Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring
The Myth of Authoritarian Stability

(By F. Gregory Gause III, Foreign Affairs, Jul/Aug 2011, Vol. 90 Issue 4, pp. 81-90)

The Myth of Authoritarian Stability

THE VAST majority of academic specialists on the Arab world were as surprised as everyone else by the upheavals that toppled two Arab leaders last winter and that now threaten several others. It was clear that Arab regimes were deeply unpopular and faced serious demographic, economic, and political problems. Yet many academics focused on explaining what they saw as the most interesting and anomalous aspect of Arab politics: the persistence of undemocratic rulers.

Until this year, the Arab world boasted a long list of such leaders. Muammar al-Qaddafi took charge of Libya in 1969; the Assad family has ruled Syria since 1970; Ali Abdullah Saleh became president of North Yemen (later united with South Yemen) in 1978; Hosni Mubarak took charge of Egypt in 1981; and Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali ascended to Tunisia's presidency in 1987. The monarchies enjoyed even longer pedigrees, with the Hashemites running Jordan since its creation in 1920, the al-Saud family ruling a unified Saudi Arabia since 1932, and the Alaouite dynasty in Morocco first coming to power in the seventeenth century.

These regimes survived over a period of decades in which democratic waves rolled through East Asia, eastern Europe, Latin America, and sub-Saharan Africa. Even the Arab countries' neighbors in the Muslim Middle East (Iran and Turkey) experienced enormous political change in that period, with a revolution and three subsequent decades of political struggle in Iran and a quasi-Islamist party building a more open and democratic system in secular Turkey.

For many Middle East specialists, this remarkable record of regime stability in the face of numerous challenges demanded their attention and an explanation. I am one of those specialists. In the pages of this magazine in 2005 ("Can Democracy Stop Terrorism?" September/October 2005), I argued that the United States should not encourage democracy in the Arab world because Washington's authoritarian Arab allies represented stable bets for the...
future. On that count, I was spectacularly wrong. I also predicted that democratic Arab governments would prove much less likely to cooperate with U.S. foreign policy goals in the region. This remains an open question. Although most of my colleagues expressed more support for U.S. efforts to encourage Arab political reform, I was hardly alone in my skepticism about the prospect of full-fledged democratic change in the face of these seemingly unshakable authoritarian regimes.

Understanding what we missed and what we overestimated in our explanations of the stability of Arab authoritarianism—and understanding why we did so—is of more than just academic significance. Regional analysts must determine what changed in the forces that underpinned four decades of Arab regime stability and what new elements emerged to spark the current revolts. Doing so will allow U.S. policymakers to approach the Arab revolts more effectively by providing them insight into the factors that will drive postrevolutionary politics in the Arab world.

**ARAB STATES AND THEIR MILITARIES**

THE FIRST task is to establish what academia knew and did not know. To begin with, it is important to recognize that few, if any, political scientists working on the Middle East explained the peculiar stability of Arab regimes in cultural terms—a sign of progress over the scholarship of earlier eras. The literature on how Arab dictators endured did not include old saws about how Islam is inimical to democracy or how Arab culture remains too patriarchal and traditional to support democratic change. We recognized how popular the concept of democracy was in the Arab world and that when given real electoral choices, Arabs turned out to vote in large numbers. We also understood that Arabs did not passively accept authoritarian rule. From Algeria to Saudi Arabia, Arab autocrats were able to stay in power over the past 40 years only by brutally suppressing popular attempts to unseat them, whether motivated by political repression or food prices. Arab citizens certainly demonstrated the desire and ability to mobilize against their governments. But those governments, before 2011, were extremely successful in co-opting and containing them.

As a result, academics directed their attention toward explaining the mechanisms that Arab states had developed to weather popular dissent. Although different scholars focused on different aspects of this question, from domestic institutions to government strategies, most attributed the stability of Arab dictatorships to two common factors: the military-security complex and state control over the economy. In each of these areas, we in the academic
community made assumptions that, as valid as they might have been in the past, turned out to be wrong in 2011.

Most scholars assumed that no daylight existed between the ruling regimes and their military and security services. That assumption was not unreasonable. Many Arab presidents served in uniform before they took office, including Ben Ali and Mubarak. In the wake of the Arab military coups of the 1950s and 1960s, Arab leaders created institutions to exercise political control over their armies and, in some cases, established rival military forces to balance the army’s weight. Arab armies helped ruling regimes win their civil wars and put down uprisings. As a result, most Middle East experts came to assume that Arab armies and security services would never break with their rulers.

This assumption obviously proved incorrect. Scholars did not predict or appreciate the variable ways in which Arab armies would react to the massive, peaceful protests this year. This oversight occurred because, as a group, Middle East experts had largely lost interest in studying the role of the military in Arab politics. Although this topic once represented a central feature of U.S. scholarship on the Middle East—when the Arab military coups of the 1950s and 1960s occupied the academics of that era—the remarkable stability of the Arab regimes since then led us to assume that the issue was no longer important. Yet a preliminary review of the unfolding revolts suggests that two factors drive how Arab militaries react to public unrest: the social composition of both the regime and its military and the level of institutionalization and professionalism in the army itself.

The countries in which the military, as an institution, sided with the protesters, Egypt and Tunisia, are two of the most homogeneous societies in the Arab world. Both are overwhelmingly Sunni. (The Coptic Christian minority in Egypt plays an important social role there but has little political clout.) Both the Egyptian and the Tunisian armies are relatively professional, with neither serving as the personal instrument of the ruler. Army leaders in both nations realized that their institutions could play an important role under new regimes and thus were willing to risk ushering out the old guard.

In Arab countries featuring less institutionalized forces, where the security services are led by and serve as the personal instruments of the ruler and his family, those forces have split or dissolved in the face of popular protests. In both Libya and Yemen, units led by the rulers' families have supported the regimes, while other units have defected to the opposition, stayed on the sidelines, or just gone home.
In divided societies, where the regime represents an ethnic, sectarian, or regional minority and has built an officer corps dominated by that overrepresented minority, the armies have thus far backed their regimes. The Sunni-led security forces in Bahrain, a Shiite-majority country, stood their ground against demonstrators to preserve the Sunni monarchy. The Jordanian army remains loyal to the monarchy despite unrest among the country's Palestinian majority. Saudi Arabia's National Guard, heavily recruited from central and western Arabian tribes, is standing by the central Arabian al-Saud dynasty. In each country, the logic is simple: if the regime falls and the majority takes over, the army leadership will likely be replaced as well.

The Syrian army's reaction to the crisis facing the Assad regime will offer an important test of this hypothesis. Members of the Assad family command important army units, and Alawites and members of other minority groups staff a good portion of the officer corps in the Sunni-majority country. If minority solidarity with the regime endures, Assad is likely to retain power. Yet if disaffected officers begin to see the army as an instrument of the Assad family itself, they could bring down the regime. Either way, once the dust settles, Middle East scholars will need to reexamine their assumptions about the relationship between Arab states and their militaries—perhaps the key element in determining regime survival in a crisis.

THE REFORM FACTOR

STATE CONTROL over the economy in the Middle East was another pillar of regime stability identified by academics. Scholars posited that Arab states with oil reserves and revenues deployed this wealth to control the economy, building patronage networks, providing social services, and directing the development of dependent private sectors. Through these funds, Arab rulers connected the interests of important constituencies to their survival and placated the rest of their citizens with handouts in times of crisis. Indeed, since the current uprisings began, only Libya among the major oil exporters (Algeria, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) has faced a serious challenge. Buoyed by high oil prices, the other oil exporters have been able to head off potential opposition by distributing resources through increased state salaries, higher subsidies for consumer goods, new state jobs, and direct handouts to citizens. Qaddafi's example establishes that oil money must be allocated properly, rather than wasted on pet projects and harebrained schemes, for it to protect a regime. The recent Arab revolts, then, would seem to validate this part of the academic paradigm on regime stability.
Yet this year’s revolts have called the economic foundations of the regime stability argument into question when it comes to non-oil-producing states. Although Arab petrostates have relied on their oil revenues to avoid economic reform, changes in the world economy and the liberalizing requirements of foreign aid donors have over the past two decades forced non-oil-producing states to modernize their economies. A number of Arab regimes, including in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia, have privatized state enterprises, encouraged foreign investment, created incentives to kick-start the private sector, and cut subsidies and state expenditures that previously consumed government budgets. Such Washington consensus-style economic reforms exacerbated inequalities and made life more difficult for the poor, but they also opened up new opportunities for local entrepreneurs and allowed the upper classes to enjoy greater consumer choice through liberalized trade regimes. Some Middle East specialists thought that economic liberalization could establish new bases of support for Arab authoritarians and encourage the economic growth necessary to grapple with the challenges of growing populations (as economic reforms in Turkey have led to greater support for the ruling Justice and Development Party there). Meanwhile, Western governments pushed the idea that economic reform represented a step toward political reform.

But these economic reforms backfired on those governments that embraced them most fully: Cairo and Tunis. Although both Egypt and Tunisia had achieved decent economic growth rates and received praise from the International Monetary Fund as recently as 2010, politically driven privatizations did not enhance the stability of their regimes. Instead, they created a new class of superwealthy entrepreneurs, including members of the presidents' families in both countries, which became the targets of popular ire. And the academics' assumption that these beneficiaries of economic reform would support the authoritarian regimes proved chimerical. The state-bred tycoons either fled or were unable to stop events and landed in postrevolutionary prison. The upper-middle class did not demonstrate in favor of Ben Ali or Mubarak. In fact, some members became revolutionary leaders themselves.

It is supremely ironic that the face of the Egyptian revolt was Wael Ghonim, the Egyptian Google executive. He is exactly the kind of person who was poised to succeed in the Egypt of Mubarak--bilingual, educated at the American University of Cairo, and at home in the global business world. Yet he risked his future and life to organize the "We are all Khaled Said" Facebook page, in memory of a man beaten to death by Egyptian police, which helped mobilize Egyptians against the regime. For him and many others in similar economic circumstances, political freedom outweighed monetary opportunity.
Seeing what happened in Cairo and Tunis, other Arab leaders rushed to placate their citizens by raising state salaries, canceling planned subsidy cuts, and increasing the number of state jobs. In Saudi Arabia, for example, in February and March, King Abdullah announced new spending plans of more than $100 billion. The Saudis have the oil money to fulfill such pledges. In non-oil-producing states, such as Jordan, which halted its march down the road of economic reform once the trouble began, governments may not have the money to maintain the old social contract, whereby the state provided basic economic security in exchange for loyalty. Newly liberated Egypt and Tunisia are also confronting their inherited economic woes. Empowered electorates will demand a redistribution of wealth that the governments do not have and a renegotiation of the old social contract that the governments cannot fund.

Many Middle East scholars recognized that the neoliberal economic programs were causing political problems for Arab governments, but few foresaw their regime-shaking consequences. Academics overestimated both the ameliorating effect of the economic growth introduced by the reforms and the political clout of those who were benefiting from such policies. As a result, they underestimated the popular revulsion to the corruption and crony privatization that accompanied the reforms.

Oil wealth remains a fairly reliable tool for ensuring regime stability, at least when oil prices are high. Yet focused on how Arab regimes achieved stability through oil riches, Middle East scholars missed the destabilizing effects of poorly implemented liberal economic policies in the Arab world.

A NEW KIND OF PAN-ARABISM

ANOTHER FACTOR missed by Middle East specialists had less to do with state policies and institutions than with cross-border Arab identity. It is not a coincidence that major political upheavals arose across the Arab world simultaneously. Arab activists and intellectuals carefully followed the protests of Iran's 2009 Green Movement, but no Arabs took to the streets in emulation of their Iranian neighbors. Yet in 2011, a month after a fruit vendor in Tunisia set himself on fire, the Arab world was engulfed in revolts. If any doubts remain that Arabs retain a sense of common political identity despite living in 20 different states, the events of this year should put them to rest.

Such strong pan-Arab sentiments should not have surprised the academic community. Much of the work on Arab politics in previous generations had focused on Arab nationalism and pan-Arabism, the ability of Arab leaders to mobilize political support across state borders based on
the idea that all Arabs share a common political identity and fate. Yet many of us assumed that the cross-border appeal of Arab identity had waned in recent years, especially following the Arab defeat in the 1967 war with Israel. Egypt and Jordan had signed treaties with Israel, and the Palestinians and Syria had engaged in direct negotiations with Israel, breaking a cardinal taboo of pan-Arabism. U.S.-led wars against Iraq in 1990-91 and beginning in 2003 excited opposition in the Arab world but did not destabilize the governments that cooperated with the U.S. military plans—a sign of waning pan-Arabism as much as government immunity to popular sentiment. It seemed that Arab states had become strong enough (with some exceptions, such as Lebanon and post-Saddam Hussein Iraq) to fend off ideological pressures from across their borders. Most Middle East scholars believed that pan-Arabism had gone dormant.

They thus missed the communal wave of 2011. Although the events of this year demonstrate the continued importance of Arab identity, pan-Arabism has taken a very different form than it did a half century ago under the leadership of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. Then, Nasser, a charismatic leader with a powerful government, promoted popular ideas and drove events in other countries, using the new technology of his day, the transistor radio, to call on Arabs to oppose their own governments and follow him. Now, the very leaderless quality of the popular mobilizations in Egypt and Tunisia seems to have made them sources of inspiration across the Arab world.

In recent decades, Arab leaders, most notably Saddam during the Gulf War, have attempted to embrace Nasser's mantle and spark popular Arab movements. Even the Iranian leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini—a Persian, not an Arab—appealed to Islam to mobilize Arabs behind his banner. All these attempts failed. When the people of Tunisia and then Egypt overthrew their corrupt dictators, however, other Arabs found they could identify with them. The fact that these revolts succeeded gave hope (in some cases, such as in Bahrain, false hope) to other Arabs that they could do the same. The common enemy of the 2011 Arab revolts is not colonialism, U.S. power, or Israel, but Arabs' own rulers.

Academics will need to assess the restored importance of Arab identity to understand the future of Middle East politics. Unlike its predecessor, the new pan-Arabism does not appear to challenge the regional map. Arabs are not demonstrating to dissolve their states into one Arab entity; their agendas are almost exclusively domestic. But the Arab revolts have shown that what happens in one Arab state can affect others in unanticipated and powerful ways. As a result, scholars and policymakers can no longer approach countries on a case-by-case basis.
The United States will have a hard time supporting democracy in one Arab country, such as Egypt, while standing by as other allies, such as Bahrain, crush peaceful democratic protests.

In addition, the new pan-Arabism will eventually bring the issue of Arab-Israeli peace back to the fore. Although none of the 2011 Arab revolts occurred in the name of the Palestinians, democratic Arab regimes will have to reflect popular opinion on Israel, which remains extremely low. Arab public opinion on the United States is influenced by Arabs' views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as much as by U.S. actions in other Arab countries. As a result, the United States will need to reactivate Israeli-Palestinian peace talks to anticipate the demands of Arab publics across the Middle East.

BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD

ACADEMIC SPECIALISTS on Arab politics, such as myself, have quite a bit of rethinking to do. That is both intellectually exciting and frightening. Explaining the stability of Arab authoritarians was an important analytic task, but it led some of us to underestimate the forces for change that were bubbling below, and at times above, the surface of Arab politics. It is impossible for social scientists to make precise predictions about the Arab world, and this should not be a goal. But academics must reexamine their assumptions on a number of issues, including the military’s role in Arab politics, the effects of economic change on political stability, and the salience of a cross-border Arab identity, to get a sense of how Arab politics will now unfold.

As paradigms fall and theories are shredded by events on the ground, it is useful to recall that the Arab revolts resulted not from policy decisions taken in Washington or any other foreign capital but from indigenous economic, political, and social factors whose dynamics were extremely hard to forecast. In the wake of such unexpected upheavals, both academics and policymakers should approach the Arab world with humility about their ability to shape its future. That is best left to Arabs themselves.

~~~~~~~~

By F. Gregory Gause III

F. GREGORY GAUSE III is Professor of Political Science at the University of Vermont.