

## Anatomy of an Arab Transformation

Written by Lara Setrakian, Contributing Editor  
Tuesday, 20 March 2012 14:54

---



More than a year's worth of systemic change in the Middle East still goes by an unsettled set of monikers: the Arab Spring, the Arab Upheaval, the Arab Awakening. But one phrase captures the effect, where we stand in the arc of a longer process. This is the age of the Arab Transformation—morphing life at every level. Beyond simply taking stock, it's worth examining the transformative machine that's being built, a kind of societal engine clicking into place that will drive the region for the rest of our lifetimes.

The strands of change can be pulled into three tiers. First is transformation at 35,000 feet—cruising altitude, above most of the weather, in this case the day-to-day political storms. That's the regional level, where broad power equations have shifted and are still in flux. With the crippled state of Bashar Al Assad's regime, the axis of Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas is now broken at the kneecaps. What was once Egypt the military monolith, underwriting a pro-U.S. Arab alignment, has faded with Mubarak's end. Alliances that had long shaped a security architecture—the peace between Israel and Egypt, ties between Turkey and Israel—have frayed. In the muddle lies the new partnership of Iran and Iraq, with Baghdad's service as an economic and diplomatic lifeline for Tehran. Sectarian fault lines are sharper, the Sunni-Shiite line more heated and deadly. And even though Arab Kings still reign, the model of dynastic politics is now in question. Why should the 'sons of' rule? That club is fading from favor.

One level down is transformation at 10,000 feet. There you see countries, societies at large reshaped. Regimes have lost their heads in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Yemen. But even where there hasn't been regime change, regimes have changed. Governments are now afraid of their people, not just the other way around. That prods policy in a new direction: Gulf rulers handing out money to keep people happy, monarchs in Morocco, Jordan, Oman, and Kuwait inching

## Anatomy of an Arab Transformation

Written by Lara Setrakian, Contributing Editor  
Tuesday, 20 March 2012 14:54

---

toward more representative systems.

We are watching the Arab democratic experiment. The fullness of its outcomes will bring the answers to long held questions. Can an Arab majority rule, without obliterating the minority? Can there be a battlefield of ideas that doesn't devolve into actual battle? In the ascent of Islamist parliaments, what constitutions will they write? Is there a post-Islamic political framework? Where lie individual rights, as religion reshapes society? Because for now, across the Arab world, faith is the dominant force.

At the next level comes transformation on the ground, where you see the change in individual lives. Revolution has brought a renaissance of identity, a transformed sense of self. With a rebirth of courage comes a flourishing of culture and innovation. Arab creatives have more to say and more room to say it, while millions of people who long kept quiet are finding their voice. Business has more room to grow, without the old regime taking its cut. The downside of that freedom is the insecurity of a power vacuum—the once unthinkable fear of a bombing in Damascus, politicized clashes in Libya, sporadic violence in Cairo, a humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen.

The renaissance of identity has lifted Arab self-esteem. In the mind of young Arabs, I am suddenly someone who can change the world. I am not a cog in the state's machine. In Arabic there are two words that convey the shift: 'musayyar' vs. 'mukhayyar.' To be 'musayyar' means you're dictated to, told what to do, what to think, what to eat. In contrast, 'mukhayyar' comes from the word for options; it is the state of having a choice. I am the chooser, the agent of freedom and free will. 'Mukhayyar' is the phase we're in, for the first time in an Arab lifetime.

That human agency is amplified by a broader group renaissance, as social networks become social movements. Up to and through the revolutions, Twitter and Facebook were catalysts and connective tissue, an enabling barometer, which proved that everyone was mad together and willing to rage against the regime. Today those tools have built a culture of collective action, where communities and individuals act with accountability. The poorest neighborhoods of Cairo have organized grassroots teams to police traffic and clean up the streets. Kuwaitis working to get out the vote have launched campaigns coaching people to look beyond their tribe and sect at the ballot box. An ownership mindset is moving individuals to act, while collective action is pooling their efforts. Together, it is a revolution in how the Arab world works.

The Arab transformation has come through incredible passion—people are so invested in

## Anatomy of an Arab Transformation

Written by Lara Setrakian, Contributing Editor  
Tuesday, 20 March 2012 14:54

---

change that more than a year after the first protest they are still willing to bleed and die for it. Through fits and fires, undeterred by the pitfalls of a massive political shift, their passion is making the new Middle East.

**Lara Setrakian** ([@lara](#)) is a foreign correspondent based in Dubai for Bloomberg Television and ABC News. She is a member of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, the Young Professionals in Foreign Policy, and the World Economic Forum's Young Global Leaders. **This article was adapted from a talk at Summit Basecamp, the 2012 event by the Summit Series, a community of entrepreneurs and global game-changers.**

*This article was originally published in the Diplomatic Courier's March/April edition.*