



The Transformation of Arab Activism

New Contexts, Domestic Institutions, and Regional Rivalries

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SUMMARY

- There have been enormous changes in activism across the Arab world in the three years since 2011, even as protests and demonstrations have given way to frustration.
- The political and historical contexts shaping institutional arrangements and state-society relations cause activists to engage in varied, sometimes unexpected, modes of activism.
- As strategies change and new forms of activism develop, regional rivalries have been equally important in creating new constraints and opportunities for activists.
- Activism will be a key component of Arab politics in the near future, and the U.S. can best prepare by supporting activists in urgent need, engaging activists involved in advocacy, and preserving space for activists wherever they exist.

The three years since 2011 have witnessed enormous changes in activism across the Arab world. Heady days of demonstrations have given way to frustration, as activists from Morocco to Yemen struggle to define a way forward in complex, difficult, and often violent contexts. Our new book, *Taking to the Streets: The Transformation of Arab Activism*, explores many of the challenges that activists face today. Our analysis aims not only to provide a better understanding of past events, but also to help establish expectations that better prepare activists, policymakers, and observers to anticipate and engage in the future.

The Arab world continues to reflect the varied, constantly changing nature of activism we explore in *Taking to the Streets*. Consider countries that saw the fall of long-standing regimes. In Tunisia, emerging political parties and civil society groups are shaping the

country's political future. In Egypt, political parties have multiplied as well, but political contestation remains more firmly situated in movements—Tamarrod and its allies on the one hand, and the Muslim Brotherhood's supporters on the other. Finally, in Libya, nascent civil society organizations and political parties are emerging, but they are dwarfed by militias and locally oriented political contenders.

The trajectories of regimes where elites have thus far survived the uprisings are equally diverse. For instance, in Morocco and Jordan, opposition activists have been largely quieted, moving away from street demonstrations and a focus on broad socio-political demands. In Lebanon, interlinked domestic and regional issues confront activists on all sides, as they respond to domestic tensions and the conflict in neighboring Syria. In Syria, activists are divided over militarization of the Syrian

conflict, as well as appropriate responses to overtures by the international community and the regime. As the international community seeks to support emerging political voices in the Arab world, it is clear that there is no “one-size-fits-all” model for this support.

From a series of country-specific cases, this policy brief analyzes three trends: the role of institutional structures and regime type in shaping activist behavior, changing contexts and new modes of activism, and the heightened influence of regional actors.

NARROW WINDOWS FOR ACTIVISM: PRE-REVOLUTIONARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

When the Arab uprisings erupted, they did so through small avenues for activism that existed in tightly controlled authoritarian regimes. Pre-revolutionary institutions and historical contexts therefore have had considerable effects on opportunities for activism. Different structures offered different opportunities—we see this from a macro level while looking at the experiences of different regime types during the revolts of the Arab Spring. Monarchies have shown themselves to be particularly resilient, at least to date. There is no consensus on why this is, whether it is because the public is less likely to rally around removing a monarch, that monarchs enjoy greater cohesion in their ruling coalitions, or that the oil and strategic rents that most monarchies happen to enjoy allow them to persist. This reality—and the fact that the institutional arrangement and state-society relations underpinning monarchies may be different from those in republics, and thus affect both the context and prospects of activism—should not be overlooked.

So, too, can the historical development of institutions affect the possibilities for activists to use different venues and incentive structures, in sometimes surprising ways. Egypt and Tunisia show how the development of a number

of institutions can influence the context for activism and political engagement.

The first of these institutions is the military, which was given a more privileged and stronger position in Egypt than in Tunisia. The result has been that, while some Egyptian activists saw the military takeover as a real political alternative, Tunisian activists are dismissive of such intervention. Thus, when Tunisians took to the streets in summer 2013, after the Egyptian military had ousted President Mohamed Morsi following demonstrations, they often explained that they did not fear the same outcome. “Tunisia is not Egypt.”

Tunisia and Egypt also have very different historical experiences with the strength of political parties and civil society. Both were highly repressed in Ben Ali’s Tunisia, and less so in Mubarak’s Egypt, where loyalist political parties were initially fostered to balance each other and the Muslim Brotherhood was encouraged to operate as a charitable association in order to provide social services, which indirectly alleviated pressure on the state. As a result, the playing field in Tunisia has been relatively level, with neither Ennahda nor any of the political parties able to dominate as the Muslim Brotherhood did in Egypt. This has fundamentally shaped Tunisian and Egyptian activists’ willingness to engage in political parties, as well as non-Islamists’ fear of the Islamist parties’ ability to change state and society. A clear understanding of the historical experience that shapes the institutional arrangements and strength of different actors helps explain the preferences and strategies of activists in changing contexts.

In responding to the political contexts that shaped their movement and limited their interactions with society and the state, activists engage in varied, sometimes unexpected, modes of activism. As contributors to *Taking to the Streets* point out, even in the harshest

authoritarian periods, activists carve out, sometimes unexpectedly, socio-political space to make demands. The nature of such public space is largely defined by pre-revolutionary structure. Certainly, social media was a public space that was largely left untouched by the authoritarian regimes. As a result, it emerged as a focal point for mobilization, aimed at garnering support from abroad (particularly in Egypt and Syria), communication within (Yemen), or both. Activism is also expressed less explicitly, for instance, through art in Assad's Syria, and diwaniyyas and literary societies in Kuwait and Bahrain, which provide opportunities for critical analysis. Social issues become the proxy for more damning political critique. This intersection of social and political spheres, formal and informal institutions, becomes salient—forming the “revolutionary infrastructure” that can underpin mobilization.

ADAPTING WITH THE TIMES: CHANGING CONTEXTS AND NEW MODES OF ACTIVISM

Political contexts change, and with them, activists' relations with each other and the state constantly evolve. Egypt provides a case in point: many activists found themselves flipping back and forth between calls for the military to get out of politics and pleas for them to come in, changing alliances with other activists. So, too, in Jordan, the increasing numbers of Syrian refugees raised the specter of civil war, bringing activists closer in line with the state: new movements that used social media and took to the streets in 2011 and 2012 to pressure the regime for economic and political change have now chosen to step back from confrontational mobilization. It is important to recognize that activism both informs and is informed by changing political contexts— notions like “the secular” opposition often miss the evolution of activist movements and groups. Furthermore, while many are already speaking of an “Arab winter,” we need to be careful not to assume that the lack of street demonstrations

and overt activism represents a void of activist engagement.

Far from effectively ending activist engagement, changing contexts and relationships spur activists to innovate new strategies and change their demands. What was successful at one point in time—indeed, even powerful enough to bring down long-standing leaders—is ineffective and even counterproductive in rapidly changing contexts. Given their success in 2011, it is not surprising that street protests are a “natural” impulse for Egyptian and Tunisian activists— somewhat akin to the notion that the French used barricades as a repertoire of collective action following the French Revolution. Yet, in changing contexts, these repertoires are not always effective. Despite the persistence of street protests, activists are also engaged in heated debate and experimentation, attempting to develop new strategies. To keep up with this fluid and adaptable nature of activism, the international community needs to maintain dialogue with activists so as to better understand what and how new strategies are being formulated.

In addition to changing strategies, the very nature of communities engaging in activism has been changing over time. For instance, *Taking to the Streets'* contributors point to the heightened role of the diaspora since 2011—the France-based support for the Tunisian uprising or the tireless efforts of activists in the Syrian diaspora to obtain international support and engage in political channels. The political engagement of women and youth, on the other hand, differs in scope across time and space in the region. Indeed, the Tunisian and Egyptian post-election polls show that Tunisians who report taking to the streets in 2011 were on average older than those who report demonstrating in Egypt. Finally, activists with different political tendencies enter and exit the playing field; as Tunisia shows, those who were once in power can reemerge as activists. It is important not to

assume a pre-defined field of activism, or to limit attention to activism to those whose political goals we find more appealing.

REGIONAL DYNAMICS: CONSTRAINTS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTIVISM

As Moulay Hicham Ben Abdallah argues in *Taking to the Streets*, “the geopolitical dimension is playing a far larger role in shaping the outcomes of the Arab Spring than in previous waves of regional transformation in other geographic settings.” Regional reconfigurations that resulted from the fall of various regimes continue to impact the trajectory of activism in the Arab world. Egypt’s political environment again provides a case in point: Saudi Arabia viewed the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt as a significant threat to its political influence in the region and therefore sought to curb the movement and backed the “popular coup” that toppled Morsi in the summer of 2013. While the Tamarrod movement that led the protests against Morsi was a genuine grassroots movement, Saudi Arabia played an indirect role by providing funding to its backers. Activists on the ground in Egypt, however, were often not fully aware of the role that Saudi Arabia was playing. Following Morsi’s removal, Egypt has been witnessing a sharp decline in civil liberties. Not only are Muslim Brotherhood activists being detained, leaders of the April 6 Movement and other secular activists who had backed the popular coup in 2013 are also now subject to persecution and harassment as rulers crack down on any form of political opposition.

In this sense, Saudi influence is resulting in the closing down of spaces of activism in Egypt. In Syria, the Saudi-Qatari rivalry has contributed to the fragmentation of the opposition, as each Gulf country and non-state actors within each country backed their own set of activists and opposition groups in an attempt to have a stake in the conflict and maintain interests. For example, the Islamic Front was largely supported

by Saudi non-state actors, while the Muslim Brotherhood, which constituted a significant proportion of the membership of the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), was backed by Qatar. Syrian rivalry regarding how the opposition should act resulted in a lack of cooperation between different opposition groups—and even within them—as witnessed in the run up to the Geneva II conference in February 2014, when Qatari-backed members of the SNC withdrew from the Saudi-backed Syrian Coalition. The fragmentation of the Syrian opposition played into the hands of Bashar al-Assad in his bid to quell the uprising against him.

In Yemen and Bahrain, Saudi influence has resulted in halting activism to a large degree. In the former, Saudi Arabia sought to contain political transition by engineering a negotiated handing over of power from President Ali Abdullah Saleh to his deputy, while in the latter, Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) forces put a violent stop to anti-regime protests in 2011. Saudi Arabia’s actions on both fronts were motivated by two factors: the first is Iranian influence, as Iran backed Houthi separatists against the Yemeni government, following the start of the uprising in 2011, and was perceived by Saudi Arabia as seeking to infiltrate the Bahraini opposition. The second factor is Gulf regime stability: Saudi Arabia does not tolerate popular protests taking place in its neighborhood, in fear of the domino effect that democratization can have in a geographical region.

Regional dynamics have also played an indirect negative impact on activism by affecting activist calculations as well as government responses. The transformation of the Syrian uprising into an armed conflict has been viewed as a cautionary tale not only by certain neighboring regimes, but also by activists in different Arab countries. In Jordan and Morocco, where the government has largely co-opted the opposition, the events in Syria have diminished the will of the opposition

to act for fear of dragging the countries into instability and violence. This fear is one shared by the Jordanian and Moroccan governments, who also see potential for long-term damage similar to the Syrian scenario. When uprisings are perceived as the source of instability, change becomes less desirable.

However, this is not a one-way street. While regional affairs have impacted the course of the revolutions and added new constraints and opportunities to activism, domestic changes in the Arab world have in return fostered regional changes and, in particular, have reconfigured the relationship between Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Iran. The uprisings of the past three years have contributed to an increase in political rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Qatar on one hand, and Saudi Arabia and Iran on the other hand. This contestation revolves around regional influence, as all three countries have seen in the uprisings of 2011 an opportunity to consolidate their power, but also, potential for instability closer to home. This duality of outlooks on the uprisings has largely had a negative impact on activism in countries under Saudi, Qatari, and Iranian influence.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The year 2011 remains historic for the Arab world, but the full story of the Arab Spring has yet to be written. Policymakers must not make premature judgments about whether the Arab uprisings have “succeeded” or not. Examining the transformation of activism in the region affirms the complexity and non-linearity of political change. This also requires an acknowledgement of each country’s unique domestic configuration and its interplay within the regional context. The Arab uprisings have made clear that activism in the Arab world is a key component of the political process, even in countries that appear dormant from the outside.

1. **Despite greater polarization and hostility towards reform among the region’s most influential actors, the U.S. must help preserve spaces for activism wherever they exist.** In December, Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Uzra Zeya delivered an intervention before the 10th Annual G8-BMENA Forum for the Future. In her remarks, she criticized the increase in legal restrictions and political intimidation of civil society in MENA and G8 countries. Zeya noted, “The governments represented in this room must also recognize our responsibility to uphold our end of the bargain, especially in these times of uncertainty.” Zeya’s speech was effective, but this message needs to be sustained, and delivered from more senior officials as well. The administration must press regional governments harder, both publicly and privately, to respect the basic rights of activists.
2. **The U.S. must be willing to seriously engage and meaningfully support a broad spectrum of activists interested or involved in advocacy activities.** Three years on, activists are still struggling to translate their ability to mobilize and organize into political dividends. In many Arab countries, there remains a strong demand and need for workshops focused not just on political party and elections training, but support for other advocacy skills, including monitoring government activity, enhancing transparency and anti-corruption. Even in countries with extremely restrictive environments, creative approaches should be sought to engage with activists and support their work. The U.S. should prioritize inclusivity, and make an effort to include activists from across the political spectrum.

3. **The U.S. must strengthen its capacity to support activists in need of immediate, urgent assistance.** Assistance is typically channeled through cumbersome, bureaucratic processes that can take months, if not years, to deliver. Funded with support from at least a dozen other countries, the State Department's Lifeline Fund, which offers emergency assistance to individuals and organizations under threat because of

human rights work, provides a useful model to policymakers interested in developing more agile, responsive forms of support for activists under threat. This fund is a strong first step, but additional support is needed. One option could include working with European and other countries to broaden the fund to include additional donors.



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