Why Did the Arab Uprisings Turn Out as They Did?
A Survey of the Literature

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SUMMARY

- Many analysts of the post-uprising Arab world have arrived at explanations for the region's persistent authoritarianism that are remarkably similar to those put forth before 2011.

- Six factors in Arab politics—Islam, geopolitics, oil, regime institutions and coalitions, the military, and civil society—continue to take analytical center stage.

- Emphasizing these factors obscures major changes taking place in the region and diminishes the important roles played both by elites and average citizens during and after the 2011 uprisings.

- Until human agency is more clearly taken into account as a factor in democratic change, experts will continue to misconstrue the nature of politics and the potential for democratization in the Arab world today.

INTRODUCTION

Is the Arab world destined to remain undemocratic? More than six years after pro-democracy uprisings toppled four long-standing Arab autocrats and threatened the rule of others, and in the face of today's civil wars, refugee crises, militant anti-state Islamism, and authoritarian retrenchment, experts are still asking this question. As they attempt to make sense of the past and to predict the future, many analysts of the post-uprising Arab world have arrived at explanations for the region's persistent authoritarianism that are remarkably similar to those put forth before 2011. Six factors in Arab politics—the role of Islam, geopolitics, oil, regime institutions and coalitions, the military, and civil society—continue to take analytical center stage.

This paper reviews the extensive scholarly literature on the prospects for democratization in the Arab world, looking at how experts have deployed these six factors to explain why democratization has, thus far, succeeded only in Tunisia.[1] It then considers the ways in which an emphasis on these factors obscures major changes taking place in the region and minimizes the important roles played both by elites and average citizens during and after the 2011

1. It is worth noting that Egypt and Tunisia are given disproportionate attention in the discussion that follows. This reflects the tendency of scholars to focus on these countries, and likely this tendency has influenced conclusions drawn regarding the Arab uprisings.

Muslim Brotherhood supporters gather in Tahrir Square on June 24, 2012, to celebrate the victory of their candidate Mohamed Morsi after he was announced as Egypt's first freely elected president. Photo credit: Jonathan Rashad/Flickr

uprisings. Until human agency is more clearly taken into account as a factor in democratic change in the region, experts will continue to misconstrue the nature of politics and the potential for democratization in the Arab world today.

SIX CONVENTIONAL EXPLANATORY FACTORS

Islam

Some scholars point to Islam as an, if not *the*, impediment to democratization in the region. There are two variants to this line of analysis. Before 2011, some argued that the precepts of Islam represent a dominant cultural framework that is fundamentally at odds with liberal democratic values (Lewis 2002; Huntington 1996; Barber 1996; Lakoff 2004). Others objected to the culturalist essentialism underpinning this position. They contended that the real issue was not the Muslim faith, as practicing Muslims live and participate in democracies around the world, but the prospect of Islamists coming to power through a democratic opening and then trampling on liberties and pluralism. This

specter helped to dissuade many secularist-oriented elites from pushing incumbent Arab authoritarian regimes for political reform (Lust-Okar 2011, Jamal 2012, Ibrahim 2007, Gerges 1999). That is, these analyses posited that an Islamist-secularist political divide, rather than the theological teachings or belief system of Islam, was central to explaining the failure of democratization.

Since 2011 some analysts have continued to advance the claim that Islam, as a belief system, shapes the barriers to democracy in the Arab world. Stepan (2012), pointing to the success of Tunisia's transition, concludes that democracy is possible only when societies adopt, as Tunisia has, "twin tolerations"—religious communities' toleration of being governed by a secular state, and the state's toleration of religious communities practicing their faiths. Hamid (2016) goes one step further, questioning whether liberal democracy as experienced in the West is likely to emerge in Muslim-majority countries. He posits that the all-encompassing nature of Islam—*din wa dawla*, or religion and state—may lead Muslims living in democratic political systems to prefer that religion and

religious values, rather than liberal values and systems, play a strong role in politics. Moreover, he cautions that at a point in history when many are questioning the importance of liberal democracy, it is wrong to assume that democracy will prevail in the 'war of ideas.'

FOR DECADES THE STRUGGLE AGAINST ISRAEL AND THE THREAT OF A RISING IRAN GAVE MANY ARAB REGIMES A JUSTIFICATION TO BUILD UP STRONG MILITARIES AND SECURITY FORCES, WHICH THEY USED TO REPRESS THEIR OWN PEOPLE.

Autopsies of the post-2011 Arab world also emphasize the problem of polarization between secularist and Islamist forces. For instance, Bradley (2012) proposes that the most important difference between the outcomes of the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia was that Islamists gained a majority of parliamentary seats in free elections in Egypt, but did not do so in Tunisia (also see Larémont 2014). Some (Cook 2013; Traub 2013) blame the electoral success of Egyptian Islamists on the weakness and disorganization of secularist forces. The Muslim Brotherhood, which Egypt's 2011-2012 elections put solidly in the political driver's seat—or at least so it seemed at the time—appeared unwilling to compromise with secular forces once in power (Wickham 2015, Selim 2014). Members of the secular opposition thus became increasingly alarmed by what they viewed as the Brotherhood's attempt to impose its agenda through majoritarian rule. This prompted many Egyptians who had initially called upon the military to withdraw from power after President Hosni Mubarak's ouster in 2011 to welcome back the generals in 2013. In Tunisia,

the Islamists did not take commanding control over the post-revolution government. The Islamist Ennahda Party won a plurality in the first free elections, but governed from 2011 to 2013 in a coalition with two secular parties. That political forces in Tunisia chose to compromise helped the transition move forward (Salamey 2015; Brownlee, Masoud, Reynolds 2015).

Fears of an Islamist takeover, stirred by the Brotherhood's ascendency in Egypt and then by the rise of the Islamic State (IS) in parts of Syria and Iraq, also led many people across the region to reject the risk of democratic change for the certainty of authoritarian rule. Autocratic Arab regimes capitalized upon this sentiment and on the post-uprising instability, portraying themselves as bulwarks against Islamist-provoked insecurity and chaos (Brynen et al., 2012).

Geopolitics

Other scholars point to the role that geopolitics have played in keeping Arab autocrats in power. Some arguments focus on the role of Western, particularly U.S., support for Israel and for the incumbent Arab regimes in oil-producing countries. The rationale is two-pronged. First, the United States and European countries have shored up repressive Arab regimes willing to help ensure Israel's security (often despite their people's opposition) and to maintain the free flow of energy resources to the global economy (Hinnebusch 2015a; Lynch 2012). Second, for decades the struggle against Israel and the threat of a rising (Shi'a) Iran gave these same (Sunni) Arab regimes a justification to build up strong militaries and security forces, which they used to repress their own people. Along these lines, Brownlee (2012) underscores how U.S. security aid to Egypt contributed to the maintenance of authoritarian rule there prior to the January 25 uprising.

Some analyses of the ability of Arab regimes to weather pressures for political change in 2011 and since also emphasize the role of geopolitics. Ahram and Lust (2016) contend that Western countries' relative inaction facilitated the success of some popular uprisings in overthrowing incumbent regimes, particularly in countries such as Egypt and Tunisia whose

Yemenis protest in Sana'a during the 2011 uprising. A Gulf Cooperation Council transition plan would eventually lead to the February 2012 removal of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Photo credit: Al Jazeera Creative Commons Repository

autocratic leaders had relied mainly on the West for support. As the United States and other Western powers became bogged down in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, they grew increasingly ambivalent about new interventions in the region. The lack of U.S. intervention in Syria after President Barack Obama violated his own 2012 "red line" dashed the hopes of the Free Syrian Army, emboldening Bashar al-Assad and his allies on the one hand and IS on the other.

As research by Durac (2012), Kamrava (2012), and Hinnebusch (2015b) demonstrates, non-Western powers often stepped in to aid Arab regimes in fending off domestic opposition or hindered democratization in other ways. They did so to protect interests such as military bases and supply lines, shipping routes, and oil, as well as to prevent regime overthrows that they feared could threaten their own grip on power. Saudi Arabia made a direct military intervention in Bahrain and pledged billions of dollars of aid to fellow monarchies Morocco and Jordan after the 2011 uprisings rocked the region. Iran and Russia provided significant military and economic assistance to keep al-Assad in power. Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) support for the maintenance of the ruling regime coalition

in Yemen, even as it backed the 2012 removal of President Ali Abdallah Saleh, helped to forestall genuine democratic change in that country. Saudi Arabia gave significant aid to Salafis in Egypt after Mubarak's ouster, which arguably heightened domestic tensions there and undermined the transition process. Then, along with other wealthy Gulf states, Saudi Arabia bankrolled the military-backed government that ousted the Brotherhood in 2013. In the post-2011 Arab world, regional and geo-politics have shifted considerably. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict, while still important, has faded as an issue around which mass mobilization and intervention is built. The influence of Egypt has diminished, while that of the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Turkey has grown.

Oil

Arab authoritarian regimes with vast oil and natural gas reserves (such as in Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) not only attracted Western support but also generated income that has helped autocrats stay in power. Prior to 2011, scholars described how oil resources allowed ruling elites to maintain control. Such resources helped them to co-opt

opponents (Luciani 1990; Beblawi 1987), build up militaries and internal security forces, pacify populations with massive state benefits, and avoid citizen taxation. Oil wealth also allowed some rulers to stave off cultural effects linked to "modernization" such as the development of occupational specialization, heightened access to media, and increased participation by women (Ross 2001, Chaudhry 1997). As a result, these analyses posited, wealthy Gulf monarchies were especially resistant to popular pressure for political change. Regimes in poorer countries such as Egypt and Jordan also benefitted from oil wealth, as petroleum-rich states at times directly aided them in return for political support. In addition, Arab expatriates working in oil-wealthy countries sent remittances back to their home countries, income that formed an important part of the social safety net and helped to maintain stability.

Oil wealth has remained a central focus of explanations for the persistence of authoritarianism in some Arab countries after the 2011 uprisings. For instance, some scholars have deemed the presence of significant oil and gas reserves to be one of the major structural factors that explained where mass uprisings failed to overturn regimes, such as in Bahrain (backed by Saudi Arabia), or where protests failed to gain traction, as in Algeria or Saudi Arabia (Yom and Gause 2012; Brownlee, Masoud, and Reynolds 2015; Lucas 2014; Layachi 2014). As it had before 2011, oil income gave incumbent rulers facing popular discontent the means to buy off opposition groups and to distribute cash bonuses, cheaper housing, and other benefits to citizens in return for their support. Poorer, semi-rentier monarchies like Jordan and Morocco also have benefited from huge aid packages from the GCC, which helped them stave off popular demands for change.

Regime Institutions and Coalitions

Before the uprisings, many scholars focused on how the type of regime in power shaped prospects for democratic change. Some viewed monarchies as particularly amenable to political liberalization (Herb 2005; Lust-Okar and Jamal 2002). As Waterbury (1970)

propounded five decades ago, monarchs were able to rise above the fray of competitive politics. They could allow limited participation and competition without threatening their hold on power. (See also Richards and Waterbury 1996.) This enabled them to take steps toward liberalization without endangering their own position. Such analyses better described the non-oil monarchies of Jordan and Morocco than their oil-rich counterparts in the Gulf. But they rightly pointed to the relationship between regime type and political dynamics.

REGIME TYPE REMAINS CENTRAL IN MANY EXPLANATIONS FOR POLITICAL DYNAMICS FOLLOWING THE 2011 UPRISINGS.

Regime type has remained central in many explanations for political dynamics following the uprisings. Some scholars highlight the differences in countries' electoral systems and their legislative-executive relations. For instance, Carey and Reynolds (2014) suggest that Egypt's primarily majoritarian electoral system was difficult for voters to understand. This may have suppressed turnout to the benefit of Islamist parties, given these parties other advantages, and reduced the representation of minorities and other marginalized groups. The Tunisian electoral system, which mandated list-based, proportional representation, avoided these problems. Ackerman (2011) critiqued Egypt's presidential system of governance, predicting that it would undermine coalition-building and lead to a concentration of political power, likely by the Muslim Brotherhood. These concerns appeared to have been borne out by what unfolded in the two years following Mubarak's overthrow. In contrast, post-revolution Tunisia, to avoid a dominant executive, distributed

The Saudi-led "Peninsula Shield" force enters Bahrain to help put down mass pro-democracy demonstrations, March 2011. Photo credit: Landov

governing powers among the president, the prime minister, and the head of parliament. These institutional designs were the result of political negotiations among different groups, some far more powerful than others. Arguably, it was such power imbalances, as much as the nature of the institutions themselves, that influenced what happened after autocrats fell.

Other analyses focus on the distinction between monarchies and republics in affecting prospects for democratization. They hold that monarchies are more capable of resisting popular pressures for change (Brownlee, Masoud, and Reynolds 2015; Brynen et al. 2012; Daadaoui 2014; Herb 2012; Yom and Gause 2012; Darif 2014).[2] In part, this was because the non-oil rich monarchies of Jordan and Morocco had allowed relatively more political freedom than had most Arab republics before 2011. Other monarchies benefitted not only from oil profits, but also from the political legitimacy enjoyed by their ruling families. However, these analyses overlook cases that did not fit the rule. For instance, the popular uprising that shook Bahrain in early 2011

arguably posed a serious threat to its regime, like the mass demonstrations in Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen. Bahrain's unrest might have forced significant democratization were it not for the Saudi-led intervention to protect the monarchy in Manama. Regime type alone does not explain Bahrain's resistance to democratic change.

The Military

Other scholars have emphasized differences among Arab militaries as a key factor in explaining political outcomes after the uprisings. For instance, Bellin (2012) proposes that the will of Arab coercive apparatuses to shoot at protesters—determined by the institutional character of the military and by the level of mobilization among protestors—helps to explain the likelihood that a regime would survive mass demonstrations calling for its overthrow. Where militaries were institutionalized in a Weberian sense (i.e., with meritocratic rules for advancement), they did not need the dictator to survive and were thus less likely to repress protesters. Thus in Egypt, although Mubarak

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2. For a collection of essays, including some with dissenting views, see Lynch (2012).

originally came from the military, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces determined the fate of its own ranks and was able to maintain independence and strength when it abandoned him. Tunisia's military was dissociated from President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and thus was able to desert him without risking its own demise when hundreds of thousands took to the streets and demanded his removal.

> IN TUNISIA, A MILITARY THAT WAS HISTORICALLY OUTSIDE THE REALM OF POLITICS REMAINED SO, LETTING CIVILIANS MANAGE THE TRANSITION.

By contrast, where the military saw its fate as intricately linked to that of the incumbent regime, it was willing to repress opponents to keep the regime in power. Patrimonialism, nepotism, and sectarianism may affect when military officers perceive their fate to be closely tied to that of the dictator. This appeared to be the case in Bahrain, where the army's predominately Sunni rank and file followed regime orders to fire on protestors, who were primarily from Bahrain's Shi'a majority. Similarly, much of al-Assad's loyal military elite share his 'Alawi heritage or are from other minority groups. They likely would have had to forfeit the benefits and status that the Assad regime has accorded to them if they had defected (Khaddour 2015), and would fear for their safety should the majority Sunni population take control of the country.

The nature of Arab militaries has also influenced political transitions following autocrats' ousters. The Egyptian military's ability to re-establish hegemony after Mubarak's overthrow was related to its independence from Mubarak as well as to its size, deep economic

penetration, and long-standing influence over the political affairs of the state (Larémont 2014; Brownlee, Masoud, Reynolds 2015; Selim 2014). Conversely, the much smaller and less politically engaged Tunisian military returned to the barracks after the overthrow of Ben Ali. In Egypt, the military's determination to protect its dominant political role led it to crush democratic forces as the transition proceeded, while in Tunisia, a military that was historically outside the realm of politics remained so, letting civilians manage the transition.

Civil Society

In the 1990s some scholars paid a great deal of attention to the strength of civil society in the region. In response to Putnam's (1994) thesis that civil society was key to democratization, and spurred by the role of civil society organizations in democratic uprisings and transitions in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, Norton and his colleagues (1996) undertook a two-volume effort to map civil society in the Middle East and North Africa. Their study and others that followed found civil society in the region far from vibrant, but argued that a nascent civil society existed that could grow and generate pressure for democratic change. When such change did not occur, other scholars turned their attention to examining how authoritarian elites co-opted civil society, sometimes in the form of creating government-organized NGOs, or GONGOs, and thus failed to instill the types of civic values needed for democratic reforms (cf. Langohr 2004; Jamal 2005; Wiktorowicz 2002).

Many analysts also point to the strength of pro-democracy civil society during the events of 2011 as an important factor in explaining the varied outcomes of the Arab uprisings. Brownlee, Masoud and Reynolds (2015) view Tunisia as having had the most developed civil society before 2011, and suggest that this helped to carry the country through its transition. By contrast, Egyptian civil society under Mubarak lacked pluralism and was dominated by Islamist forces after his ouster. Others, however, document an increasingly strong secular Egyptian civil society at the turn of the twenty-first century (Beinin 2009) and contend

Leaders of the four Tunisian civil society organizations that formed the "Quartet" and negotiated a compromise solution to the country's 2013 crisis met in Vienna in 2016; the Quartet won the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize. Photo credit: Mahmoud/Wikimedia Commons

that this factor contributed to the demise of the Mubarak regime (Salamey 2015; Sika 2014; Duboc 2014). By eroding authoritarian structures and encouraging citizens to take to the streets and voice their grievances, these analyses posit, Egyptian civil society helped to propel Mubarak's ouster after just 18 days of mass protest.

Another perspective focuses on how the relationship between civil society and political parties affects prospects for democratization. Lust and Waldner (2016) propose that authoritarian regimes' strategies toward civil society and political parties shaped the politics of transition periods. Before the uprisings, the Libyan and Tunisian regimes subjugated opposition parties more severely than the Egyptian regime did; moreover, the Libyan regime exerted more constant repression on Islamist movements than the Egyptian and Tunisian governments did. The authors contend that the strength of parties after the uprisings was affected by whether or not they had existed previously, had drawn upon civil society movements, or were entirely new, and the balance among parties in turn affected the

transition process. This helps to explain why the party systems that emerged in Libya's and Tunisia's post-uprising landscapes were more balanced than those that emerged in Egypt. Thus, the popular fear of a dominant Islamist force taking over the political system was less pronounced in Libya and Tunisia than in Egypt, where such fear built support for the new military-backed authoritarian system after 2013 that excluded the Brotherhood.

WAYS FORWARD: RESEARCH ON DEMOCRATIZATION AND STABILITY IN THE ARAB WORLD

As we have noted, the factors upon which many scholars focused to explain the persistence of authoritarianism before the uprisings have dominated explanations of Arab countries' trajectories since 2011. Yet, focusing on these factors to the exclusion of others risks overlooking important changes in, and lessons learned about, Arab politics.

First, analysts examining the prospects for democratization should pay particular attention to new dynamics and the changing

roles of regional and international actors in domestic politics in Arab countries. Since 2011, authoritarian regimes in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates have gained regional influence, and multi-national organizations such as NATO and the GCC played a large role in the Libyan and Yemeni transitions as well as in the suppression of Bahrain's uprising. There are isolated studies on the role of international relations in shaping the Arab uprisings as cited above, but generally, comparative case studies on the Arab uprisings do not take these influences seriously enough. A synthesis of viewpoints from inside and outside Arab countries is lacking. We need more studies that move beyond regime-centric, country-level analyses in order to understand how transnational factors affect politics on the ground and shape the possibilities for democratic change.

Second, we need deeper consideration of the nature of the Arab state, and how this affects the likelihood of regime transitions and democratization. Scholars have long understood that the countries in the region varied significantly in the extent to which they developed as nation-states. Pre-revolution Tunisia was at one end of the spectrum with a relatively strong nation-state and a developed bureaucracy; Libya under Muammar Gaddafi was at the other, with a weak state, a personalized and oil-dependent bureaucracy, an absence of parties and other political organizations, and an emphasis on tribalism and kin relations (cf. Anderson 1987; Larémont 2014). These factors affected the 'raw material' available to domestic and international actors as countries entered transitions, and had an impact on whether the removal of the autocratic leader led to a democratization process (Tunisia) or to a breakdown into civil war (Libya) (Brownlee, Masoud, and Reynolds 2015).

Third, we need to give fuller attention to alternative, non-state authorities, such as sectarian, ethnic, and other social actors, and to their impact on governance both sub-nationally and cross-nationally. The Arab uprisings instigated changes that have undermined the state and national identity, and thereby prospects for democratization. We are witnessing increasingly

porous borders, diminished state legitimacy, the rise of divisive transnational ideologies such as sectarianism, and the emergence of alternative and sometimes transnational political authorities in Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere. Such actors include IS, Al Nusra and other Al Qaeda affiliates, tribal leaders, and others who mobilize around sectarianism. These are not only outcomes to be explained, but are also themselves changing the political conditions in which ongoing domestic struggles are unfolding (Lynch 2016).

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THE ARAB UPRISINGS INSTIGATED CHANGES THAT HAVE UNDERMINED THE STATE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY, AND THEREBY PROSPECTS FOR DEMOCRATIZATION.

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Finally, scholars should give more attention to the role of human agency. Many descriptions of the events in Arab countries since 2011 recognize the importance of agency (e.g., Abu-Rish 2014; Koehler and Workotsch 2014; Marks 2016; Volpi 2013), but do not draw broader theoretical conclusions, and broader theoretical analyses of the causes and consequences of the Arab uprisings often give human agency short shrift. One cannot understand the outbreak of the uprisings without considering the choice of the Tunisian citizen Mohammed Bouazizi who set himself on fire to protest the injustice of the Ben Ali regime, the actions of ordinary people who risked their lives to protest against autocrats for weeks or months in Bahrain, Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen, or of those in Jordan and Morocco who decided to accept concessions from regimes and stop protesting en masse. Similarly, leaders' and regime elites' choices at crucial moments to pursue democratic change (Tunisia), to offer limited political reforms in the face of popular demands (e.g., the Moroccan king's willingness

to enact a constitutional reform requiring him to select the prime minister from among the largest popularly elected party in Parliament, or the Algerian leadership's decision to lift the 19-year-long emergency rule), or to take an uncompromising stance (e.g., the al-Assad's regime's attacks on peaceful Syrian protesters), were pivotal. Decisions during periods of uncertainty—from average citizens' choices to protest or stay home or to vote or abstain from elections, to elites' efforts to find consensus (e.g., the Tunisian Quartet) or to fail to compromise and enter into violent conflict (e.g., the Egyptian military and the Muslim Brotherhood)—have had profound implications for democratic outcomes. Different choices could have led events in very different directions.

CONCLUSION

Incorporating agency into our understanding of political processes in the Arab world is not easy, but it is possible. Many scholars examining the "Third Wave" of democratic transitions that took place from the 1970s through the 1990s explored the importance of agency. They focused on decisions during moments of profound political uncertainty made by regime actors—hardliners and softliners, moderates and radicals (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Przeworski 1991; Huntington 1991). This was a useful framework, although one that still requires greater specificity. As we examine the current situation in the Arab world and look forward, we may do well to draw upon psychology and behavioral economics. These disciplines can shed light on the different ways in which individuals make decisions under uncertainty and how people's perspectives, particularly regarding whether they see themselves in domains of gains and losses, affect decision-making. (See Lust, Soltan and Wichmann 2016 for example.) By recognizing the role of agency, and by understanding the structural and psychological factors at play, perhaps we can better predict how individuals—and the groups and nations that they affect—will respond in the next waves of unrest and political change likely to sweep the region.

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THE PROJECT ON MIDDLE EAST DEMOCRACY (POMED) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization based in Washington, DC, that is dedicated to examining how genuine democracies can develop in the Middle East and how the United States can best support that process. Through dialogue, research and advocacy, POMED works to strengthen the constituency for U.S. policies that peacefully support reform in the Middle East. POMED research publications offer in-depth, original expert analysis of political developments in the Middle East as they relate to the prospects for genuine democracy in the region and to U.S. policy on democracy and human rights. The views expressed in POMED Snapshots and other publications are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of POMED or its Board of Directors. For more information, please contact the series editor Amy Hawthorne at amy.hawthorne@pomed.org.

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