arab world (Murphy 2011, 300). This is evidenced by the fact that over 2 million Tunisians changed their Facebook profiles to a revolutionary icon in one day (Lynch 2012, 77). A similar expansion of online access emerged in pre-Arab Spring Egypt, with over 160,000 blog sites being recorded by 2008—many of which were openly critical of Egypt’s political conditions (Filiu 2011, 46; Shehata 2012, 117). This increasing public access to cyberspace was further exemplified by the burgeoning number of Internet cafes throughout the region—even in tightly controlled Syria. Paralleling this expansion of the online world in many parts of the region was the dramatic increase in the use of mobile phones, with Lynch (2012) arguing that in some locales, rates of use were on par with those in Europe. This expanding world of online access offered several advantages to would-be revolutionary activists—facilitating new forms of oppositional organization that ultimately forged shifts, if not openings, in political opportunity structures, mainly because it was difficult for state security forces to completely shut down their more hidden networking and mobilizational activities. Online opposition activists, for example, developed networks that tended to be loose, lacking in centralized and hierarchical leadership, and characterized by political orientations described as ideologically flexible, hybrid, and cosmopolitan—features that came to define the Arab Spring protests themselves. This is aptly described by Abdelrahman as “orderly without an organization, inspired without a leader, and single-minded without a genuine political ideology” (2011, 423). In turn, these new styles of networking and mobilization fostered significantly reconfigured structures of political opportunities in the region. They reduced the “transaction costs” of promoting oppositional information flows across a wider audience and increased the costs of regime repression as a result of their ability to transmit information about regime abuse to external actors—all of which weakened the ability of regimes to maintain their hegemonic “walls of fear” (Lynch 2011, 304).

Yet, all of these potentially significant developments in resource mobilization on the part of a nascent opposition within many Arab countries prior to the outbreak of the Arab Spring(s) did not necessarily translate into a revolutionary situation. They cannot be used as an analytical tool through which history can be read backwards as there was no inevitability

as to their impact or result—especially given the reality of authoritarian resilience in the region. As scholars have well documented, civil society in all Arab countries remained weak and politically ineffectual. In the case of Syria, it was utterly crushed. Furthermore, political society remained tightly controlled. Despite the efforts of a new generation of extra-institutional activists to forge inclusive, crosscutting oppositional networks, most analysts agree that these efforts remained a work in progress, unable to overcome their predominantly localized and atomized nature. Facebook, for instance, did not by itself “kill Mubarak,” in contrast to some popular claims (Barber and Youniss 2013). Indeed, as a testament to the surprising nature of the various mobilizations that transpired during the season of the Arab Spring(s), most activists did not expect their efforts to have been so richly rewarded. In order to come to a fuller understanding of the complex dynamics that led to the unfolding of the various Arab protests, we need to turn our analytical attention to the final prong in the social movement framework—political opportunity structures—and address the overarching questions posed in this chapter: Why did political opportunities suddenly open during the early phases of the Arab Spring(s)? Why were these openings seemingly so fleeting?

Forging Political Opportunities: Social Mobilization, Intra-Regime Contestation, and the Role of Contingency

According to Alimi and Meyer (2011, 477), the unity of the ruling elite coalition is “the critical variable” in determining the nature of political opportunities for those wanting to promote transformative social mobilization. In a variation on this theme in the context of the Middle East, Heydemann and Leenders (2013, 5) suggest that the key to the resilience of authoritarian systems of governance in the region has been not so much their willingness to use coercive force, but rather their ability to adapt to changing circumstances and stay connected. In short, over the longer term, authoritarian resilience is the result of a regime’s “relational qualities,” both inside the state itself as well as between the regime/state and its society. As we will see, it was the weakening nature of state-society relations in certain countries, combined with the emergence of visible cracks in intra-regime relations—sparked by the mobilizational process

itself—that opened up opportunities, not only for social mobilization, but also in some cases for political transformation.

First, there were signs that political institutions created in the early stages of many of the nationalist-populist authoritarian regimes of the region—namely ruling parties—were experiencing declines in capacity and legitimacy in the years leading up to the Arab Spring(s). Soliman (2012), for example, has written about the increasing weakness of the regime-dominated National Democratic Party in Egypt in the years before the uprising. This is symbolized by the decreasing representation of labor within the party, the increasing dominance of neoliberal elites whose social and political roots within Egypt were described as being “very shallow,” and the more general increase in the number of independent parliamentarians that, Soliman has argued, pointed to a more general fragmentation of Mubarak’s political apparatus. These dynamics were paralleled in Syria by the declining representativeness and influence of the Ba’ath Party, a principle pillar of Ba’athist legitimacy in the regime’s early years. Initially a channel for the transfer of power to Syria’s marginalized classes in both rural and peripheral urban areas—giving them both a greater voice and a share of the regime’s resources—the Ba’ath Party gradually abandoned its social roots in favor of the interests of Syria’s urban elites. This increasingly left Syria’s more marginalized constituencies “to their own devices” (International Crisis Group 2011, 16). Indeed, the role of the Ba’ath Party itself in managing state-society relations in Syria gradually gave way to the more dominant influence of Syria’s security apparatus, transforming the initial redistributive logic of Ba’ath Party governance into one characterized by its more extractive and predatory qualities. The result, as Caroline Donati has so poignantly argued, was “the diminishing relevance of the Ba’ath Party as a mechanism for the neo-patrimonial mediation between state and society” (2009, 347). Not only did this weaken regimes’ ability to manage state-society relations, it also pointed to the more general weakening of the political apparatus vis-à-vis the parallel centers of power within these regimes revolving around the military and/or security apparatuses. This was made visible in both Egypt and Syria by the targeting of ruling-party buildings during the initial stages of their respective uprisings. In the post-uprising period in Egypt, the narrowly based neoliberal

political class seemed to utterly collapse in the face of challenges weighed against them.⁷

The changing dynamics of relations between the various power centers of the regimes affected by the Arab spring(s) proved decisive in determining the extent of political opportunities for politically transformative social mobilization. These dynamics were symbolized by the unwillingness of the military in several countries (as in Tunisia and Egypt)—or at least sections of the military (as in Libya, Yemen, and to a much lesser extent in Syria)—to fire on protesters and/or support the existing regime. To some, this was a surprising development. Regimes had spent significant resources trying to “coup-proof” their regimes. They had either channeled significant resources in support of their corporate interests (large budgets, significant modernization programs, access to opportunities in the private and/or black market sectors, etc.). Or, they had guaranteed the compliance of the military through extensive mechanisms of political control (intensive oversight of security services, creation of privileged and loyal military units, use of foreign mercenaries, etc.) (see Bellin 2004). The result was a seemingly cooperative and, in some cases, co-opted relationship between political and military elites, allowing the former to call upon the latter for support in particularly dire circumstances—such as the repression of the Islamist insurgency in Egypt in the 1980s and early 1990s (Droz-Vincent 2011b).

Yet, behind the surface of this seeming regime unity were seeds of dissent. In short, certain regimes were more “coup-proofed” than others. In some, latent fault lines formed around the insufficient satisfaction of the military’s corporate interests (such as in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya); in others, these grievances aligned with primordial fault lines inside the military itself (as was the case in Yemen and to a much lesser extent Syria). Kandil (2012) has extensively documented the growing sense of grievance within the Egyptian military. Challenging the perceived wisdom that it had enjoyed extensive privileges within the Egyptian ruling coalition, he described the military’s socioeconomic privileges as being “humble” in relation to the luxurious living standards enjoyed by the country’s upper-middle and elite classes. He also described its “reputed economic empire” as being “considerably more modest” than what was commonly believed. The military’s financial power within the regime itself had also

suffered a consistent, if not precipitous, decline, symbolized by the fall of military expenditure as a percentage of GNP, from its peak of 33 percent in the 1970s to its nadir of 2.2 percent in 2010 (Kandil 2012, 182–3). On the strategic side, Kandil (2012, 187–90) has argued that latent corporate resentment within Egyptian military circles cut even deeper—fueled by the constraining and depoliticizing influence of Egypt’s geostrategic alliance with the United States, which ensured that its military capacity would remain subordinate to that of Israel. All of this contributed to a significant decline in the military’s relative influence within the Egyptian ruling coalition. It was left trailing behind the rising influence of Gamal Mubarak and his coterie of neoliberal elites, as well as that of Egypt’s police and security forces, which benefited greatly from the decisive evolution of the Egyptian regime “from a military to a police state” during the Mubarak era (Kandil 2012, 199).⁸ In short, on the eve of its uprising in 2011, the cohesion and unity of Egypt’s ruling coalition was by no means secured, brought into question by the various grievances flowing beneath the surface within the Egyptian military sector.

Latent grievances of an entirely different nature permeated the military sectors in the Arab Spring countries of Yemen and Syria. These were caused by ethnic, religious, and/or tribal factionalism within these regimes as a whole, which cut across the various weakly institutionalized power centers. In Syria, divisions of a sectarian nature have been kept in check by the coercive hegemony of, for the most part, Alawite-dominated security networks that have managed to sustain the compliance and subordination of the predominantly Sunni military rank and file. In Yemen, whose modern state is the result of an informal power-sharing agreement among the country’s dominant tribal elements, the coherence and unity of the state—and of the military institutions inside that state—depended upon vigilant attention to a balanced distribution of resources and power across the various dominant tribal groupings (Knights 2013). In the years leading up to Yemen’s uprising, that balancing act was replaced by President Saleh’s attempt to increase the power of his own family networks within the state, including its military apparatus. This upset the balance of power within Yemen’s “complex, overlapping and competitive network of families, clans, and tribes” (Fattah 2011, 82). According to Michael Knights, this represented “a breach of the contract” upon which the Yemeni state—and

Saleh's leadership of that state—was based (2013, 276). Given the degree to which this Yemeni power-sharing tribal contract permeated all formal institutions of the state, including the military, the preconditions existed for its partial defection.

The question remains, however, as to what transforms grievances—be they percolating throughout society or within the state apparatus itself—into the type of collective action that can challenge existing political equations. Moreover, what is the relationship between these two processes? What happens when the two sets of grievances—societal and intra-regime—interactively collide? It is within this recursive and iterative analytical space that a more complex understanding of the political opportunities—and political limitations—of the Arab Spring uprisings can be found. The most important point to be made here is that there is really no way of predicting in advance how these iterative processes will unfold and what factors will prove decisive, despite the existence of numerous facilitating preconditions that have been documented above. Goodwin (2011) rightly stresses the importance of contingency and unpredictability in transforming seemingly small and insignificant events into catalysts for major social and political upheavals.

Nonetheless, there were a series of crucial factors in both launching the cascading Arab Spring protests and igniting processes of contestation within several Arab regimes themselves. I will highlight three such factors that helped to translate objective conditions for effective social mobilization into significant political action on the ground: 1) inopportune episodes of arbitrary state violence; 2) the initial use of nonviolent strategies of popular mobilization; and 3) the ambivalent reactions of regional and global actors. Much intellectual effort has been expended by social movement theorists to unpack the relationship between state violence and social mobilization. Schneider has suggested that this work has produced some of social movement theory's "most robust findings" (2011, 481). It is argued, for example, that arbitrary state violence can produce moral outrage, increase the solidarity of core activists, sensitize normally passive members of a population to the need for change, and bring external actors in as allies—all the while weakening the legitimacy of the regime in question. In the various national contexts within which Arab Spring mobilizations occurred, one can point to numerous examples of arbitrary

state violence that seemed to activate these dynamics. These include the administrative abuse of Mohammad Bouazizi, which resulted in his self-immolation in Tunisia, and the murder in police custody of Khaled Said and Ahmad Shaaba in Egypt, which laid the groundwork for significant mobilizations among youth activists. Also critical were the torture of several high school students and the subsequent torture and murder of the thirteen-year-old Hamza al-Khattib in southern Syria, which sparked the ongoing uprising there, as well as the firing on crowds of peaceful protesters in Sanaa's Change Square and Manama's Pearl Roundabout, in Yemen and Bahrain respectively. All sparked feelings of moral outrage among the general public above what might be called "threshold levels," therefore facilitating the efforts of social activists to promote mass demonstrations. There is no objective understanding of what these threshold levels might in fact be, with Goodwin arguing that they "are not simply a given, but may shift radically in the space of a few days or even hours" (2011, 454). It is nonetheless clear that these particular episodes of arbitrary state violence proved crucial in sparking the mobilization processes that gave birth to the various Arab Springs.

The second crucial factor in translating mass social contestation into genuine political opportunities was their predominantly nonviolent nature. As Nepstad (2011) argues, nonviolent strategies of social mobilization under certain conditions complicate the calculations, if not immobilizing the decision-making process, of state actors when it comes to the use of repression, especially those within the military. In particular, she argues that when the military shares a common identity with the protesters (as in Tunisia and Egypt), when protests reach the kind of mass levels that make repression costly (as in many of the Arab Spring contexts), and when the military itself can perceive benefits arising from defection (certainly the case in Tunisia and Egypt, to a partial extent in Libya and Yemen, and to a very limited extent in Syria), the possibility of a temporary but politically transformative alliance between the military (or portions of the military) and the protesters emerges. It should be stressed that this equation linking nonviolent protests to military defections is a contingent one—note the inability of three plus months of heroic nonviolent demonstrations in the early stages of the uprising in Syria to effect significant degrees of defections from the regime's armed forces. But, where regime control over the

military apparatus was not hegemonic, the possibility existed that non-violent mass demonstrations could change the incentive structure within the military's decision-making processes, activating latent but real opportunities for them to redress their own grievances by joining forces with protesters in seeking political change.

The third factor influencing the possibility, timing, and outcome of processes of social mobilization is the influence and post-mobilization reactions of external actors. Alimi and Meyer, for example, stress that political opportunities are “nested” within a larger international structure of political alliances, adding that, “dissidents routinely look beyond their governments to make judgements about the likelihood of support from outside the state” (2011, 477). In the unfolding of the various Arab Springs, these factors, in conjunction with the internal dynamics of the regimes themselves, seem to have been crucial in determining the degree to which political opportunities remained opened or suddenly closed once social-mobilization processes were unleashed. In short, they had a decisive impact on the degree to which the ensuing iterative processes between protesters and aggrieved power centers within the state were synergetic or not. Clearly, the emergence of robust international support for the uprising in Libya proved crucial in the eventual ousting of the Gaddafi regime in Libya—providing tangible and powerful incentives and resources for Libyan protesters to sustain their antiregime campaign. In Tunisia and Egypt, the nonviolent nature of oppositional mobilization handcuffed the external allies of the Ben Ali and Mubarak regimes in the West, removing the possibility that they might sanction a repressive regime response and, hence, gave crucial time and space for the iterative dynamics between protesters and the military to play out. Moreover, the tightness of regional alliances among the various monarchies of the region—backed by the strategic, if tacit, support of the United States and benefitting from a “learning process” with respect to the perceived consequences of the weakness of coercive regime responses in the Arab states of the Mashreq—ensured that oppositional social mobilization, even in Bahrain, where protests became widespread, would face resiliently limited and, ultimately closed, political opportunity structures, removing the possibility of a synergetic iterative process emerging. Finally, where external involvement has been robust but in competition—as became the case with Syria—political opportunity

structures remain in flux. Their further opening or subsequent closing has become increasingly dependent on the ways in which this external competition ultimately unfolds.

Conclusion

It is clear from the analytical narrative outlined above that the opening up of political opportunity structures in the Arab world in 2010–11 cannot be explained solely with reference to the existence of “objective conditions” in the region—be they related to the existence of widespread socioeconomic and/or political grievances among the population or latent grievances within the regimes themselves. These were certainly significant—forming the landscape without which there would have been no Arab Spring(s)—but by themselves, they were insufficient to explain the timing, let alone the amazing scope, of the various uprisings. Grievances may have been plentiful among the region’s populace and the resources and experience needed to promote widespread forms of social mobilization may have accumulated in the period before the uprisings. The political divisions within the various political structures in the region may also have been festering—creating latent political opportunity structures that social movement entrepreneurs might have been able to take advantage of given favorable circumstances. Yet, in the absence of factors that unleash new iterative and dynamic processes—ones that force changes in the calculations of actors at a variety of political levels—be it within society, the state, or the regional/global arena, it is unlikely that any of these grievances, mobilizational resources, or political opportunities will be translated into significant political transformation. In the case of the Arab Spring(s), the most important factors seem to have been the timing of particularly brutal acts of state violence, the predominantly nonviolent and mass nature of the protests, and the ways in which the various national political arenas were integrated into regional and global alliance networks. Such factors provided greater or lesser space for iterative processes to build up.

What do these analytical narratives of the various Arab Springs contribute to the debates surrounding the concept of political opportunity structures? It certainly suggests, first and foremost, that political opportunity structures cannot be analyzed in a static manner. Rather, they ebb

and flow as a result of a dynamic process of interaction with processes of social mobilization themselves; in short, the existence and salience of political opportunity structures are highly contingent. Second, it is also clear that political opportunity structures can emerge due to threats emanating from the political system—threats that can transform a fatalist reluctance to resist into an activist moral outrage—as much as from the apparent weaknesses within regime structures themselves, weaknesses which in authoritarian political systems can be extremely difficult to detect. In turn, this suggests that attempts to define the concept of political opportunity structures in a narrow manner ignore the inherently important element of uncertainty and unpredictability in determining what kinds of political opportunity structures are relevant to any historical situation of social contestation and in what manner they unfold. In sum, it appears that the “sponge-like” nature of the concept of political opportunity structures may retain analytical, though perhaps not “scientific,” utility.

The highly contingent nature of political opportunity structures is plain to see in the post-Arab Spring(s) Middle East. As processes of social contestation and mobilization have diminished and fragmented (though certainly not disappeared) in the region, political opportunity structures have also diminished. In some countries—such as Tunisia, where democratic regime change has been achieved—there remains the challenging task of cleansing pre-uprising political structures of the resilient presence of political elements from the past regime. In other countries, however, regime change has been extremely limited—characterized at best by a change in the personnel at the top (Yemen), by the coexistence of a widespread revolt with a powerfully resilient regime structure (Syria), by the complete reversal of initially promising democratic change and the re-trenchment of military power (Egypt), or in the case of all the monarchies, by no political change at all (Bahrain et al.). In short, as the dynamics of social mobilization diminished (or have been repressed), the iterative processes and pressures that were able to forge political opportunities within many (but not all) regimes in the region have also diminished, giving back space to actors within the political realm to reconstruct or reassert their political hegemony. Yet, given the continued existence of objectively unfavorable socioeconomic conditions in the region and the now empowered nature of popular forces, it will be much more difficult for networks of

power to protect this re-found space. Hence, rather than returning to the previous status quo of resilient authoritarian systems of governance, it is more likely that the Arab world is about to enter into a period of increased and overt political contestation. This new era will be characterized by continued, if fluctuating and cyclical, efforts on the part of political activists in the region to reignite the kind of iterative processes that temporarily pried open political opportunity structures during the Arab Spring(s).

NOTES

- 1 Indeed, one of the overarching purposes of that volume is to focus, both empirically and theoretically, on issues of social movement demobilization and fatigue.
- 2 According to Kandil, the effects were plain to see in the suburbs of Cairo, where 10 million rural migrants “lived in slums with no schools, hospitals, clubs, sewage systems, public transportation, or even police stations [and] which had become a Hobbesian world of violence and vice” (2012, 208).
- 3 In describing the sum total of these popular frustrations, Holger argued that “people were antagonized by the degree of patronizing arrogance and pretension with which the ruling class, which made politics itself a ‘gated community,’ communicated to them that they were tedious subjects of the state rather than its citizens” (2012).
- 4 Lesch (2012) notes the increasing control of elections in the late 2000s by the Egyptian Ministry of the Interior. This started with the municipal council elections of 2008, in which Egypt’s ruling party, the National Democratic Party (NDP), won 99 percent of all municipal seats. It is also evident in the blatantly rigged 2010 National Assembly elections, in which the NDP won 94.7 percent of the seats. Holger (2012, 259) has described this as a “tipping point” in terms of social frustration with the ruling elite, especially given the fact that it was popularly believed that the result was engineered by the Ministry of the Interior in order to ensure a smooth process of succession from Hosni Mubarak to his son Gamal. In other republics, national assembly elections were cancelled (Yemen in 2008, Tunisia in 2009) in order to prevent voices of political discontent with the ruling status quo from being electorally expressed.
- 5 According to Gelvin, “the Tunisian government expanded and intensified repression to such an extent that Human Rights Watch declared Tunisia to be one of the most repressive states in the world” (2012, 58).
- 6 This increasingly bold dynamic also emerged within Arab cultural circles. Lynch uses the example of Tunisia rapper El General, whose songs became directly critical of the corruption and paternalism of Ben Ali, remarking that “previously, most songs had been indirect, avoiding a frontal denunciation of the political situation. By breaking the taboo, El General became a symbol of the Tunisian Revolution, and his songs became known across almost the entire Arab world” (2012, 239).

- 7 In Syria, by contrast, although the Ba'athist regime clearly lost control of the countryside and the peripheral urban areas of the country, it has still managed to maintain its elite-oriented core political networks, both within its own Alawite community, as well as between these and Syria's other urban-based communal business and religious elites.
- 8 Indicative of the rising influence of the security forces is the dramatic increase in expenditures on security matters—higher than the military by 2002 at 6 percent of GDP—and the equally significant increase in the number of people employed in the sector, surpassing 2 million by 2002.

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