

THE “ARAB SPRING” STRESS TEST: DIAGNOSING REASONS FOR REVOLT¹

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Abstract

Two stories characterize the Middle East in general—and the Arab world in particular. They are robust authoritarian regimes suffering economic dysfunction under the stifling “institutional stagnation” of Islamic law. Neither story is credible. In this paper I draw on rather standard economic and demographic data to construct a model of the trajectories to political revolt in 16 Arab countries. This work shows rather standard economic phenomena at work in the Arab world since 2000. This effort suggests that an attentive observer of 5-6 plausible explanatory variables could have predicted—by the summer of 2010—which Arab countries would very soon fall into political chaos, and which ones would not. I call it the “Arab Spring Stress Test.”

I. Introduction

The so-called Arab Spring has received considerable attention recently, with most of that attention focused on the political realm.² The obvious question is why those revolts occurred, and why scholars of the Middle East failed to see them coming. To their credit, the experts seem eager to call attention to their own apparent blindness to what began in late December of 2010 in Tunisia. A few years earlier, in 2004, Eva Bellin had written an article entitled: “The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East,” [Bellin, 2004]. Her 2012 paper “Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East” is a thoughtful reprise of her earlier views. She is not alone. F. Gregory Gause III has also discussed just how surprised he and other experts

¹ I am grateful to Charles Becker, Greg Gause, and Mehran Kamrava for helpful comments on an earlier draft. Participants in a seminar at the World Bank (October 28, 2015) also provided valuable feedback.

² The “Arab world” is of course an abstraction, as is the term “Middle East.” In parts of the world this region is called “West Asia.” The data from the World Bank that will be used in the econometric work to follow is classified under “Middle East/North Africa.” But of course this includes Iran, Israel, Malta, and what is called the “West Bank and Occupied Territories.” It does not include Mauritania, Comoros, Sudan, or Somalia—all Arab countries. Some lexical latitude is called for here. See Appendix Table 1 for the countries under discussion here. Djibouti, Somalia, and Sudan are missing because of a lack of data.

were [Gause, 2011]. This is not the place, nor am I qualified, to plumb the depth and breadth of Middle East scholarship in an effort to sort out why these uprisings were such a surprise. With the advantage of hindsight, it seems that many of the same factors that had suggested robustness turned out to be weaker than expected. Of course the profound role of social media—especially in the early days of the Cairo demonstrations in January, 2011—is a reasonable oversight on the part of those writing about the region [Anderson, 2011]. Who could have imagined, just a few years ago, that Facebook and Twitter had any role to play in political stability?³

The events of 2010 onward have been intellectually therapeutic for those who know the region well. Much of the early discussion seems to center on a reconsideration of the idea of military loyalty to despotic leaders, of the profound rise in the number of well-educated youth seeking both political voice and jobs, and of the looming dangers of both urban and rural alienation. The old social contract in a number of these countries was crafted to purchase domestic peace through low-cost education, subsidized fuel and housing, public health programs, and government jobs. The arrangement was implicit—the government will take care of you, and you will leave us alone. We might think of this arrangement as constituting the “mask of citizenship” [Bromley and Anderson, 2012].

It now seems that someone forgot to remind Arab rulers that sooner or later many of their well-educated young people would like to have a real job so that they could start a family [Yousef, 2004]. Individuals with a college degree are not exactly charmed by gifted jobs in the darker corners of obscure government bureaucracies. Occasionally, if economic fundamentals became misaligned, targeted subsidies—accompanied by a highly visible security apparatus—

³ While most protests over the years have been concentrated in urban areas, more recently the use of social media surely brought many others into the action—often from poor rural areas where disenfranchisement may be rather pronounced.

were sufficient to keep the peace. But of course this recipe also discouraged the development of a viable private sector that might comprise an unwelcome counterweight to the domination of public-sector jobs as a monopolized gift of the regime [Malik and Awadallah, 2013]. Economists do not often consider a robust private sector as a political threat to the public sector. In the Arab world this prospect is well understood.

The old social contract worked reasonably well throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s. State-centered economic policies were permissive of expansive—and expensive—protections. However, by the 1980s that implicit arrangement was becoming more difficult to implement, and by the early years of the 1990s, the strains gradually became untenable [Yousef, 2004]. Consider Figure 1. Here we see the trajectory of total resource rents as a percent of GDP since 1980.

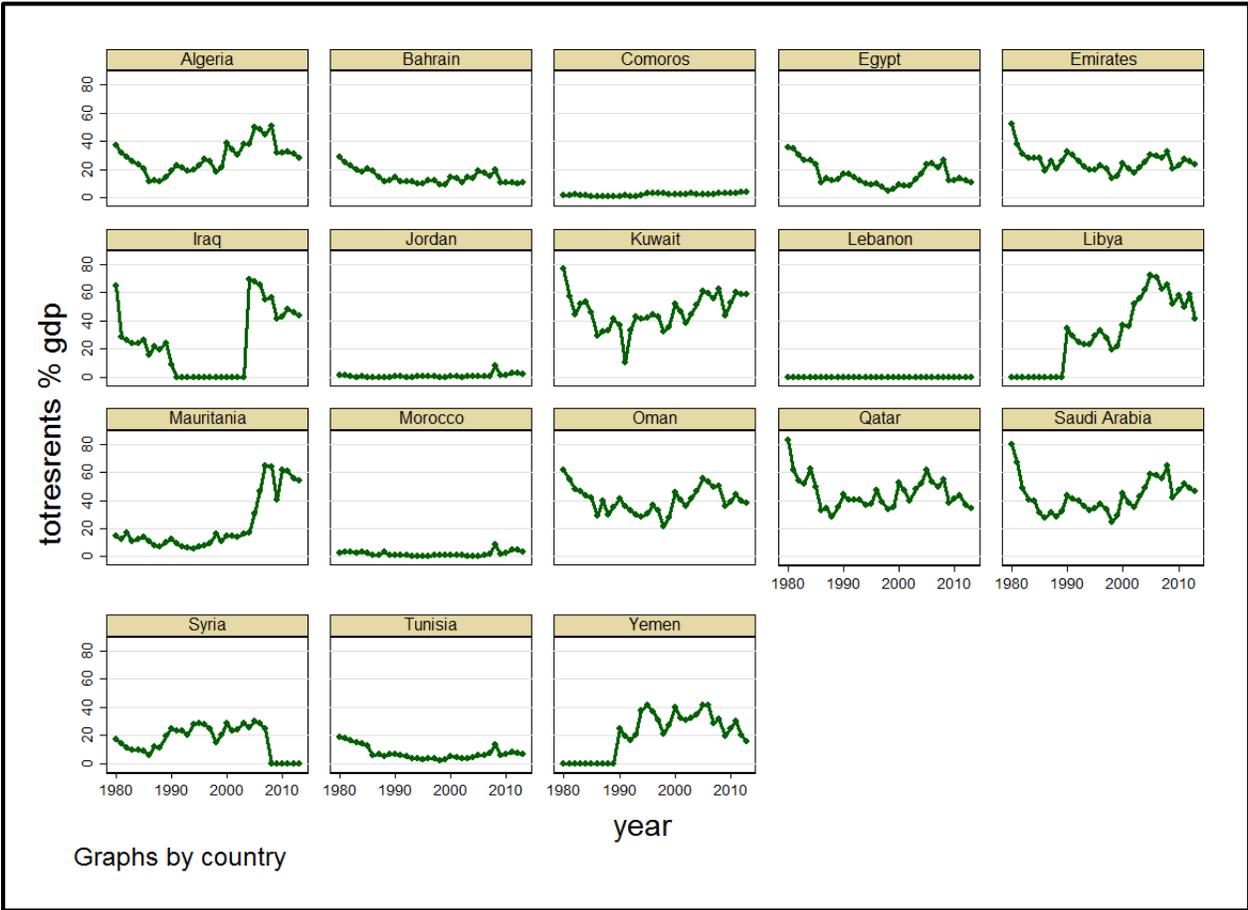


Figure 1. Total Resource Rent as Percent of GDP: 1980-2012.

Declining oil prices, the shrinking demand for migrant labor that had allowed poorer countries in the region to “export” their redundant low-skilled workers to the vibrant centers of growth (and brought in agreeable remittances)—coupled with world-wide economic problems—conspired to erode the necessary fiscal capacity to uphold government commitments. And then the global recession that began in 2008 delivered the *coup de grace* to the old social contract. This event struck resource-dependent economies as much as it did those who had little reliance on resource rents (Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia).

Then, in 2003, the American invasion of Iraq not only created political chaos where swaggering stability had reigned, it reminded residents of the Middle East that for too long their political leaders had been complicit in their Faustian bargain with the rich “other” in the industrialized world. Many countries in the region had been co-opted as global suppliers of addiction, which then brought in billions of petro dollars to further the ostentation of a very few urban elites. Even thoroughly modern and weakly middle-class Tunisia was not immune—it was, in fact, the first to feel the groundswell of alienation. In hindsight, it should have been obvious that many countries in the region were living on borrowed time.

The history of the Arab world since the end of World War II seems, in hindsight, to be much less about “authoritarianism” than it does about the agile management of monetary and fiscal policy to co-opt urban elites into the game. The reason why authoritarianism “failed” in 2010-2011 is that it was never the reason for the absence of earlier revolts. The reasons for the revolts—as with the reasons for the political peace prior to 1990—are to be found elsewhere.

I now turn to the second regional narrative—that of Islam and institutional stagnation. Within economics one can find proffered explanations that focus on Islam and Islamic law as the

central causal agent for “institutional stagnation” and economic “underdevelopment.” For instance, Timur Kuran, after noting that a millennium ago the Middle East was an economically advanced region, writes:

This essay offers reasons why the Middle East became underdeveloped. In particular, it points to certain Middle Eastern institutions, including ones rooted in the region’s dominant religion, as past and in some case also continuing obstacles to economic development [Kuran, 2004, p. 71].

As examples of institutional stagnation leading to underdevelopment, Kuran mentions:

(1) Islamic inheritance law that is parasitic on capital accumulation; (2) strict individualism and absence of the concept of a corporation that has kept civil society “weak”; and (3) the “waqf”—a trust that allegedly locks resources into organizations that inevitably degenerate into dysfunction with the passage of time. The only problem with this account of alleged stagnation and underdevelopment is that it cannot account for the obvious economic successes in the Arab world during the 1950s-1970s [Yousef, 2004]. If Islamic law and practice strangle economic progress then they must do that handiwork uniformly over time—unless their grip has somehow changed in concert with the changing economic performance of the region. There is no evidence that this is the case. In fact, the evidence suggests that the force of Islamic law and practice is far less than many suppose it to be—and this has been the case during good economic times and bad economic times.

This notion of an all-powerful rigid Islam, and the inevitable “institutional stagnation” emanating therefrom, plays into an unfortunate tendency for outsiders to lament—when pondering the Middle East—“What is wrong with those people.” And we can be sure that what is meant by “those people” is their religion. But the more serious implication of this appeal is its intellectual and historical naiveté. That is, to ask the question is to confuse the reality of human history with the idea of human nature. David Hume would not be amused. More seriously, there

is no such thing as human nature—there is only human history. And it is here that the common understanding of the region goes off the rails.

III. Challenging Exceptionalism

The notion of Middle East exceptionalism captures both convenient stereotypes that impeded clear thought about the region. Authoritarianism plays into the idea that Islam rejects the democratic process, that Islam is some unified hegemon that alone can tame the atomized centrifugal tendencies of the mystical Arab, and that a modern state is antithetical to Islam. The claimed rigidity of Islamic law standing athwart the inevitable march of modernity and economic progress builds on the authoritarian motif, but then seeks to add intellectual heft by shifting the conversation from religion and history to the hard-edged analytical rigor of economic theory. Here is analytical evidence, we are led to believe, proving that institutional stagnation—a convenient *deus ex machina*—stands in the way of efficiency and economic progress. The two sides of the coin are in fact the same side—expressed differently, and aimed at different audiences. The short version is that Islam is to blame.

Progress on this front must start by drawing a clear distinction between a religion and a sect. Religion concerns systems of beliefs, doctrines, rites, sacred texts, and various practices associated with sacred objects and the revealed meaning of human life. Sect, on the other hand, concerns the social organization of a community of those individuals who are affiliated with a specific religion [Barakat, 1993]. And so we find the familiar sects of Druze, Shi'a, Sunni, Alawite, Sufi, and Wahabi in the Islamic world. In other parts of the world sects come in the form of Catholics, Methodists, Lutherans, Baptists, Presbyterians, Unitarians, and Episcopalians. The Arab writer Kamal Salibi calls religious sects simply tribes in disguise.

The original colonialism in the region—the Ottoman Empire—was built on various layers of intermediaries who served as buffers between the general population and distant authoritarian rulers. These intermediaries, who lived among the population and who were thus accessible, were leaders of the various atomized sects. Over time, the former reach and authority of the central government—what we might wish to think of as the Imperial state—withered and was gradually taken over by these sectarian leaders [Barakat, 1993]. The historian of religion Karen Armstrong [2002] often alludes to these intermediaries as the “priestly class.” All sects have them. In the west, they are called parsons, preachers, ministers, priests, pastors, and bishops. In Islam they are the Mullahs, Imams, and assorted clerics.

In light of the colonial history of this region, we can now see why the atomized and fragmented societies of the Arab world have weak levels of social, political, and economic integration. Islam recedes into the shadows. On the African continent, a number of countries have long been places of cultural and religious tension. The long-running civil war in Sudan—eventually resulting in the split into South Sudan and Sudan in July, 2011—is emblematic of this tension. Northern Nigeria is struggling with the threat of Boko Haram. In the recent past, Europeans tried to spread Christianity throughout the region. Now we see a similar move to spread Islam. Both colonial efforts—then and now—drew their purpose and their successes—from weak dysfunctional states. But there is an important difference between then and now. And it is this difference that must now figure prominently in our story.

Contrary to popular opinion, Islam is not a unifying force in the Arab world. Instead, it is a rather abstract entity. The salient organizing principals in the Arab world are the highly tangible sub-entities discussed immediately above—sects. In other words, the history of authoritarian political leaders—first of the Ottoman rulers, and more recently of propped-up

petty dictators—has produced a governing climate in which the sect has become of enduring importance. The sects often organize and operate the schools—thereby assuring continuation of their centrality to local affairs. It is through the sect that the politically disenfranchised individual comes into contact with the appearance—and I stress appearance—of political power and voice. The Arab sociologist Halim Barakat writes that: “These sectarian affiliations are comparable to—indeed, inseparable from—tribalism or ethnicity [Barakat, 1993, p. 125].”

Barakat insists that religion—official Islam—as a spiritual, moral, and integrative force had been in a state of decline long before the emergence of radical jihadists. In fact the Egyptian founder of radical fundamentalist Islam, Sayyid Qutb, died in 1966. His political program of the 1950s was motivated by the weakened and vulnerable position of Islam. It is, after all, weakness, not strength that gives rise to radical insurgents. That lesson is pertinent today. The emergence of sectarian politics is symptomatic of what I call social entropy. In physics, entropy refers to dissipated thermal energy that is unavailable to do work. Entropy is the degree of disorder or randomness in the system. It would be difficult indeed to find a more fitting metaphor for the societies of interest here. Social entropy nicely captures the reality in the Arab world.

The historic creation of social entropy might seem an old problem that ought to be overcome with the passage of time. The cynic looking in on the Middle East, or the entire African continent, is often heard to complain, with abundant frustration, “How long are they going to blame us and our long-dead colonial ancestors for their current problems?” But of course this is the wrong question to ask. The question is impertinent because today’s social and economic relations are the inescapable result of acquired patterns of interaction that endure and often become magnified with the passage of time. Friedrich Nietzsche points out that: “Rational thought is interpretation according to a scheme that we cannot throw off [Nietzsche, 1968, p.

522].” We cannot throw it off because of the customary practices and vested interests that make it valuable to hold on to the habituated scheme. We must remember that the quest for reasons, and reason giving, operates within particular cultural traditions [Bernstein, 1983, p. 130].

Individuals embedded in socially entropic societies cannot change for the same reasons that we ourselves are incapable of immediately rearranging the institutional architecture of our own societies. We would have scant idea how to start. And so individual behaviors in these problematic places are deeply embedded in the attendant patterns of interaction that cannot be thrown off. The German sociologist Max Weber called them our “webs of significance.”

IV. Diagnosing Revolt

The surprises of the Arab Spring, and especially the internal variation within the region, suggest new theoretical insights as well as new empirical realities that govern the dynamics of authoritarianism in the twenty-first century [Bellin, 2012, p. 127].

Bellin’s call for new theoretical insights and “new empirical realities” warrants consideration. In this light, I will deploy a diagnostic econometric model to assess plausible reasons for the dramatic political events in the Arab world that began in December 2010. This approach will allow us to move beyond the standard narratives about authoritarianism and the alleged stifling role of Islam.

The approach here is Aristotelean diagnosis—a method familiar to medical doctors and forensic specialists, but unknown to most social scientists. It is common to assume that there are only two ways of drawing inferences about events in the world—deduction and induction. But of course induction is not a valid inferential program, and so deduction is left to carry the burden. Unfortunately, deduction is not well suited to diagnostic analysis and so we must turn to

abduction, an approach popularized by the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce [Peirce 1957, p. 136]. Peirce called abduction the “method of hypothesis” or “inference to the best explanation.”

By induction, we conclude that facts similar to observed facts are true in cases not examined. By hypothesis [abduction], we conclude the existence of a fact quite different from anything observed, from which, according to known laws, something observed would necessarily result. The former is reasoning from particulars to the general law; the latter from effect to cause. The former classifies, the latter explains

[Peirce, 1957, p. 136].

The abductive syllogism is of the form:

The surprising fact **C** is observed
If **A** were true then C would be expected (and therefore not surprising)
Since **C** is indeed observed, **A** must be true.

It is apparent that civil unrest and revolts are not normal political events and we can therefore consider revolts to be a “surprise” —the “**C**” in the above abductive syllogism.⁴ As we see, abduction then seeks to identify a suite of hypotheses that, if found to be true, might offer insights into the reasons for the surprising event **C**. The “explanatory” hypotheses (**A**) can be derived from economic or political theory, from familiarity with the region under study, or from prior work. In the current case, possible hypotheses might be the sudden rise of powerful Islamist politicians, a drop in oil revenues, betrayal by trusted military leaders, etc. Given the sweep of recent frustrations in the region—exemplified by the self-immolation of a young street vendor in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia—there now seem to be other sources of political unrest. And what, exactly led to this immoderate protest? Mr. Bouazizi had been ticketed for selling goods without a

⁴ Bellin [2012] and Gause [2011, 2013] remind us of just how surprising these revolutions were to Middle East experts.

license. His act of extreme desperation must have been driven by a much deeper and enduring problem too inchoate to be noticed, until it was too late.

I will suggest here that alienation is an important factor in these revolts, and that plausible empirical work requires that we devise ways to assess and analyze alienation in the Arab world. Today, alienation is often taken to mean a state of being angry—as with two people who are alienated. But the important connotation of alienation is one of separateness, of isolation, of being apart from something. In psychology, alienation can imply a condition of estrangement between the imagined self and the perceived objective world. Alienation concerns an individual's perception of self as it comes into contact with the world in which that self must exist and perhaps flourish.

Karl Marx identified alienation as the dominant product of emerging capitalism—first observed in Britain in the latter half of the 18th century. Charles Dickens derived his agreeable fame and income from novelizing alienation. The alienation of interest to both Marx and Dickens had its origins in the emergence of a distinct class of individuals who owned and controlled the means of labor. Capital is the means of labor. Without access to capital, labor cannot perform work. Labor that cannot work does not get paid. Labor that does not get paid cannot eat. For those who do not own capital—they own just their labor power—eating requires that they sell their labor power to someone who owns capital. For such individuals, access to capital is the difference between eating and starving.

Of course in pre-industrial times there had always been lords and landowners. These individuals controlled access to capital in the form of land. In those agrarian societies life for those who did not own or control land was, as Thomas Hobbes put the matter—solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. But of course those difficult times pre-dated the Enlightenment. Then,

one was born into a particular social position and that was the end of the matter. No questions were asked, and social improvement, if any, would need to come in the afterlife. But, the Enlightenment created the individual as a sapient discerning being. And with that, one of the early opportunities to deploy that new-found sapience was to begin to question the new reality that a few local men—and not some mysterious force in heaven—actually controlled the social and economic future of the huddled masses. These local worthies controlled access to capital—factories, land, and specific machines such as spinning wheels and looms. Labor needs access to capital, and capital needs labor. In this unavoidable linkage we find the origins of alienation. Both participants in this technological drama—capitalists and workers—resent the ineluctable need for the other. But of course it is an asymmetric resentment. Workers cannot get by without access to capital, but capitalist can certainly get by without many workers. It is called “labor-saving technology”—and robots are the apotheosis of such desires on the part of capitalists. This knowledge serves to render owners of labor power, cognizant of their own looming dispensability, even more alienated than previously.

But the question lingers—why is there so much alienation in the Arab world? First, we must acknowledge that throughout the world, whether in Africa, Latin America, Europe, Asia, or North America, the single best predictor of civil unrest—turmoil, mayhem, local war, kidnappings, rape, and pillage—is the number of young men with too much time on their hands, and with too little hope for a promising future. Alienation is a male problem, and in the Arab world, where the calming influence of wives and daughters is increasingly attenuated or absent, that translates into a serious social cancer. Consider just a few numbers. In the Arab world, the unemployment rate among the young averages 30 percent. In a few countries—Algeria, Iraq, Mauritania, Somalia, Sudan—unemployment of the young hovers around 45 percent. Another

look at the same problem tells us that of total unemployment in the Arab world, the young account for over 50 percent of that share, and in Algeria, Jordan, Tunisia, Iraq, Djibouti, Somalia, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Mauritania and Sudan, over 70 percent of total unemployment falls on the young. Moreover, since in most of these societies women—young or old—are not expected to work, this is a male problem. Young men are unemployed and unemployable because there are no jobs to be performed. Exporting oil—indeed all resource extraction—is capital intensive and so the demand for labor in such countries is minimal.

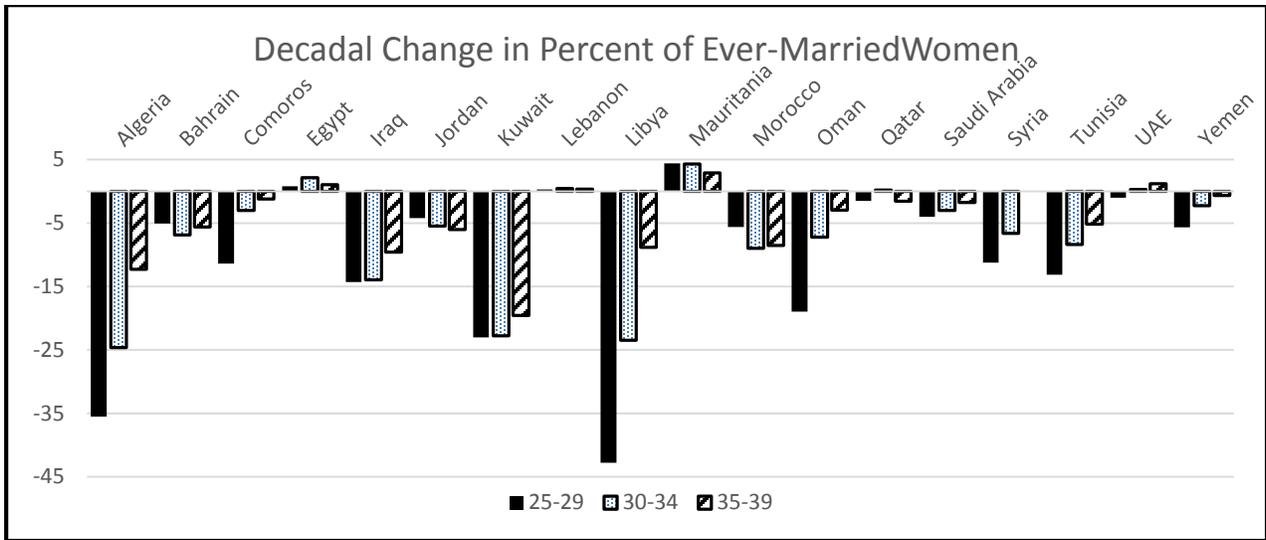
Now for the second pertinent fact in our quest to understand alienation. Marriage in these societies is difficult—perhaps even impossible—in the absence of a job and the ability to prove to a protective and skeptical father that a suitor will be able to provide for his precious daughter. Societies in which young men are closed off from any prospect of female companionship, with no alternative in sight, are not promising places. Males who cannot find work are of course supported by the extended family. But imagine what this does to an individual's self-esteem. And then with marriage and family formation impossible, the pressures of self-doubt escalate accordingly. The next stage is to find someone to blame for this situation of hopelessness and disgust. The sectarian schools, so prevalent because of the dysfunctional public-school system, provide a ready answer. Many such schools are laboratories of both learning and acquired victimhood. As noted, alienation is a condition between the self-perception of the individual and the perceived world out there. If the world available to the individual is one that forces apartness—apartheid in the South African narrative—then there is no hope for social cohesion. My concept of social entropy is precisely concerned with this problem.

To summarize so far, two broad yet related considerations seem to hold some importance for understanding the emergence of alienation in the Arab world. As above, the first of these

concerns employment prospects for the young seeking to enter the work force. We know that high unemployment is a serious problem and so it is important to see if we can document the extent to which problems in the labor market presage political unrest. Moreover, with employment prospects being problematic, marriage and family formation is delayed, and fertility rates—births per woman—fall. We here encounter the second factor that may suggest a way to assess alienation. It is customary to attribute reduced fertility to enhanced education for girls, and to improving prospects for women in the workplace. However, fertility can also fall because of an unwanted increase in age at first marriage.⁵ It is difficult to obtain complete data on this indicator, but there are data on decadal changes in the percent of ever-married women and men for different age cohorts across the Arab world.

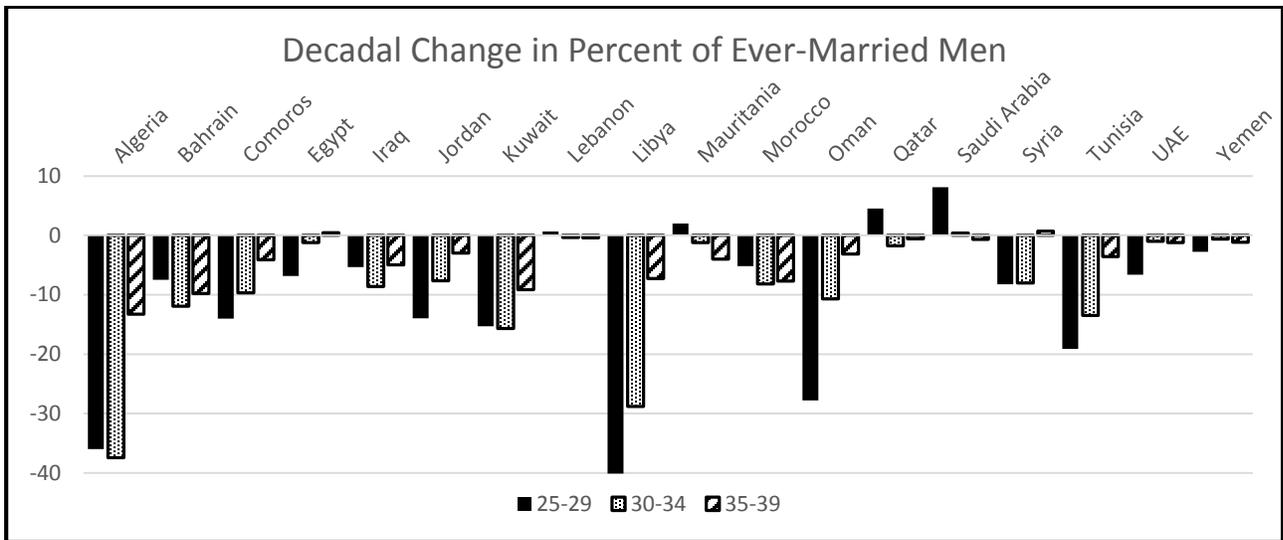
We see in Figures 2a and 2b recent data on changes in the percentage of ever-married women and men in three age categories over the most recent 10-year period for which data can be found. In most instances, the end of that decade is between 2002 and 2006. For a few countries, the decade covers the late-1980s to the late-1990s. We see a quite dramatic drop over a mere 10-years in the percent of both women and men who are considered “ever-married.” Data for women (Figure 2a) in Algeria, Comoros, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Syria, and Tunisia are particularly striking. For men (Figure 2b), we see that conditions are severe in every country with the exception of Egypt, Lebanon, Mauritania, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, and Yemen. It is reasonable to suppose—as often appears in the literature on the Arab world—that delayed marriage increases the proportion of disaffected youths. While young women are less prone to take to the streets than are young men, the revolts in Egypt and Tunisia are striking in terms of female protestors—many with college degrees.

⁵ The term for this in demography is singulate mean age at marriage—smam. For detailed work on this topic in the Arab region see Rashad [2000, 2013].



Source: U.N. 2013.

Figure 2a. Recent Decadal Change in Percent of Ever-Married Women.



Source: U.N. 2013.

Figure 2b. Recent Decadal Change in Percent of Ever-Married Men.

Another obvious consideration is the recent history of inflation. If food and other necessities are becoming more expensive, and if those items have been subsidized in the recent past in the service of social peace, inflation can be a very important factor in a tendency toward alienation and political instability. In societies with relatively well-off urban elites, and masses of

much poorer urban and rural residents, inflation reminds the poor—aware of elaborate glittering shopping malls in capital cities—that they are being left behind in the modern consumerist economies of the region.

V. Modeling Revolt

The foregoing discussion motivates an abductive econometric model in which the event to be explained, revolt, is modeled as a probabilistic event influenced by the above-mentioned suite of variables. Summarizing those considerations, there seem to be good reasons to identify a limited number of plausible constituents of the vector \underline{A} —high male unemployment, delayed marriage and subsequent family formation, reduced fertility, and the record of inflation. These constituents of \underline{A} will stand as the testable hypothesis that might bring empirical clarity to the surprising results C . The value of the diagnostic approach lies in the realization that if we can identify a set of plausible reasons for observed revolts then we will have a reasonable idea of which events or government actions (or inactions) are plausibly associated with—contributory to—those specific outcomes.⁶ The intuitive form of the model to be estimated is:

$$\Pr(Y = 1 | X_1, X_2, \dots, X_k) = F(\beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \dots + \beta_k X_k) \quad (1)$$

The formal model is given by equation (2).

$$Y_i = \alpha_i + \delta_t + \beta X_{it} + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (2)$$

where Y_i is the binary (0, 1) dependent variable, α_i and δ_t are fixed (country) effects and time effects, respectively, X_{it} is the matrix of country-specific variables, and ε_{it} is an error term. This equation yields the probability of revolt ($Y_i=1$) as a function of a suite of independent variables in

⁶ See Appendix Table 1 for a list of the countries.

the matrix X_{ii} . The β coefficients in a Linear Probability Model are a measure of the change in the probability of revolt—evaluated at the mean of the independent variable.

We proceed by a two-stage instrumental variable model in which I first estimate an OLS model concerning the factors that appear to influence the endogenous variable depicting the delay of marriage of females between the ages of 20 and 24 (femar2024). The results in Table 1 reveal that this model has quite high explanatory power. Principal considerations seem to be whether or not the country is a kingdom, the extent of inflation, the degree of male unemployment (between ages of 15 & 24), child bearing (fertility), and delayed marriage of males between the ages of 20 and 29. With the exception of inflation, four of these variables are very highly statistically significant in their association with delayed marriage of females aged 20-24. It is of course obvious that if female marriages are delayed then male marriages will also be delayed.

The second-stage regression results in Table 1 show the variables that increase the probability of revolt. With the exception of delayed marriages among 20-24 year-old females, all variables are very highly significant, and their signs comport with what might be expected. A check of elasticities of the independent variables reveals that a 1% increase in the cpi (at its mean) is associated with a 1.03% increase in the likelihood of revolt, a 1% increase in male unemployment is associated with a 1.2% increase in the tendency to revolt, and a 1% drop in fertility is associated with a 2.1% increase in the tendency to revolt. The results in Table 1 satisfy tests for heteroscedasticity, endogeneity, and multicollinearity.

Table 1. Linear Probability Model for Tending to Revolt

VARIABLES	ols	2sls
	femar2024	Revolt
femar2024		-.0230 (.0146)
kingdom	-.2593*** (.0928)	-.1060*** (.0356)
d.cpi	-.0032 (.0052)	.0190*** (.0050)
malunemp (15-24)	-.0073*** (.0028)	.0037*** (.0017)
L.fertility	.0976*** (.0355)	-.0469*** (.0176)
mamar2029	.8892*** (.0237)	
Constant	.1247 (.1806)	.1549 (0.0810)
Observations	202	202
R-squared	0.8199	0.2337

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

In Figure 3 we see the trajectories of the second-stage model of Table 1 that predicts the likelihood of revolt—with insufficient data for Comoros and Mauritania. Notice the respective trajectories for the five “Arab Spring” countries—Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen. In Figure 4 I show the probabilities as histograms for the years 2010 and 2011.

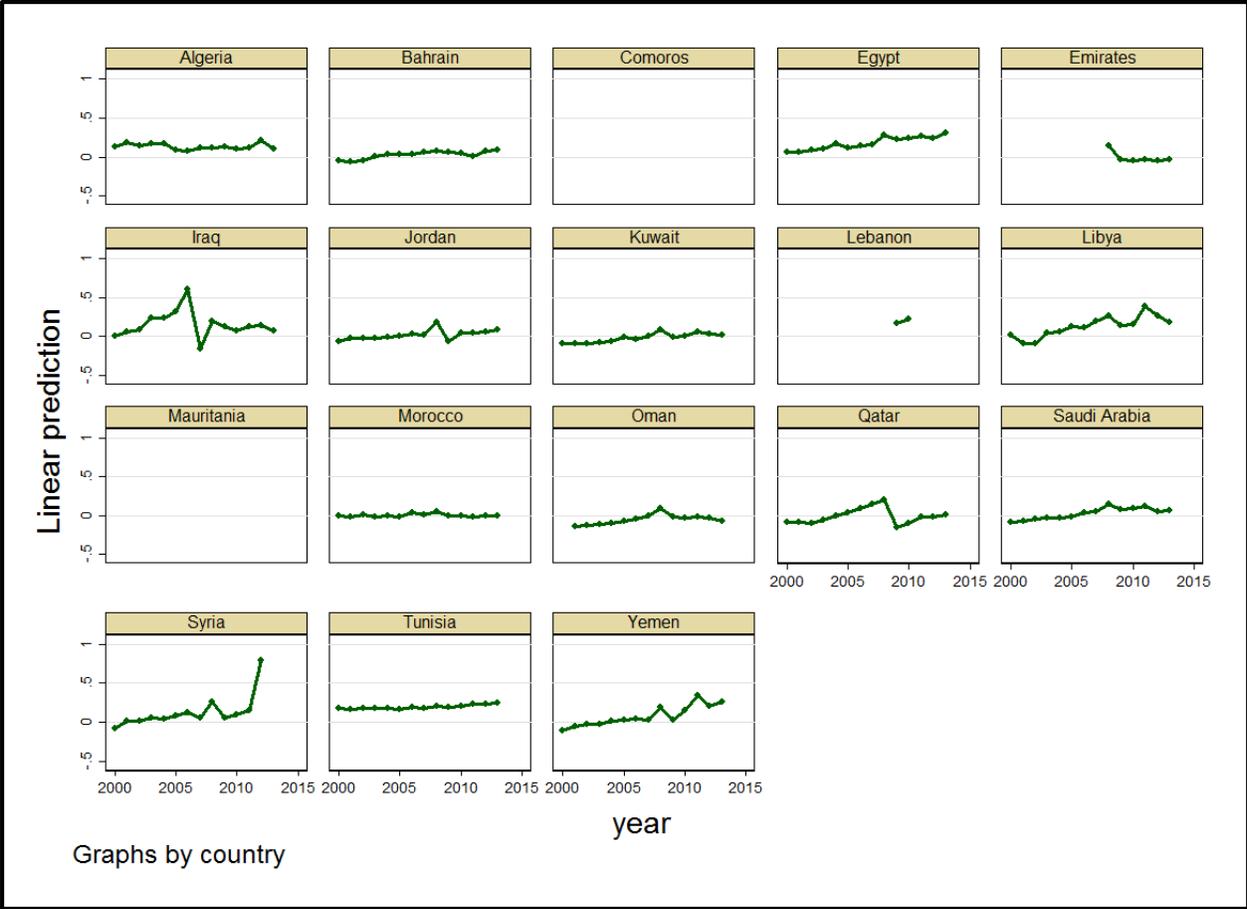


Figure 3. Trajectories to Revolt

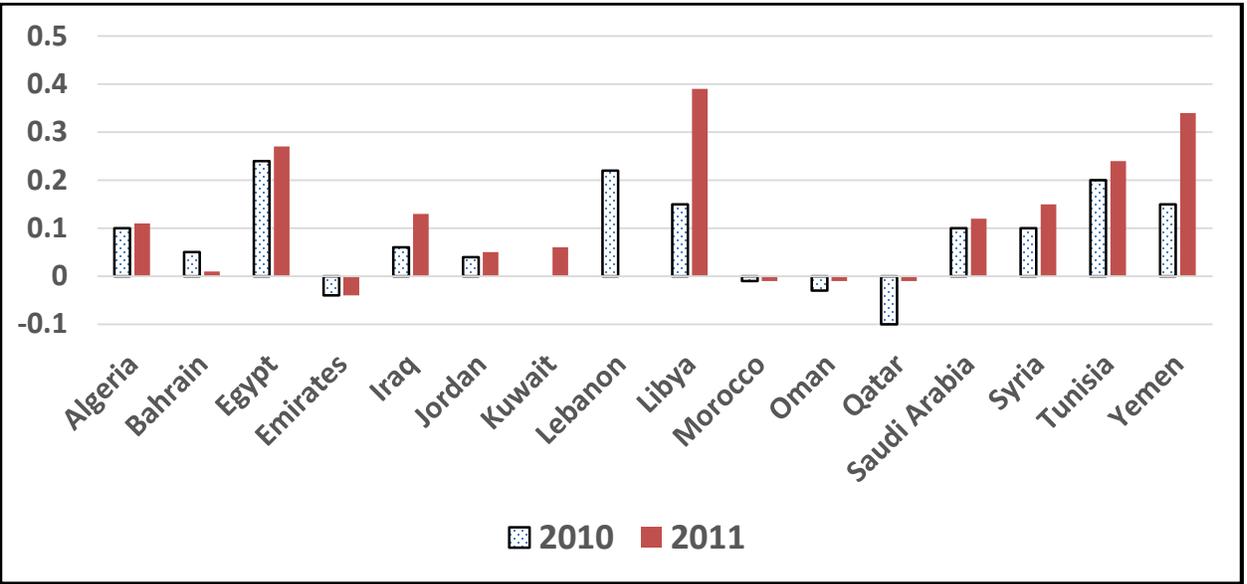


Figure 4. Probabilities of Revolt: 2010 and 2011

One obvious observation here is that the tendency to revolt seems somewhat correlated with the larger (territorially) countries in the region—as opposed to the “city states.” We see an indication of just how difficult it can be to extend governance across large regions with little economic potential. As we know, upon the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire following World War I, several European governments established new colonial “protectorates” in the Middle East. These acts of opportunistic political expropriation and contrived geography came several generations after the infamous “Scramble for Africa” that had produced the equally flawed national boundaries in North Africa (and the remainder of sub-Saharan Africa) [Pakenham, 1991]. These new “judicial” states—judicial by virtue of their official recognition by the international community (via the United Nations)—still exist as the artificial creations of colonialism rather than as the gradually evolved and delicately negotiated empirical nation-states of Western Europe. In other words, in the Middle East and North Africa (and in other colonized venues), the idea and reality of “nationhood” is an alien transplant imposed under external occupation and duress. This is well understood. What remains under-theorized is the profound implications of this political history for contemporary governance—with particular attention to the reach of governance across space.

As European nations lost interest in their colonial possessions, particularly following World War II, the newly independent governments adopted a practice of governance in accordance with the inherited colonial model. The difference between the historically negotiated boundaries of Europe, and the imposed boundaries of the Arab world is profoundly important for understanding the current practice of governance in these “notional states.” In Europe, the different political centers (capital cities) coveted a bounteous asset base worth fighting over and controlling. The various European states became strong—they created effective governance

protocols across space—in the 18th and 19th centuries because they had to be strong to resist alien conquest. In contrast, the colonial states of the Middle East and North Africa, victims of externally imposed boundaries were born weak because they had no reason to be strong. The hinterland was of minimal economic value, and the various colonial administrations would protect the spatial extent of each of their “possessions” (that is why they were called “protectorates”).

At independence, these political structures and processes, historically centered on capital cities, remained that way—and do so to this day. These states were (and are) weak because, unlike those in Europe, they have never had compelling reasons to be strong.

The meager economic value attributable to most land in the region—and thus the minimal political importance of individuals occupying that land—offers a reason why some governments have shown scant interest in the hinterland and the people who live there.⁷ And by showing little interest in the impecunious hinterland there are no good reasons for governments to expect those individuals scattered across such vast spaces to hold their governments in high esteem. The economic and political estrangement is reciprocal. Those far from capital cities get nothing from the central government—and they give little to it. And the government, getting little in the way of tangible benefit—tax proceeds—from occupants of the hinterland, are unable to find good reasons to pay them any attention. In an ironic twist of conventional political thought, it seems that here is an example of “no taxation, and no representation [Kamrava, 2014, p. 22].”

⁷ It must be acknowledged that the tremendous oil and mineral wealth of a number of Arab countries is very different both spatially and politically from the extensive reaches of superb agricultural land throughout Western Europe. Such gifts of nature were certainly worth protecting and fighting for throughout history. It was this necessity to protect widely dispersed and highly valued assets that produced the strong states of Western Europe.

The stark political irrelevance of those in the hinterland is offset by the profound political influence of urban elites [Barakat, 1993]. And since urban elites have always known how to get what they want from urban-based governments, there are few good reasons for governments to create and nurture governance structures and processes whose purpose is to deliver goods and services to the rural dis-empowered. Good governance takes effort and considerable financial commitment. Good governance requires the conscious act of intending [Bromley, 2008; Bromley and Chavas, 1989]. Very few governments in the region seem to believe that “intending” offers valuable returns.

VI. The Globalization of Alienation: A Worrisome Trend

The common element throughout this troubled region is the existence of a small class of wealthy elites who control all political outcomes. The middle class in such places is of trifling importance and cowed into submission by the careful use of religious dogma. The poor count for little—and hunker down in their misery. Political and economic alienation go hand in hand.

The financial crisis of 2008-2012 may be over for many. But the mere existence of that crisis, and the durable nature of its ramifications in terms of stagnant wages, persistent unemployment, and dashed dreams for millions, warrant great concern. The extreme economic bifurcation of living standards in the United States—now the most unequal in the industrial world—presents ominous signs that must not be ignored. A recent report from OXFAM indicates that in 2014, the richest 1% of individuals in the world owned 48 percent of total wealth, leaving the remaining 99 percent with just 52 percent [Oxfam, 2015]. And of course the world’s richest individuals are overwhelmingly to be found in the 10-12 richest countries. Perhaps wealth disparities and alienation will no longer be confined to the Middle East and North Africa.

As we reflect back on the troubles in the Arab world, and in light of the foregoing diagnostics, several closing thoughts seem warranted. The region is so closely tied to oil that we must start there. World oil markets are now more unstable than at any time since the Arab oil embargo of 1972-73. There are reasons to believe that oil prices will remain low into the near future. This trend holds serious implications for a number of countries around the world. Equally important, economic growth in China, India and Brazil is slowing down, and the oil content of their GDP is falling. The world's rich industrialized economies—the OECD countries—are also languishing and well poised to continue to enjoy the benefits of increased fuel efficiency.

It is reasonable to suggest that historians will look back on the world financial crisis of 2008-2012 as the turning point in the global energy market. With slowing world population growth, with energy efficiency gains beginning to accumulate, and with individual energy use gradually falling, the historic transition from wood to coal and then to oil is now entering its endgame in which renewables will finally eliminate the pressing threat of energy scarcity. This is good news for countries in the Arab world who have been trapped in a role for which they were not well suited.

These changes will, I suggest, generate profound political change throughout the region. The dictatorships we have known—Qaddafi, Sadat, Nasser, Mubarak, al Assad, Saddam, Ben Ali, and a few other lesser lights—were the product of a now-ending world oil economy. They were as addicted to oil money as the rest of the world was addicted to their oil. They were convenient and agreeable authoritarians who served global capitalism—and its profligate consumption habits very well indeed. They also served another useful purpose after World War II—they could be counted on to be reliable against the spread of communism.

It is important to recognize that the “Arab street” is post-ideological—in both the religious sense as well as yesterday’s struggles of the Cold War. The President of Egypt recently visited a Coptic Christian church on their Christmas Eve (January 6, 2015) to insist that religion counted for nothing—they are “all Egyptians now.” This is but the first step in the process of creating a national identity of such familiarity to the rest of the world. The Westphalian system may yet emerge in this troubled region. This emerging political covenant will generate, I predict, a much-needed commitment to economic diversification that will allow these countries to turn their back on the bad old days of being the world’s primary exporters of addiction. A number of these countries have the water resources and the land base to become major agricultural engines of economic growth. That differential comparative advantage across a generally dry and inhospitable region suggests that we will begin to see enhanced prospects for regional economic cooperation based on food production, medical services, engineering, and tourism.

This economic transformation will not happen in the absence of political change, and the political change will be impossible without the emerging economic diversification I mentioned above. However, these linked transformations are impossible without a new strategic partnership between countries in the Arab world and the rich industrialized world. Recall that the west became rich from burning their oil. It is now time for the industrialized world to participate in a multi-year program of genuine development partnerships that will help these countries escape the perverse legacy of their colonial past.

This development agenda implies that the region’s political leaders will gradually begin to collaborate with the industrialized world in a long-game of resistance to ISIS and other threats to regional stability. Soft military interventions, selective sanctions, and degrading initiatives will obviously be needed. But, international donors must also be prepared to make significant

investments that will foster economic diversification all across the Middle East and North Africa. We are now entering a necessary era of state-building throughout the Arab world. This new initiative must actually extend further to the east as well—encompassing both Afghanistan and Pakistan. A century of state-driven dysfunction is about to end. The diagnostic approach offered here is but one small step in understanding the reasons for revolts, and for gaining insights about what might be needed to preclude future revolts.

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Appendix Table 1. Countries In Econometric Models

Country
Algeria
Bahrain
Egypt
Emirates
Iraq
Jordan
Kuwait
Lebanon
Libya
Morocco
Oman
Qatar
Saudi Arabia
Syria
Tunisia
Yemen

Appendix Table 2. Variables in Linear Probability Models*

kingdom	Dummy variable (0,1) if the country is ruled by a monarch
cpi	Consumer price index
femar2024	Decadal drop in ever-married females aged 20-24
fertility	Total births per woman
malunemp	Unemployment of males 15-24 years of age
mamar2029	Decadal drop in ever-married males aged 20-29

*All data, unless otherwise noted, are from the latest web-edition of the World Bank's World Development Indicators. Data on labor force participation and employment are from country-specific models of the International Labour Office.