The people want the fall of the regime

Al-sha‘b yurīd isqāṭ al-nizā‘ m
[The people want the fall of the regime]

I see a decaying temple, almost collapsing ... it will fall sooner than later.

Mohammed ElBaradei

In the opening chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*, Franz Fanon suggests that decolonisation, with its world changing aspirations, is

a program of complete disorder. But it cannot come as a result of magical practices, nor of a natural shock, nor of a friendly understanding. Decolonization, as we know, is a historical process: that is to say that it cannot be understood, it cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content. Decolonization is the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature, which in fact owe their originality to that sort of substantification which results from and is nourished by the situation in the colonies.¹

Much like decolonising movements, those who engaged in political protest, taking to the streets across the recent past, also seek to change the order of their world. Such change is a historical process, shaped and given meaning by context and the specificity of contingency. With this in mind, we must not view the uprisings that broke out across the region in late 2010 as independent phenomena. Instead, we must locate the protests within the context of state-building processes – where regimes have sought to maintain sovereign control amid an array of challenges – but also within the history of political protest across the Middle East. Ultimately, the uprisings are the latest manifestation of the long-running politics of resistance. This chapter traces this history of protest and resistance, locating the uprisings within a broader narrative of the contestation of sovereign power, arguing that protest movements which emerged in 2011 should not be viewed as isolated incidents. To do this I look at historical

examples of unrest, before turning to a consideration of socio-economic factors and finally, exploration of the impact of environmental degradation that brought about rapid transformations of social and political landscapes in the years leading up to the uprisings.

The emergence of uprisings across the region demonstrates the widespread rejection of political, social and economic conditions that people had faced. The conditions prior to the uprisings should not be viewed solely as a by-product of political life, an accident or the unavoidable consequence of the interaction between nationalist and globalising forces. Instead, as previous chapters have argued, political, social and economic situations were carefully designed as mechanisms of control, resulting in the cultivation of a form of bare life. Although not necessarily the literal manifestation of Agamben's bare life, political meaning had been stripped from groups across the region, wherein individuals are bound by the laws of the state yet not protected by such laws. For Agamben, once in this position, there is no escape and one should accept the position of 'being thus'.² Yet looking across the region in the early months of 2011, it was difficult to view events as the acceptance of the status quo. Instead, what quickly became known as the Arab Uprisings was seen as the *rejection* of being thus and the demonstration of agency – seen to be possible even within bare life³ – amid efforts to improve political life.

After decades of political marginalisation where ruling elites had created political and social conditions tantamount to bare life, there was little hope of lasting change. Although the decade prior to the uprisings had been punctured by political protest, these efforts were largely unsuccessful as instruments of state security pervading all aspects of society were able to crush the protesters. At this point, grievances and resentment continued to fester, as regimes used all manner of mechanisms of control and techniques of government to prevent the emergence of protest movements. Yet by 2011, protesters in a number of states were successful in their demands for political transformation, albeit in a range of different forms, escaping bare life and rejecting 'being thus' in the process.

This rejection was driven by expressions of agency and resistance, which required huge courage and a desire to transform all aspects of political life. As Charles Tripp notes, this was not an immediate phenomenon, but one that emerged over time and space. Much like historical accounts of protest, latent structural grievances began to manifest, resulting in challenges to mechanisms of control. For Tripp, 'the public had been brought into resistance and this had been made possible not only by the immediate performances of resistance, but by the underlying, gradual reversal of the flow of capillary power itself that had been going on for years'.⁴

As we shall see, the rejection of 'being thus' served as a source of possibility: a disjunctive moment where people across the region could either continue with their existence in bare life or to challenge the status quo. In many cases, the latter was chosen as a moment of possibility served to inspire expressions of political agency. This hope was combined with an increased awareness of the latent socio-political-economic structures that had facilitated oppression, while allowing those who benefitted from (neo)patrimonialism to gain vast wealth. The publication of US diplomatic cables from

the Middle East in 2010 was one such means through which knowledge of events was distributed and while the cables did not reveal anything that the people of the region didn't know, they added to the psychological damage, impacting on national pride. Although it was generally accepted that corruption played a prominent role in accruing wealth, when documented by WikiLeaks, this placed an additional psychological burden on individuals, prompting many to exert agency through resistance.⁵

In Arabic, the closest transliteration to the concept of resistance is, for many, *muqawamah*, literally understood as 'to stand up'. For Larbi Sadiki, the concept of *muqawamah* is comprised of a broad range of norms and values, driven by agency and shaped by an Islamic and communal ethos. Moreover, although it is context specific, reflecting language and idioms, it also transgresses spatial and temporal dynamics.⁶ Ultimately, *muqawamah* is

a way of thinking, being, and acting, and an ever-widening site of holistic struggle in which the AK-47 is not, in the scheme of resistance, more important than piety, charity, schooling, propaganda or music. It simultaneously constitutes and embodies a normative imaginary for enacting emancipation at various levels, beginning with inner self-transformation through resistance against religious, moral, and intellectual laxity, and ending with creative protest.⁷

To understand why such events took place we must not only look at the uprisings themselves but also place them within broader contexts of resistance and political opposition.

A history of unrest

Protest movements rarely occur as independent phenomena; they are typically shaped by events that have come before. The political history of the twentieth-century Middle East is one of contestation, driven by efforts to exert power and manifestations of resistance. With this in mind, to understand the uprisings that broke out in late 2010, we must consider the residue of historical unrest that shaped performances of resistance. Such reflections allow us to identify broad structural factors that cultivate latent grievances, along with the evolution of state security apparatus that continued to serve within mechanisms of control.

Our exploration of state building began prior to the Treaty of Versailles with acts of resistance and the Arab Revolt, wherein people sought to challenge the power of the Ottoman Empire. Egyptian history across the twentieth century has been shaped by the interaction of political movements, seeking to exercise power and engage in acts of resistance. Driven by decolonisation efforts, the struggle for Egypt is central in understanding political life across the Middle East and shaped by the Egyptian Revolution of 1919, unrest in the 1930s, the 1952 Young Officers Coup and unrest in the late 1970s. In all, mass movements took to the streets, rallying against structural grievances and characterised by regional pressures. The 1919 revolution was driven

by anti-imperialist sentiment and economic concerns, wherein thirteen thousand landowners owned 40% of cultivated land, while the poorest 80% held less than 20% of privately owned land.⁸ Egyptian intellectuals sought to capitalise on British inertia after the First World War, at a time when key staff and goods were being transferred to Palestine. The revolution began the processes of gaining independence, during which thousands of Egyptians were killed, injured and arrested.⁹

The establishment of the modern Egyptian Republic in 1952 occurred amid decolonisation movements, alongside widespread anti-British sentiment and capitalising on increasingly prominent class tensions. Anti-imperial attacks took place across Cairo, while the Muslim Brotherhood gained prominence. Mass protests stemmed from the expression of multifaceted grievances that spread across the region with the development of Arabism. Political transition from Sadat to Mubarak was triggered by an act of violence, when a member of Islamic Jihad – who also served in the army – assassinated Sadat as a consequence of the peace treaty with Israel. After his death, Sadat was succeeded by his Vice President, Hosni Mubarak.

Life under Mubarak was aptly described by the economist Samer Suleiman 'of regime success and state failure'.¹⁰ In spite of early nods towards democratisation, Mubarak quickly fell into line with regional practices. Having come to power after the assassination of his predecessor Anwar Sadat, early signs of reform and apparent rapprochement with the Muslim Brotherhood quickly dissipated amid perceived threats to his rule. In 1992, Mubarak responded with force writ large across Islamic groups in Egypt as a consequence of the emergence of a violent Islamist insurgency that had committed terrorist attacks in Cairo.

Domestic events continued to be shaped by regional factors and the Palestinian cause, although once described to me as a 'political football', was one such issue. Beginning with the Arab-Israeli wars, the cause continued with the *intifada* of 1987, which much like other incidents, had broader regional ramifications. Across the 1990s, following the fall of the Berlin Wall and end of the Cold War, many states across the Middle East experienced the growth of civil society organisations, yet in several instances, these reforms were restricted by authoritarian tendencies, such as in Jordan where reform was a strategy to maintain control amid economic crisis.¹¹

In Syria, Hafez Assad violently suppressed an Islamist uprising across the state (1976–82), resulting in the deaths of around thirty thousand people and widespread repression of Islamist movements¹² in what Patrick Seale referred to as a 'long campaign of terror'.¹³ Moreover, in an attempt to maintain order, it was forbidden to discuss events in Hama. As one Syrian recounted, when she asked her father about what happened in Hama, he threatened her with violence if she ever asked again, out of a fear of potential repercussions. Similar incidents were recounted when talking to others about Syria.¹⁴

A British man travelling to Damascus in the 1980s was asked by his Arabic teacher to take a pair of shoes to a local man in the suburbs. Although no house number was given, this was hardly surprising and, assuming that he would be able to find someone who knew the old man, he went to the area with confidence. After an afternoon of searching, resulting in countless claims not to know the man and an increased sense of suspicion, an old woman took pity on the Brit, telling him to leave as the person

he was looking for no longer lived there; in fact, 'he no longer lived at all'.¹⁵ All that remained of him was a pair of shoes. While Robin Yassin Kassab and Leila Al Shami suggest that Hama was 'traumatised for a generation', the Syrian psyche more broadly was devastatingly damaged.¹⁶

In Iraq, to quash domestic unrest, Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons against the state's Kurdish population¹⁷ and also committed 'atrocities on a predictably massive scale' against both Kurdish and Shi'a dissidents.¹⁸ The most prominent of the Shi'a opposition parties, Al Dawla, fled to Iran after the execution of their spiritual guide, Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir Al Sadr. Disaffection among the Shi'a community was seen by many in Iran as a means of increasing their influence, resulting in the establishment of the SCIRI out of members of Al Da'wa to export Khomeini's revolutionary goals.¹⁹

Following unification in 1989, Yemen experienced a period of political crisis that continues to shape its future. The struggle to meet basic needs was a prominent characteristic of daily life, exacerbated by the absence of national security infrastructure, health care and limited local governance across the state's 333 districts. Although living within the Yemeni state, individuals in rural areas may have little sense of the state as a political entity beyond the presence of political posters. Across peripheral districts, life is regulated by tribal sheikhs – often competing with one another – where state mechanisms have little influence amid the power of *turath* and normative structures of tribal and religious life.²⁰ Within such conditions, protests, strikes, riots and bombs were a routine part of life across the state. Dire economic conditions were aggravated by the return of migrant workers expelled from Kuwait.²¹

A history of civic activism within the fabric of the Kuwaiti state has created the most vibrant political sphere in the Gulf, albeit resulting in a number of instances of unrest. The importance of politics within Kuwait should not be understated. As Kristin Diwan suggests, the National Assembly is central to Kuwait's national identity.²² Since the 2006 succession, the assembly has been characterised by political unrest as groups vie for influence within the political realm. Yet the nature of political life in Kuwait means that a struggle for influence in the National Assembly also results in 'extra-parliamentary' strategies and mobilisation, feeding into a climate of unrest.²³

Similar events occurred in Bahrain, as decades of political unrest prompted the abolishment of emergency laws and the establishment of a new national charter to replace the country's democratic constitution suspended in 1975. The State Security Law was enacted in 1975 and helped enforce the Al Khalifa's rule across the archipelago, while the State Security Court – established in 1995 – was responsible for sentencing hundreds of activists. The abolition of emergency laws was a key part of reconciliation efforts between the regime and Shi'a opposition groups.²⁴

Even the conservative Saudi kingdom was not immune from such pressures as a number of groups challenged the Islamic credentials of the Al Saud. Al Sahwa al Islamiyya Sahwa, an influential group of Muslim Brotherhood activists was joined by the Committee for the Defence of Legitimate Rights, who both criticised the Al Saud's domestic and foreign policies.²⁵ In the following years, the *sahwa*, perhaps the best organised political group in the kingdom, offered the most likely political challenge particularly after the groups' successes in the 2005 municipal elections, drawing on

Islam to offer resistance to the Al Saud. Yet even this was largely superficial, curtailed by the co-option of the group into the institutional structures of the state.²⁶

Beyond isolated incidents, a number of issues occurred in the decade prior to the uprisings that had an incendiary impact regional politics, with repercussions felt across the domestic realm. The first was the US actions in the aftermath of Saddam's invasion of Kuwait, which opened up schisms between regimes and their societies as people were largely opposed to government support for US military action against Iraq. A second issue was the War on Terror, which possessed a degree of Arab complicity, while the third was the onset of the second *intifada*, which was quickly framed as part of the War on Terror. A fourth was the 2005 Cedar Revolution in Lebanon, which was the catalyst for the Syrian withdrawal, while the fifth was the Green Revolution in Iran, which demonstrated the capacity of people to challenge their regimes. Such factors fed into a region-wide mass mobilisation, facilitated by technological developments and the emergence of Al Jazeera. Regional events shaped domestic contexts and vice versa. In this context, local movements had to capitalise on local conditions and regional factors²⁷ as efforts to create order had implications for spatial borders, as domestic and regional challenges collided.

At this time regional forces exerted a great deal of influence on localised *nomoi*. Both Yemen and Jordan had spoken out against the US military action, responding to public demands, but not without cost, as both were hit economically by the loss of US and Saudi financial support. Jordan at this time had begun a move towards political liberation, seemingly in a pre-emptive move by King Hussein to retain power. In doing this, the country underwent the most competitive parliamentary elections in over forty years.

In the mid 2000s, many believed that reform was likely in the Hashemite kingdom facilitated by the Jordanian National Agenda, cutting across political, economic, social and administrative lines, seeking to restructure parliamentary elections and essentially, offering a radical redistribution of power across Jordanian society. The stated aim of the agenda was

to achieve sustainable development through a transformative program that puts Jordan on a trajectory path towards fast economic growth and greater social inclusion, resulting in comprehensive strategies and initiatives developed to realise social, economic and political development, evaluate and monitor progress of its implementation according to detailed performance indicators.²⁸

Yet amid increasing pressure from conservative aspects of society who feared the erosion of tradition and *turath* amid the trappings of modernity, the Jordanian National Agenda was withdrawn, replaced by the far less progressive 'All for Jordan' initiative.

This example demonstrates the importance of balancing different pressures and agendas both within society and among supporters. Those regimes that had survived the tumultuous 1970s, a period beset by parabolic ideological forces and a spate of *coups d'état* had developed a strong ability to balance competing pressures while preventing the emergence of opposition groups through the penetration of society.

This was perhaps, as Marc Lynch argues, because the Jordanian state had ‘perfected the art of pervasive social and political surveillance and control’.²⁹ The biopolitical state machinery was fully operational, monitoring all aspects of society and preventing the creation of organised opposition movements. Those opposition parties that did emerge typically did so from within the context of the current political system, resulting in a complicit form of dissent. As governmental penetration of society increased, mass urban protests during the 1990s decreased, ultimately feeding into the cultivation of structural grievances.³⁰ Yet this did not put an end to resistance, nor to the brutal methods of control used by rulers that were argued to be necessary to prevent a spiral into chaos similar to the Lebanese civil war.

There is little doubt that political life in Lebanon was shaped by the fifteen-year long civil war that drew in all aspects of society. During the civil war, Shi’a groups gained greater representation as seen in the establishment of Hizballah in 1982, reflecting both the socio-economic conditions facing Shi’a Muslims in the country but also the failings of Amal who, at that time, dominated political representation of the Shi’a.³¹

As we have seen, although initially an armed militia with an explicit resistance agenda shaped by Shi’a history, the group evolved into a political entity, becoming one of the most influential parties in Lebanon.³² For the group’s leader Hassan Nasrallah, resistance is holistical, involving force and politics. It is ‘a complete organism with a thinking brain, eyes, veins, ears that listen, a tongue that utters, and a heart filled with affection or full of anger’.³³ This point is echoed by Hizballah’s Deputy Secretary General, Shaykh Na’im Qasim who suggests that resistance is ‘military, cultural, political and informational resistance. It is resistance by the people as well as by the mujahidin; it is resistance by the ruler and by the ummah’.³⁴ In spite of such remarks, the Cedar Revolution served as a spectacle of possibility, resulting in the withdrawal of Syrian troops but also demonstrating the capacity to bring about political change without requiring a descent into civil war.³⁵

A year later, war with Israel secured the group’s popularity across the region. At the time, Nasrallah and Ahmadinejad were the most popular leaders in the Middle East due to their anti-Israeli stance. This popularity created serious challenges for Sunni Arab rulers who had long viewed the Party of God with suspicion, but after the destruction of Dahiyeh in 2006 they were forced to provide support to the group out of fear that they would lose credibility domestically.

As political space was restricted and groups failed to find traction within electoral processes, the political and social fabric holding the nature of the social contract became increasingly frayed, creating conditions of uncertainty and *fitna* (civil strife). At this point, old divisions within society became increasingly prominent, as economic hardship worsened, while latent tensions across society began to manifest in protest.

Wealth and poverty

The idea that the Arab world is ‘richer than it is developed’ is one that resonates with many.³⁶ Reflecting on the Arab Uprisings, Christine Lagarde, Managing Director of

the IMF, noted that while top-line numbers often looked good, 'too many people were being left out'.³⁷ Development is inherently linked with empowerment and to understand the roots of the uprisings, we must consider not just economic or political factors, but the relationship between wealth and power.³⁸ This relationship manifests in the establishment of (neo)patrimonial systems of governance and the cultivation of so-called 'deep states' across the region, which prevent moves towards regime accountability.³⁹

To understand this, we must consider the impact that governance structures have had on people across the region. Although bare life is typically considered as the restriction of human agency through recourse to political and legal structures, normative and economic structures also have a restrictive capacity. As we have seen in earlier chapters, the nature of social contracts – particularly those underpinned by rentier bargains – and the emergence of (neo)patrimonial mechanisms of control have created societies underpinned by marginalisation. As Gilbert Archar suggests, all Arab monarchies are patrimonial regimes, along with Ba'ath regimes in Syria and formerly Iraq. Both Egypt and Yemen are neopatrimonial, where regimes possess autonomy from rulers, who can later be replaced. Thus, neopatrimonial societies possess strong organisational structures that can survive the removal of rulers where particular economic interests and power are more important than governing.⁴⁰ Put another way, in a neopatrimonial system there is no distinction between the public and private as states are run in a form of feudal enterprise. Reflecting this, when protesters took to the streets, the term *izba* (fiefdom) was levied at ruling elites and as the uprisings took place, the emergence of gangs and militias along economic lines would become commonplace.⁴¹

As a consequence, political regimes not only occupied a central role within the economy at the cost of the private sector, but also subsumed the state itself in its quest for survival. States such as Lebanon and Bahrain began to rely on external funds to prop up regimes and national economies. In 2006, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia donated \$1.5 billion to the Lebanese Central Bank to support the bank's currency chest, while two years later the bank received a further \$1 billion from Saudi Arabia, helping maintain the Lebanese pound's peg to the dollar which had become increasingly precarious.⁴² In Bahrain, the Al Khalifa family's personal fortune was supported by finances from Saudi Arabia. In both cases, economic interest was tied to broader political and geopolitical concerns.

As regimes found themselves unable to regulate political life, society became increasingly polarised, leading to the politicisation of the allocation and distribution of resources, while states also became extractors, predatory and clannish.⁴³ At this point, the security sector received disproportionately large amounts of financial support compared to other aspects of society, along with greater political influence and ability to act without regulation.⁴⁴ Arab Human Development Reports in the years leading up to the uprisings paint a gloomy picture of unbalanced development, systematic exclusion and structural neglect.⁴⁵ Reports routinely detailed governance failures and the absence of mechanisms to effectively hold political elites to account. Institutional weakness was routinely identified as 'one of the most important causes of socio-economic and political exclusion in the Arab region'.⁴⁶ It was regularly stressed

that this exclusion resonated across the region because it was 'inclusive', in so much as it affected people across different classes, in both rural and urban areas, and the poor.⁴⁷

In 2004, the authors of *Towards Freedom in the Arab World* referred to the state as a 'black hole', where the centrality of power in the hands of a few results in a situation where 'nothing moves and from which nothing escapes'.⁴⁸ The report suggested that the key issue behind political failings 'lies in the convergence of political, social and economic structures that have suppressed or eliminated organised social and political actors capable of turning the crisis of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes to their advantage'.⁴⁹

While it is correct not to reduce the democratic deficit to purely cultural factors, we should not dismiss the importance of history and values in defining contingency and shaping the decisions taken by those in power.⁵⁰ Indeed, as the Executive Summary suggests – acknowledging the power of the *nomos*, *nomoi* and norms – 'freedoms in Arab countries are threatened by two kinds of power: that of undemocratic regimes, and that of tradition and tribalism, sometimes under the cover of religion'.⁵¹ The interaction of the two – a form of *ordnung* and *ortung* – facilitated the creation of systems of governance, both formal and normative, which restrict the capacity of agency. As Amartya Sen argues, cultural factors have a hugely important impact on political and economic behaviour, shaping participation in activities and civil society, mutual support and solidarity.⁵²

Socio-economic differences had a detrimental impact on the democratic tradition.⁵³ In the 2008 *State of Reform in the Arab World* report, Jordan was ranked as the highest performing Arab state in terms of democratic practice and the rule of law, while, Saudi Arabia had the lowest general index and Yemen the lowest rank in terms of application of the rule of law. Palestine had the highest rank of equality and social justice, while Lebanon had the highest rank for respect for rights and freedoms.⁵⁴ Yet in a positive analysis of regional dynamics at the time, Bassma Kodami suggested that the region was experiencing a 'constitutional moment', noting the opening of a space of expression, albeit not participation.⁵⁵ As the following years would prove, such optimism was ultimately misplaced.

Although the discovery and extraction of oil pumped money into domestic economies there was widespread stagnation in per capita GDP between the 1970s and the 1990s. At the same time the region experienced the world's highest population growth, placing additional pressure on society. This increased growth rate was a consequence of *infitah* policies that led to social reforms and improvements across the health care sector, yet as we have previously seen, the private sector lagged behind, lacking development amid state dominance of economies. At this point, it was estimated that while the private sector accounted for less than half of the GDP across the region, corruption was rife.⁵⁶

Adding to such challenges were enormous levels of capital flight. At the height of the 2008 economic crisis, contracts worth \$958 billion and \$354 billion were cancelled in the UAE and Saudi Arabia respectively,⁵⁷ while an estimated \$247.5 billion was removed from the Middle East.⁵⁸ Although many analysts reduced the uprisings to a lack of a 'middle class', this is perhaps inaccurate; instead, as Gilbert Archar argues, it

should be viewed as a form of private capitalism that operates independent of the state but dependent on wider socio-economic forces, helping to understand the inclusivity of the exclusion.⁵⁹ In addition, tensions between public and private sector workers have long been rife, manifesting in the emergence of class struggles.⁶⁰ Such factors have been escalated by the relatively high population growth rates, while both standards of living and per capita income have stagnated since the 1980s.⁶¹

Underpinning all of this, and indeed political life more broadly, were gender issues and questions about the role of women in society. High levels of female underemployment fed into such economic situations, shaped by interpretations of culture, tradition and *nomos*. As a World Bank report on gender and development notes, although there are achievements in a number of areas of well-being, key challenges emerge in economic participation and political empowerment.⁶² Moreover, women face widespread discrimination across the private sector, once again stemming from cultural prejudice and bias, resulting in many working for lower wages. The 2009 Arab Human Development Report documents how the interaction of a range of different factors has established structural 'social biases against women,'⁶³ perhaps most obviously seen in the recently lifted ban on women driving in Saudi Arabia. Discrimination has been a direct consequence of the reduction of the number of women in the workforce, leading to higher fertility rates, lower levels of education and less influence in the family. Furthermore, this restricts the type of interactions that occur, limiting the exchange of information and lowering the desire for political agency.⁶⁴

We should not view economic structures independently from political contexts. In the case of the Trucial States, it is easy to see how British colonial policies were essential in establishing political structures that were later necessary for their economic development.⁶⁵ Such an approach resulted in the immediate penetration of domestic politics by external actors, but over time, a more centralised economic system was developed, facilitating nationalist projects and the perpetuation of exclusionary forms of social contract. One of the reasons for this identified by the UNDP was the

inability of the state to co-opt the educated youth into what used to be a relatively well-paid civil service that acted as a mechanism for upward social mobility. In country after country since 1980, the public sector was no longer able to absorb ever-increasing numbers of graduates produced by the educational system.⁶⁶

The failure to provide jobs or to stimulate a vibrant private sector meant that by 2011 41% of people across the Middle East were living 'in need' and in 2015 53% required financial assistance from non-state actors as informal networks began to play a more important role within the state. This was exacerbated by endemic corruption, which is estimated to have amounted to around \$1 trillion in the past fifty years.⁶⁷ As a consequence of the need to look for alternative sources of economic support, 56% of people viewed the economy of their home country as overly negative.

The cultivation of particular forms of political life and social contract between rulers and ruled had a dramatic impact upon political participation. In the decade

prior to the uprisings, voter turnout in elections across the region was low. In Saudi Arabia, for example,

[p]eople were reluctant to register and vote, as was clear in Riyadh (the Saudi capital and home to 2,692,780 citizens), where the number of registered voters did not exceed 18% of those eligible to vote, i.e., 86,462 voters out of a potential electorate of approximately 470,000 persons – representing just two percent of the total population of the city.

The small number of registered voters was expected to lead a relatively high rate of participation on election day (February 10, 2005). The rate of participation in the capital, however, barely reached 65 percent (i.e. a little bit more than 1 percent of the total population of Riyadh).⁶⁸

Even in elections deemed ‘free and fair’, low turnout provided scope for regime candidates to win easily.

History and culture must not be ignored when considering the means through which economic allocation facilitate (neo)patrimonialism. Such values played an important role in the establishment of the very structures at the heart of political projects.⁶⁹ Although a number of rights were secured by constitutions, there were regular instances of states not fulfilling obligations to international conventions or indeed, not being signatories of such conventions.⁷⁰ This feeds into the perception of a gap between the law in theory and the law in practice, with people trapped in a zone of indistinction between the two. The weakness of civil society organisations and widespread restrictions in application of justice only served to fuel a loss of confidence in the state and its institutions. Faith in electoral processes and turnout in elections both rapidly diminished across the years preceding the uprisings.⁷¹ In the 2010 elections in both Egypt and Jordan, the main opposition group, the Islamic Action Front, boycotted the elections, resulting in a climate of despair.⁷² It is within this context that people across the Middle East took to the streets in what became known as the Arab Uprisings.

The stories of Khaled and Mohammed

The emergence of protests in late 2010 should not be seen as independent phenomena, but rather the most recent manifestation of long-running politics of resistance from the formal and subaltern. The power of the Arab Uprisings can be traced to the influence of ideas, narratives, sacrifice and human actions against repressive regimes. The stories of two individuals in particular are worth noting, as their behaviour had a dramatic impact upon regional politics. For many, there had been little hope of political or economic reform, as the imposition of emergency laws in the previous decades had prevented any serious reform beyond token nods to elections or economic handouts facilitated by (neo)patrimonial systems inherent within political projects. The process of state building had left people marginalised with little political agency, essentially in

a form of bare life, lacking recourse to legal protection yet bound by the laws of the land. The construction of particular forms of political and legal structures prevented expressions of agency, establishing authoritarian structures that were regulated by (neo) patrimonial systems as a mechanism of retaining power. Here governance strategies include economic disenfranchisement and the closure of economic systems, removing channels through which political and legal disenfranchisement and marginalisation could be escaped.

The uprisings must then be seen as the response to existential crises, the visible contestation of sovereign power. Following the self-immolation of Mohammad Bouazizi, Arab populations faced a disjunctive moment wherein they could accept their position within political communities or they could reject being thus. Within this moment, one of the most enduring aspects of the uprisings emerged. Ordinary people who had not been politically active challenged decades of repression, marginalisation and structural violence, emerging from years of bureaucratic inertia with a new form of political agency. From their unique – yet remarkably similar – experiences, a form of collective agency was developed and a shared hope and responsibility was created across the region.

In 2010, an Arab Human Development Report outlined the obstacles to political participation in Egypt. Central to the increasing disillusionment was a perceived political apathy among the Egyptian youth. After noting issues with political structures, the report suggested that an additional factor is 'the apathy among youth towards political participation, borne of the conviction that that their voice will largely remain ignored'.⁷³ Only months later, people took to the street as the uprisings spread across Egypt. While apathy was certainly a factor, this was a regime construct, stemming from political fatigue and the belief that political change could not happen, all underpinned by fear.

For Wael Ghonim, a prominent opposition figure but at this time a Google employee, the regime lived in fear of opposition, projecting a façade of democracy while vanquishing dissidents.⁷⁴ While a number of opposition groups operated across the decade prior to the uprisings, few had a lasting impact, restricted by the power of the emergency laws. Other civil society actors fared little better, leaving the Muslim Brotherhood as the main source of organised opposition to the Mubarak regime, albeit facing widespread discrimination and a ban from electoral politics. In spite of this, the Brotherhood had firmly established themselves as a force across Egypt, wielding vast power and influence across society.⁷⁵

Beyond the *ikhwan*, optimism about opposition parties was placed in the likes of Mohamed ElBaradei who was viewed by many as a means through which lasting change could be engendered. Upon returning to the country in February 2010, his Facebook page documented seven demands:

1. Terminate the state of emergency.
2. Grant complete supervision of elections to the judiciary.
3. Grant domestic and international civil society the right to monitor the elections.
4. Grant equal time in the media for all candidates running for office.
5. Grant expatriate Egyptians the right and ability to vote.

6. Guarantee the right to run for president without arbitrary restrictions, and set a two-term limit.
7. Vote with the national identity card.⁷⁶

These demands required dramatic structural changes across Egyptian society. It also marked the point at which social media began to play a prominent role in political life across Egypt and the wider Middle East. At this point, Ghonim took on responsibility for running both the ElBaradei and Kullena Khaled Said (We Are All Khaled Said) Facebook pages. His account of events in *Revolution 2.0* reveals how such platforms were used as a means of spreading information and government fears at their perceived 'revolutionary power'.

Posting anonymously on Kullena Khaled Said, Ghonim provided followers with contemporary updates from the case and other acts of state repression across Egypt. Followers of the Facebook page organised a 'silent stand' protest to take the disenchantment to the street and express anger at the Ministry of Interior, in a non-violent way. Despite regime attempts to prevent it, protests took place across a number of Egyptian cities, while dissent also spread across the 'echo chamber' resulting in protests on the corniche in Doha; this was 18 June 2010.

In the months that followed, a set of organic, grassroots movements using the Internet gained momentum across Egypt. It was a time in which political agency began to manifest across the country, in spite of the perceived apathy of the Egyptian youth. Independently of Ghonim, a Facebook page was established calling for the monitoring of the 2010 elections, which were later argued to be fraudulent, suggesting that the ensuing parliament was illegitimate.⁷⁷ On 30 December 2010, Ghonim posted: 'January 25th is Police Day and it's a national holiday ... I think the police have done enough this year to deserve a special celebration ... What do you think?'

After the toppling of Ben Ali in Tunisia, Egyptians were hopeful about what could happen next. While contexts were different, there were a number of similarities between the two cases; it was hoped that just as Tunisians had rejected their positions within bare life, so too might others. On 25 January, Egyptians took to the streets, occupying Tahrir Square in a collective demonstration of political agency and frustration at the Mubarak regime and his intention to transfer power to his son, Gamal. Although the Brotherhood was the leading opposition party, their view of events across the country was mixed, with the older generation taking a watching brief, while younger Brothers and Sisters took to the streets.

Somewhat counter-intuitively, the support of the Egyptian army was integral for the success of the revolution, facilitating the transition away from Mubarak. In the coming years, the army took on an increasingly prominent role in political life, but in an attempt to retain influence across the country's future, military personnel supported the protesters in Tahrir against their former sponsor, Hosni Mubarak. On 10 February, Mubarak transferred power to the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), a standing military committee with its roots in the Free Officers' Movement, which ruled in Egypt during times of severe crisis. A day later, Mubarak fled to the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh.⁷⁸ In the following months, the Muslim Brotherhood would play an

increasingly influential role in Egyptian politics, as befitted the unofficial opposition party that had strong networks of influence across the state. This culminated in the election of the Mohammed Morsi – the Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party candidate – as the first democratically elected President of Egypt, albeit not without serious schisms within the *ikhwan* about how to rule.

Across the region, a number of common factors were found in protest movements. Fridays became days of protest, requiring little or no communication through channels that had routinely been monitored or regulated by the state, while the mosque served as a focal point. Protest movements used the cityscape around them as an integral part of their political action, seizing public spaces and transforming them into spaces of possibility. Online spaces were used as a means of spreading images and messages across the region. Central to the movements were slogans such as *irhal* (leave) or *al-shaab yureed isqat al-nizam* (the people want the fall of the regime) and events across the region were eagerly watched by those protesting in different countries across the region.

Collective empowerment and realisation of possibility born out of the toppling of Ben Ali and Mubarak facilitated widespread mobilisation across the region. Ideas quickly spread across space, resonating with local grievances and a spirit of empowerment and hope emerged. People who had long been pushed to the margins of political life began to believe in the possibility of change and took to the streets to express their political will.⁷⁹ Across the region, people watched, encouraged and emulated each other, from the squares of Cairo to Sana, from Manama to Damascus. Ideas spread across state borders, aided by technological developments and the establishment of hashtags across social media that facilitated investment in shared projects and bound people together across a region in turmoil, supported with a clear narrative of struggle, replete with expectations, heroes and villains.

Although often ignored, protests in Jordan began on 14 January, with a day of rage that focused upon the Prime Minister Samir Al Rifai. At this point, the protesters were predominantly the traditional opposition parties, who had experienced two decades of repression and negotiation with the regime over their place within the political system. As a consequence, the regime had become well versed in counter-revolutionary tactics, designing an urban architecture that prevented large-scale mobilisation, along with the widespread penetration of opposition groups. In spite of this, the protesters' demands were met and the Prime Minister was dismissed.⁸⁰

Protests in Yemen began in early February inspired by events in Tunisia and Egypt, but once again drew upon a long history of local discontent. A day of rage was called for on 3 February, which drew a crowd of thousands in protest against Ali Abdullah Saleh's rule. In the early stages, the protesters were a combination of civil society actors who had long been critical of the regime and youth activists. Networks were informal, grassroots movements that largely bypassed formal opposition groups. In Sanaa, *irhal* was baked into bread while in Taiz, it was painted on banners. For one observer, 'That single Arabic word has united Yemen's fractured political opposition, turning old enemies into temporary allies and pushing President Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime to the brink of collapse'.⁸¹

On 25 February pro-regime supporters clashed with protesters and on 19 March regime snipers opened fire, leading to an escalation of violence and a rapidly increasing death count as Saleh struggled to retain control. After efforts to reshuffle his cabinet, implement a new constitution and a number of announcements about transition to his Vice President, on 3 June Saleh was injured in a bomb blast at the presidential compound and taken to Saudi Arabia to be treated. On 4 June, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi was appointed as Acting President, but amid a range of competing tribal, religious and political factions, a Houthis insurgency and active Al Qa'ida franchise, along with a range of regional actors, Yemen was drawn into a seemingly intractable war, shaped by geopolitical considerations with devastating humanitarian consequences.

In Bahrain, protesters designated 14 February as a day of rage. Much like protesters elsewhere, activists moved into Pearl Roundabout and transformed the space into a site of possibility. Two days later, regime forces cleared the square and destroyed the site, in doing so removing one of the prominent symbols of Bahrain history; a six-hundred-fils coin that also depicted the roundabout was removed from circulation. Protesters differed greatly in their approaches, which ultimately proved detrimental to their cause. Chants referring to not being Sunni or Shi'a 'just Bahraini'⁸² evoked memories of political protests from the 1990s yet played a prominent role in the uprisings. Some called for peaceful protest, requesting political reform while others demanded the end of Al Khalifa rule. The regime's response across Manama was swift following clashes between protesters and security forces. The restriction of political space that followed later was hardly surprising but was the beginning of the counter-revolution.

On 14 March, after the Crown Prince's failed efforts to facilitate dialogue with the protesters, Saudi-led GCC forces under the guise of the Peninsular Shield Force entered Bahrain, leading to a widespread crackdown on civil society, political space and opposition groups. Across the island, the Al Khalifa rule had become increasingly challenged by long-standing political grievances, predominantly from Shi'a parties such as Al Haq and Al Wefaq. A public sphere that facilitated dialogue about political reform had emerged in the late 1990s, but efforts to regulate political debate in the kingdom had resulted in arrests of prominent human rights and political activists. As we shall see in the following chapter, regime figures quickly framed the 2011 uprisings along sectarian lines, adding in an existential dimension by playing into fears about Iranian expansionism and of the 'Persian other'. Fundamentally, the protests became the site of contestation between *ortung* and *ordnung*.

In Oman, protests began in earnest on 18 February, taking on a vastly different character to that in other states. For many, the uprisings in the sultanate came as a surprise as it had long been isolated from broader regional currents and possessed a well-respected leader, a long and proud history and financial resources to provide a comfortable life. In spite of this, a spate of protests occurred across February, spread by text message and the Internet, resulting in the closure of schools across the country.⁸³ Initially small, the protests gained traction when they reached the city of Sohar where they escalated, resulting in regime forces using tear gas, rubber bullets and suggestions of one fatality.⁸⁴ On 4 March, the largest demonstration in the history of the state took

place, stimulating further protests throughout the month along with military aggression against those politically active.

Grievances were similar to other states, as protesters sought to eradicate corruption and called for the removal of a number of prominent ministers, yet protesters expressed 'confidence in the sultan that he will respond to our demands.'⁸⁵ On 21 March, a crowd of around seven thousand in Muscat handed a letter to the public prosecutor calling for the immediate investigation into ministerial finances. Recognising the severity of the protests, the sultan acquiesced and later in the year held parliamentary elections for the first time. Although the sultan's rule was never in serious danger, the protests exposed underlying structural tensions within the state. Unlike other instances of unrest across the region, protesters issued a public apology to the sultan for damaging the state.⁸⁶ While concerns were assuaged, questions about succession in the sultanate post-Qaboos continue to plague political life.⁸⁷

On 25 February, demonstrations took place across Iraq as activists sought to use the popular momentum as a means through which to stimulate political progress and end the deadlock that had frozen political life. As violence broke out, six protesters were killed. Protests became a weekly occurrence but, unlike other states across the region, the uprisings failed to find the popular support to affect political change. This lack of support is predominantly seen as a consequence of two reasons. First, divisions within Iraqi society and all-too recent memories of war and violence meant that there was a distinct lack of popular will to take to the streets.⁸⁸ Second, a number of Iraqis felt that they had democracy and as a consequence many believed that 'we're ok'.⁸⁹ A more convincing argument, however, suggests that although disenfranchised and marginalised, Sunnis lacked representation and popular leadership, preventing wide-scale mobilisation.⁹⁰

The biggest prize for the revolutionaries was Saudi Arabia. As we have seen, the very fabric of the Saudi state is bound up with the Al Saud tribe, whose conservative alliance with Wahhabi clerics and rentier bargain meant that political participation was limited. In spite of this, the kingdom faced a number of serious pressures in the years prior to the uprisings, leading to Madawi Al Rasheed, a prominent Saudi scholar to suggest that Saudi Arabia was 'ripe for change'.⁹¹

Despite deep structural grievances, few turned up to a day of rage in Riyadh, with the majority of those who attended from news outlets. One of those who did was Khaled Al Johani, a Saudi teacher who spoke to the BBC before being arrested. His words reflect much of what was happening across the Arab world at this time: 'I am here to say we need democracy. We need freedom. We need to speak freely. We need no one to stop us from expressing our opinions ... Freedom ... there is no freedom. Dignity ... there is no dignity. Justice ... there is no justice.'⁹² The Saudi response to Al Johani's words would serve as a premonition of what was to follow across the region.

Both Syria and Palestine set 15 March as their day of rage. While some Palestinians called for expressions of frustration and non-violent resistance against both the Israelis and Palestinian Authority, divisions between West Bank and Gaza, and Hamas and Fatah meant that no serious opposition could be organised. In contrast to the burgeoning optimism across the region, few in Syria believed that the regime of Bashar Al Assad

could be seriously affected as a consequence of decades of repression and restrictions of political space. The strength of the Syria state and its repressive apparatus seemed impregnable, but regime violence inspired protests and mobilised the body politic.⁹³

The tragedy of events across Syria is widely documented in a number of prescient accounts. Perhaps the most powerful is by Yassin Al Haj Saleh, whose account of the fragmentation of Syria documents the rise of war machines that were supported by the Assad regime in a move that helped regulate all aspects of the Syrian population.⁹⁴ Protests broke out across the state where they were met with disproportionate force. In Deraa, regime forces opened fire on protesters and the ensuing brutality created a cycle of escalation that drew in more and more people as family and friends were killed or injured. Grievances grew rapidly, as tales of the horrors of the regime's brutality spread. Events escalated following the arrest of fifteen schoolboys in Deraa who had sprayed walls with revolutionary slogans picked up on TV. While in detention the children were tortured as their fingernails were ripped out. The parents of the children went to plead for their release from the local branch of political security, led by a cousin of the President, where they were told, 'Forget your children. Go sleep with your wives and make new ones or send them to me and I'll do it.' It was hardly surprising that in response, thousands of people gathered in front of the Omari Mosque and demanded their release.⁹⁵

The escalation and emerging intractability of the conflict was in part a consequence of the burgeoning regional importance of events in Syria. The geopolitical aspirations of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Russia, the United States and groups such as Hizballah coalesced in Syria, aligning themselves with either regime or opposition groups. As a consequence, each side became emboldened, provided with weapons, finances and international political support in international forums such as the UN, leaving the people of Syria paying a truly abhorrent price.⁹⁶

In Kuwait, the government marked the fiftieth anniversary of independence and the twentieth anniversary of the liberation of the country from Iraqi forces with large handouts given to all except *bidoon*. On 18 January, protests broke out in the country and although events would not dramatically escalate until June, where thousands took to the streets of Kuwait City, discontent began to spread. Amid growing political turmoil, a number of MPs refused to sit on committees with colleagues who were perceived to be corrupt and following the defection of a number of government MPs, the opposition was able to win a vote of no confidence in the Prime Minister. One of the main goals of the opposition MPs was to gain the opportunity to question the Prime Minister about political activity and perceived corruption in the country. Allegations of corruption included the suggestion that sixteen MPs had received bribes of around \$350 million to support government policies and that the Prime Minister was also involved, having diverted public funds to personal accounts abroad.

Shortly after, the Constitutional Court decreed that the Prime Minister could not be held to account for violations committed by his ministers, only those violations under his direct authority. Amid widespread allegations of corruption, this was seen by opposition figures as 'a clear attempt to prevent the lawmakers from exercising their constitutional right to question the Prime Minister' and to avoid accountability.⁹⁷

Despite this setback, protest groups were not deterred. One opposition group, the Popular Action Bloc, stressed that 'no medium of escalation would be spared', while another opposition figure tweeted that 'no solution will come from within the parliamentary halls of Abdullah Al Salem, but instead must come to it'.⁹⁸ In response to such inertia, protesters stormed the parliament on 16 November. There, in a nod to democracy, Musallam Al Barrack – a prominent opposition leader – proclaimed that protesters have 'entered the house of the people'.⁹⁹ In response, the National Action Bloc stated that 'the storming of the parliament is no less dangerous than what the government is doing'¹⁰⁰ and revealing the surprise at the turn of events, one interviewee referred to them as a 'rare incident'.¹⁰¹

Protesters were careful to frame the uprisings as a defence of the constitution. In doing this, protest movements were able to draw support from a range of disparate groups including Islamists, Shi'a and *bidoon*, along with those who had expressed desires for greater democratic accountability. Galvanised by successfully storming the parliament, red lines imposed by the Al Sabah were breached, notably insulting and taunting the Emir and ruling family. One protester proclaimed: 'In the name of the nation, in the name of the people, we will not let you, your Highness, practice autocratic rule'.¹⁰² Such comments were not beyond reproach and a number of opposition figures were arrested, including Al Barrack.¹⁰³

Much like other states across the region, protests began within the fabric of current political structures. Aware of the potential repercussions of expressing dissent against the ruling family, but also with the idea that change could only be brought about from within the system, political anger was expressed carefully. As Al Barrack suggested, 'People do not dispute the Al Sabah family's right to the presidency, but the Al Sabah family is disputing the people's right to manage the state and its wealth'.¹⁰⁴ Instead, ire was directed towards the government, as it was felt that Kuwaitis have 'a government that doesn't listen, doesn't see and all it does is deceiving the people'.¹⁰⁵ Yet as a caveat to such incendiary comments, Al Barrack was careful to express support for the Al Sabah family.

The Prime Minister resigned on 28 November 2011 and a new Prime Minister, Jaber Al Mubarak Al Sabah, was appointed amid serious political challenges. Legislative elections in February 2012 returned thirty-five of fifty seats in the National Assembly to opposition candidates, the largest grouping of which was the Shi'a National Islamic Alliance movement. Parliamentarians elected in February, led by Musallam Al Barak, advocated the idea of a parliamentary government for Kuwait and widespread political reform, including a law guaranteeing the independence of the courts. Eight days before a vote on this law, the Constitutional Court – appointed by the Emir – dissolved parliament.¹⁰⁶ Protesters stressed that they would continue 'under the umbrella of the constitution' using 'all peaceful and constitutional tools'.¹⁰⁷ In a nod to the power of the exception, Sheikh Salman Al Humoud, the Information Minister, proclaimed that the ruling enhanced the 'durability of the democratic system' and 'demonstrates the strength our democratic institutions and our judicial system'.¹⁰⁸

While the uprisings spread across the Arab world, on its periphery, Iran, Turkey and Israel were all also affected by events. In Israel, 400,000 out of a population of around

7.7 million took to the streets to express solidarity with Tahrir Square. In the summer of 2011 outrage at the rising cost of living resulted in protests, demonstrating the move from a quietist social welfare Zionism of the formative stages of the state to the more hawkish but economically liberal interpretations of Zionism. In response, a tent was pitched in Habima Square on Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv, triggering a mass protest. Facebook once again proved a platform to spread ideas, helping to develop a tent city that straddled differences across Israeli society as people were ultimately united in search of social justice. In spite of the scale of the protests, as 2011 ended, so too did the movement, amid reform of aspects of society including restrictions on benefits given to the Haredi community.¹⁰⁹

In Turkey, the ruling AKP discourse stressed 'historical responsibilities' to the region, stemming from deep collaboration and personal relationships with political leaders. Prominent figures in the party, including President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, viewed the AKP model as one that could be applicable across the Arab world. Indeed, Turkish historical experience and record of parliamentary democracy offered a vision of political and democratic stability for the region, driven by Atatürk's secular vision, albeit eroded by Erdogan's Islamic party.¹¹⁰ In spite of this, over the coming years Turkey was not immune from protests.

Protests in Turkey erupted in Istanbul's Taksim Gezi Park, stemming from the violent eviction of protesters who were demonstrating against the planned destruction of the park.¹¹¹ The protests rapidly escalated, bringing together broader concerns over the political vision of the Turkish state, environmental challenges, the erosion of secular ideals, the freedom of the press and freedom of expression.¹¹² Rising authoritarianism was perhaps the main driving force, triggering protests across the state after the occupation of the park. The park was later cleared using tear gas and rubber bullets amid claims from the Prime Minister that 'Taksim is not Turkey'.¹¹³

For many in Iran, events across the Arab world were framed as a continuation of one of two possible narratives. Regime figures viewed the uprisings as a continuation of the 1979 revolution, while opposition figures framed the protests movements as a continuation of the 2009 Green Movement. As we shall see in the following chapter, the Islamic Republic's response to the uprisings was rife with contradiction and shaped by geopolitical calculations. In 2009, Iranian citizens demanded political change in the aftermath of a contested presidential election that returned the incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to office. In the so-called Green Movement, protestors used social media as a tool to mobilise people across the state, facilitating demonstrations and getting information about events outside of Iran. While triggered by the electoral crisis, the protests must also be placed into historical context.¹¹⁴ Images of Iranian men and women in squares, on university campuses and major roads were transmitted internationally, as protesters began to support reformist candidates Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karubi.¹¹⁵

While the protest movements spread across the region, a number of states were largely able to avoid unrest, as will be discussed in the following chapter, with a number of Gulf states using patrimonial networks and rentier economies to placate protest movements. Surprisingly, in spite of serious societal schisms, Lebanon also remained

largely free from protests. In part this was a consequence of such societal schisms, preventing the emergence of a coherent protest movement under strong leadership, but the memory of the civil war remained central in the minds of many.¹¹⁶ Yet only a few years later, protests erupted across Beirut as people from a range of sects expressed frustration at governance failures and bureaucratic inertia that prevented collection of rubbish across the city in what became known as the #YOUSTINK movement.

While Gulf states were largely unaffected by events in 2011, their rulers faced a serious challenge only three years later with a dramatic fall in oil prices. Uncertainty following the Arab Uprisings had driven the price of oil up from just over \$60 in 2010 to a peak of \$115 in 2014 but this was not sustainable, driven down by increased supply facilitated by the rapid expansion of North American crude oil. This fall in oil prices had a serious impact on those states that exported oil. In 2013, oil rents amounted to 53.8% of GDP in Kuwait¹¹⁷ along with 90% of government income and 88% of exports in Saudi Arabia.¹¹⁸

Vast reserves of natural resources allowed Gulf regimes to placate populations through rentier social contracts, along with the welfare benefits and subsidies that come with such a social contract.¹¹⁹ Although difficult to estimate, break-even oil prices differed greatly across the Gulf, from \$52 in Kuwait to \$126.9 in Bahrain,¹²⁰ while Saudi Arabia required the price of oil to be above \$84.3 to break even. Maintaining social cohesion amid serious economic pressure placed additional pressure on regimes across the Gulf, already wary after the events of 2011.

Demands for an improved quality of life were at the heart of protest movements, as chants such as '*ish, huriya, karama insaniya*' (bread, liberty and human dignity) were heard from Cairo to Manama, revealing seismic schisms within political structures.¹²¹ The rapid emergence of protest movements revealed a great deal about the political nature of contemporary societies and also the strength of belief and agency, as people took to the streets in defiance of emergency laws that had previously been tools of restriction and repression. The overwhelming images of the first part of the uprisings were the scenes of hope and possibility that political change could be achieved. For the first time in political protests, there was no reference to a slogan such as 'Islam is the solution', or 'Arab unity is the solution'. The protesters truly were grassroots organisations, driven by a desire to change the order of their worlds but in the months and years to come, such movements would be hijacked by a range of different actors.

Spaces and performances of resistance

As Frantz Fanon argued, changing one's world is a violent process that leads to disorder. This violence need not necessarily be direct but can take place in a range of different forms, through a range of different objects and subjects. One such transformative aspect occurred in public spaces, where expressions of agency facilitated the metamorphosis of space that had previously been a mechanism of sovereign power into a site of possibility. As we have seen, space is simultaneously the arena and the canvas, the area in which politics was played out and the means through which political agendas were also expressed. Urban landscapes had long been sites and spaces of expressions of

political power but also mechanisms of control, drip-feeding civilian populations with a sense of sovereign control and ultimate authority.

The fabric of space, as we saw earlier, both demonstrates and enacts power. Such visible – yet unseen – techniques of power fed into the construction of myths and narratives that were used as mechanisms of control. These mechanisms helped normative structures to be accepted by those who are subjugated. The uprisings demonstrated a widespread rejection of the ordering of space. Essentially, as Hamid Dabashi argued, protesters were ‘creating a new geography of liberation, which is no longer mapped on colonial or cast upon postcolonial structures of domination ... a restructuring [that] points to a far more radical emancipation’.¹²²

As a consequence, a range of tactics were employed and graffiti became both voice and action of dissent against ruling elites. It became a medium of communication when the mainstream media ‘ignored the dissenters’ and exploded across urban environments in response to Orwellian surveillance of creative figures.¹²³ Acts of graffiti helped facilitate the reappropriation of public space, serving as ‘unsanctioned aesthetic modes of self-expression in dialogue with the urban environment’, transforming space from sites of neutrality to those demonstrating potential and revolutionary change.¹²⁴ Graffiti as art became resistance in and of itself, reflecting protest narratives but also interjecting, reframing the urban environment according to the creativity of the protesters. Squares became sites of possibility, gymnasiums of civic activism, as new meaning was given to all manner of arenas.¹²⁵ Transformative processes fed into and developed anti-systemic protests and the appetite for democratic process, as Larbi Sakiki suggests, through ‘sustained and creative mass protest’.¹²⁶

After seizing public space, protest movements sought to reclaim it, transforming meaning beyond its previous message of repression. This transformative process went some way to dismantling authoritarian regimes, rejecting the visibility of power and in doing so, creating space and possibility for the new. In dismantling the physical world, protesters created space to be shaped into something new. Space thus became a zone of indistinction where the remnants and residue of the *ancien régime* remained, but were subsumed by transformative possibility.

In rejecting authoritarianism, citizens regained control of territory, purging regime forces and symbols from space and time, transforming the geographical area into a site of possibility. The presence of crowds in Tahrir was symbolic not only in their defiance of state legislation, but also in their presence in the square itself, wherein previous relations between regime and square – or urban architecture broadly – that had previously served to reinforce power were severed.¹²⁷ In a more powerful move, it was the scene of a new becoming, as an opportunity emerged to reframe the nature of Egyptian politics. It also fuelled protests across the region, demonstrating the power and possibility of collective action.

The transformation of space in an existentially liberating way was characteristic of the uprisings. In such a climate, artists became the targets of persecution. One particular instance of regime brutality that became a prominent work of art saw an Egyptian woman wearing an abaya being dragged through the street, revealing a blue bra. An image of a blue bra would later become used as a symbol of revolution. The

image took on symbolic importance, becoming a symbol of the struggle for freedom against oppression, viewed through the lens of gender-related issues.¹²⁸ The image of the blue bra was later banned by the UAE.

In Bahrain, public spaces that were in tourist areas became canvasses to disseminate political messages. Competing narratives played out on the streets, with black paint used to cover up earlier messages. The images of martyrs and political prisoners adorned the walls, annotated with comments written in both Arabic and English to get coverage from the international press visiting to cover the Formula 1 race. Amid an increasingly violent conflict, space became contested as protesters were met by counter-demonstrations and security forces, as the Al Khalifa regime sought to prevent further escalation. Protests quickly moved across space, from the urban environments of the suq in Manama to rural villages across the island and as a consequence, highways took on a security dimension with military and police personnel stationed at intersections. Similar scenes were found in Yemen, Syria and Egypt.

Authoritarian regimes were not only draconian but also resilient. Their penetration of all aspects of society, domination or destruction of opposition movements and regulation of public space made few optimistic about lasting change. Decades of authoritarian rule, facilitated by (neo)patrimonial structures and underpinned by normative structures limited political space and civil society, restricting the capacity of people to express grievances, yet making the expression of a political voice all the more powerful.

The words used by protesters were imbued with meaning: hope, possibility and a desire to challenge seemingly endemic despotism.¹²⁹ Words became tools of empowerment rather than repression and songs took on political importance.¹³⁰ In one of the more powerful Egyptian protest songs, engineering student Ramy Essam wrote the song 'Irhal', a call and response song in Tahrir Square, featuring the lyrics: 'We are not leaving; He will leave; As one; We demand one thing; Leave, leave, leave'. Nationalist songs historically used by regimes were transformed as lyrics were rewritten to express loyalty to protest movements and people, rather than regimes. In addition to the tangible fabric of the state, protesters also sought to alter the metaphysical construction of the state. As one Syrian woman observed, songs that had been symbols of nationalist pride were rewritten to express possibility, solidarity and hope.¹³¹

Virtual space also became a site of contention as technological developments allowed anyone with a smartphone to become a journalist. This rise of the citizen journalist allowed events to be documented, stories to be verified and hegemonic narratives to be challenged. Moreover, amid widespread restrictions on the freedom of press, the Internet provided a means to circumvent regulation but also created a new space for divisions and dissent to emerge as friends and families became bitterly divided.¹³² In Egypt, token nods to reform meant little, leaving the press under regime control in what one analyst called a 'truly Orwellian nightmare for reformists'.¹³³

Emergency laws gave Mubarak licence to cut off the Internet which, counter intuitively for the regime, pushed more people out on to the street. Yet the Internet made awareness of the uprisings immediate and grounded it in the present. Ultimately, Tahrir became the focal point: the epicentre of protests and the site of performance, as

individuals engaged in collective action. As Judith Butler argues, these actions 'collect the space itself, gather the pavement, and animate and organize the architecture'.¹³⁴

Ultimately, the transformation of public space into sites of possibility was an essential aspect of the uprisings. The prominent rejection of previously embedded authoritarian regimes offered an alternative vision to people who had been trapped in bare life. Moreover, graffiti and street art served as a non-violent method of transformation, dramatically altering and reclaiming space while also having the capacity to speak to a range of audiences regardless of language. Fundamentally, graffiti was a way of 'defending and occupying the street'.¹³⁵ Over time, this transformative process took on a holistic nature as both the formal power of regimes and normative practices were identified and transformed.

Degradation and transformation

While a great deal of this chapter has discussed transformation in the run up to the uprisings, perhaps the most important form of change was demographic. Transformation from rural to urban has been a prominent feature of political development across the history of the Middle East, changing the nature of urban environments and placing additional pressures on political elites to both meet basic needs and to regulate life. In the years leading up to the uprisings, the most important transformative movement from rural to urban was a consequence of environmental degradation, stemming from the inability of farmers to tend to land and produce food.

In the Levant, environmental change enforced by anthropogenic developments increased the likelihood and occurrence of droughts and in Syria, the length and intensity of droughts as experienced between 2006 and 2011 was two to three times as likely.¹³⁶ Such changes had a dramatic impact upon migration in Syria and across the Levant broadly, as individuals sought water and sustenance, while arable land became increasingly rare. In the run up to the uprisings in Syria, 75% of farmers suffered total crop failure and in the north east, 85% experienced loss of livestock. Ultimately, the drought affected 1.3 million people, bringing the number of Syrians in poverty over the 2 million mark, also resulting in 800,000 Syrians losing their livelihoods and migration to cities.¹³⁷ The price of bread rose 87% in public bakeries while families had to spend between 50% and 80% of income on basic food.¹³⁸ Of course, the impact on state infrastructure was undeniable, with a generation of Syrians existing without schooling and institutional support. Such conditions remain, exacerbated by conflict, leaving 9.8 million Syrians as food insecure while 6.8 million of those are severely food insecure.¹³⁹ Making matters worse, recent estimates suggest that one in three houses in Syria have been destroyed, while the country lost 80% of its GDP between 2010 and 2016.¹⁴⁰

Environmental degradation should not be seen as a neutral phenomenon. As Francesca de Châtel argues, such events must be placed in the context of Syrian mismanagement of moves towards a market economy and the failure of the Assad regime to respond appropriately to drought. As de Châtel asserts, drought is a structural feature of the Levant that need not necessarily result in such widespread unrest.¹⁴¹

We should then place it in a broader context of events at the time. While some argue that drought should be viewed through the lens of a 'threat multiplier',¹⁴² it is perhaps the inadequate regulation of such issues and the failure of the move from centrally planned economy to market liberalisation¹⁴³ that meant that serious humanitarian issues emerging from the drought were mismanaged. Some estimates suggest that around 50% of the Syrian workforce was involved in agriculture at this time.¹⁴⁴ As a consequence, an estimated three hundred thousand people migrated from the north-east of the country¹⁴⁵ and by 2009 an estimated 60–70% of villages in the governorates of Deir ez-Zor and Hassakeh had been deserted.¹⁴⁶ Drought appeals failed to meet targets and the government sought to downplay the severity of the crisis, fearing the potential consequences of decades of economic and resource mismanagement.¹⁴⁷

As a 2016 Arab Human Development Report noted, 'the events of 2011 and their ramifications are the outcome of public policies over many decades that gradually led to the exclusion of large sectors of the population from economic, political and social life'.¹⁴⁸ At this time there was a low level of support for formal institutions and a widespread lack of confidence in legislatures, particularly in its ability to hold the executive to account, to protect liberties and to treat all societal groups equally. Indeed, by 2014 only 21% viewed the rule of law to be applied universally and a year later this figure rose to 25%. As a consequence, over 50% of people had a negative view of the political situation along with their economic circumstances.¹⁴⁹

In 2011, 41% of people in the region were living 'in need' and although this number dropped by 2015, 53% of people required financial assistance from other actors such as families, friends and other groups, as informal networks took on an increasingly important role and the need for support remains.¹⁵⁰ Indeed, 56% of people asked had an overly negative view of the economy of their home country, with Lebanon worst at 71%. These sentiments were exacerbated by endemic corruption, estimated to be in the region of \$1 trillion in the past fifty years.¹⁵¹ Ultimately, in such conditions of uncertainty and instability, those able to provide support were seen in a positive way, giving them a great deal of influence across the region, which helps to explain the popularity of groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, Hizballah and even Da'ish.¹⁵²

Conclusions

Placing the Arab Uprisings in the context of political, economic and social unrest across the Middle East provides valuable insight in understanding why, when and how the protests took place. The proliferation of ideas, grievances and ultimately protest across time and space reveals two important aspects. First, that state-building processes have created structures that have a detrimental impact on life, manifesting in tensions between rulers and ruled, along with existential and often competing visions of political organisation. Second, amid a shared normative environment what happens in one state can have regional repercussions. Protest movements have always been shaped by domestic context and regional pressures meaning that the two are

often intertwined, with serious consequences for the ordering of space. From Nasser's manipulation of the pan-Arab cause to the multifarious agendas and groups involved in the Arab Uprisings, political agendas have served to undermine real political progress across the region. The complexity of such factors and inter-relation of themes and issues has created a new political dynamic, wherein space became a site of possibility and in the months that followed, the region was characterised by a struggle to shape this possibility in a range of different ways.

The uprisings of 2011 should not be viewed as qualitatively new phenomena but instead, the continuation and manifestation of revolt and resistance against embedded authoritarian movements. With this in mind, we see that although the protest movements demonstrated the ability to reject being thus, seeking to move away from the creation of bare life in political, legal and socio-economic forms, similar expressions of agency had been occurring over time, albeit without the success of the Arab Uprisings. Although Agamben argues that escaping bare life is impossible, across the region, expressions of agency and resistance served as a mechanism of rejecting being thus. This is, however, part of a bigger narrative account of the Arab Uprisings, which should be split into two. The first part, as documented above, is a story of hope and resistance, where autocratic, authoritarian regimes were deposed in Egypt and Yemen (and Tunisia and Libya, although these are beyond the scope of our analysis) but regimes in Bahrain and Syria were seriously challenged. The second part of the broader narrative considers the response of the state, to see how regimes fought back against the protesters.

The uprisings reveal the depth of political dissatisfaction and the fissures that were inherent within political projects. These divisions were also prevalent in opposition groups whose views on how best to respond to regimes vastly differed even within sites of protest. From calling for peaceful pro-democracy marches to the violent toppling of regimes, the range of competing visions of protest ultimately restricted their capacity for change. Although people took to the street to express this displeasure, little changed. Structural grievances remained and although token reform would take place, the underlying factors that caused the uprisings endure, leaving a very real possibility of future unrest.

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