

From the Collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe to the Arab Spring: Lessons for Democratic Transition

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Abstract:

The last two years have witnessed an unexpected series of events unfolding in the Arab World leading us to make comparisons with the fall of Communism in 1989. Developments in the Middle East and North Africa made headway at a rapid pace. The overthrow of governments in Tunisia and Egypt, the civil war in Libya and the ongoing inner conflicts in Bahrain, Syria and Yemen were just as unexpected and stunning as the fall of communism in Eastern Europe. It is ironic that many observers attempting to make sense of these events have chosen the term 'Arab Spring' to define this movement, which somehow recalls the Eastern European analogue 'Prague Spring' in 1968. Many political scientists and analysts viewed these events taking the fall of Communism as a common point of reference. The Arab Spring is reminiscent of the Eastern European Revolutions in 1989 in many respects, yet a deeper analysis shows that significant similarities are outweighed by key differences. This paper attempts to address the recent wave of democratization which has swept across the Arab world in a comparative context and discuss the similarities and differences between the Arab Spring in 2011 and the fall of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989.

Keywords:

Arab Spring, democratic transition, Eastern Europe, collapse of communism, regime change

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Introduction

A wave of democratization which originated in Portugal and Spain in the 1970s with the fall of dictatorships spread over Latin America where military regimes gave up power to civilian governments. Then came the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe¹ beginning in 1989. Later democratic transitions swept through Sub-Saharan Africa in the mid-1990s and occurred in some parts of Asia. This global democratization trend since the mid-1970s was termed the ‘Third Wave of Democratization’ by Samuel Huntington. The end of the Cold War signaled that respectable alternatives to democracy were nonexistent in terms of expressed ideologies while at the same time demonstrating the strength of democracy as it has advanced both normatively and practically since the mid-1970s within most regions of the world.²

Most recently, we have witnessed regional political upheavals which have irreversibly transformed the Middle East. The self-immolation of Muhammed Bouazizi in 2010 was a spark which initiated demonstrations and spread to neighboring cities leading to the toppling of the long-lasting Ben Ali’s dictatorial regime. The overthrow of Ben-Ali in Tunisia triggered popular political action against Mubarak regime in Egypt. Thousands of protesters gathered in Tahrir Square to force Mubarak to resign which culminated in the transfer of power to the military. A few days after the Mubarek’s fall, protests against Muammer Qadhafi broke out in Bengazi and spread across the other parts of the country and after months of apparent deadlock, with the aid of Nato intervention, Qaddafi’s regime was toppled. In Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria protests and uprisings erupted, initiating a vicious cycle of repression and further protests, which led to serious internal fracturing and contestation.³ The Arab World has long been regarded as a region which is more solid than any other region and untouched by democratic change over the decades. This mass-mobilization and movement towards democratization in the Middle East was unexpected and stunning just like the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the fall of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe. In an attempt to understand the Arab Spring, most political scientists looked backwards and tried to make sense of this movement by comparing it with the European analogue in 1989. Given the striking parallels between two regions, some analysts used metaphors such as “the fall of Berlin Wall in the Arab World” whereas in academia it has been debated whether the Arab Spring could be deconstructed within the Third Wave of Democratization.⁴

The notion of ‘transition paradigm’ suggesting that countries which move from authoritarian rule toward democracy through a sequence of stages has been largely rejected.⁵ Although in the third wave most countries moved from authoritarian rule towards a more democratic system, in each of the regions the transition experience displays completely different stories in terms of causes, ways, timing, and pace. Looking at the post-communist transition experience, very divergent outcomes are apparent. Although the former states of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia have gone through the common experience of the fall of the Soviet Union and the demise of the Warsaw Pact, today the world faces a markedly different political situation in those countries. Two decades after the fall of the Berlin wall and the iron curtain, most states in Central and Eastern Europe have made considerable progress in democratization and transition towards market economy and are consequentially regarded as consolidated democracies. Yet, these developments are in contradiction with the current situation in Central Asia and the Caucasus, where democratization has either ceased, was faced with a setback, or not initiated at all. After the fall of the Soviet Union, many countries have fallen into the ‘gray zone’ of diverse forms of government that combine authoritarian and democratic features.⁶ Political scientists have invented new terms such as authoritarian democracy, managed democracy or hybrid regimes to describe the current situation in countries like Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. Thus, it is commonly accepted that there is no single theory or a roadmap which accounts for why some countries achieve a successful transition towards democracy whereas others fail. Instead of making huge generalizations, highlighting the factors which trigger or impede transition process is important in drawing lessons from past experience for future transitions. In that respect, this paper aims to shed light on commonalities and differences between the post-communist transition and the Arab Spring. In the first section, parallels drawn

between the two sets of regime changes are highlighted. Then, key differences are raised with respect to the factors that determine the success story of the Eastern transition and some potential pitfalls that Arab countries could face. Finally, it is debated whether some lessons could be drawn for the Arab Spring from the post- Communist experience.

What Parallels can be Drawn Between the Collapse of two Regimes?

Apparently, there are a number of similarities between the Arab uprisings of 2011 and the revolts of 1989-1991 that transformed the Communist Europe and the former Soviet Union. Huntington put forward five main causative factors for the rise of the Third Wave of Democratization including a decrease in legitimacy of authoritarian regimes, lack of economic development and outbreak of economic crisis, snowballing (demonstration effects), changes in the Catholic Church and new policies of external actors, among which the former three seem to be prominent in both regions.⁷ The revolts of 1989 and the Arab uprisings indicate that decrease in the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes may turn into mass movements in the long term. The existing regimes that were the object of revolts represented multiple decades of authoritarian rule developing a virtual monopoly of power, highly repressive techniques of control, and a privileged inner circle surrounding the top leader and his family or close associates.⁸ The socio-economic grievances such as rampant corruption in government institutions, further deterioration of economic conditions, humiliation of citizens and failure to provide adequate public services were endemic in both cases.⁹ Unlike the communist regimes, high unemployment especially among the youth, internal and regional social inequalities were also catalysts for the Arab uprisings. In terms of material and social well-being, both the pre-1989 communist governments and the Arab autocracies had central-planned economies which failed to provide the quality of life aspired by the majority of their citizens. For both the communist and the non-oil rich Arab countries, economic performance lagged behind those economies with which the populations tended to make comparisons such as the East Germans looking across the Iron Curtain to the Federal Republic of Germany or the Egyptians and Syrians aspiring greater prosperity and freedom in their nearby Europe and Turkey than at home.¹⁰ In both regions, there was also a growing educated middle class who started to be cynical about their governments' legitimacy and efficiency in generating commensurate job opportunities and material rewards.¹¹ While the communist regimes were apparently eliminating virtually all opposition, most of Arab autocrats pretended to be democratic by permitting only token opposition and creating an electoral playing field which indeed left no room for any opposition. The communist regimes had exerted a greater degree of totalitarianism than the Arab autocracies, yet both sets of regimes were highly repressive, corrupt, and nontransparent.

Comparing the Arab Spring with the revolts in the Eastern Europe in 1989, snowballing (domino effect) was the most obvious factor which influenced both regions substantially. Snowballing is strongest among countries that are geographically close and culturally similar. Given that the Arab countries share a common language, culture and religion, snowballing effect was particularly important. Throughout Eastern Europe having come to power, the reformist Solidarity in Poland pushed for change in other countries. People in the neighboring countries could see that it was possible to bring down authoritarian systems and how to do it. Today a similar pattern of snowballing effect in North Africa and the Middle East has emerged. In the Arab Spring, protests in Tunisia inspired protests in Egypt, which later snowballed throughout the region. Snowballing was even more obvious with the widespread use of social media. Dalacoura argues that an explanation of how grievances were channeled into collective action in 2011 emphasizes the role of the media which allowed the revolts to spread across borders and brought people onto the streets.¹² The Qatar-based Al-Jazeera broadcasted the protests in Egypt and Tunisia while social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter were commonly used to organize the revolts in addition to connecting protesters to one other and the outside world. In a sense, media and especially social media were an inseparable component of the Arab uprisings that heightened the power of domino effect. Studies have shown that having democratic neighbors on average increases the likelihood of a country being democratic.¹³ Through this prism, if Egypt

and Tunisia manage to develop consolidated democracies, this could affect the democratization prospects for the rest of the region in the long term. Consequently, the Arab Spring appears to be at least a democratizing attempt largely unpredicted and very surprising just like the fall of the Soviet Union and the communist regimes in Eastern Europe.

How does the Arab Spring Differ from the Collapse of Communism?

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Given certain similarities in their initial stage, the Arab Spring was likened to the post-communist transitions. Though this kind of comparison would be useful in eliminating the widespread belief that the Arab world is unique in terms of resistance to democratic change, such a comparison needs caution. There are a number of structural conditions that need to be elaborated while comparing the Arab Spring with the revolts of 1989. These are (1) the nature of regimes, (2) the mode of regime change, (3) past experience with political pluralism and civil society, (4) the role of military, (5) social cohesion and stateness, (6) external environment and (7) the impact of oil and Islamism. These structural conditions double as the factors considered important in democratization literature and they will affect the pace and success of Arab countries' transition process. Obviously these are not all the possible factors, but they are supposed to be the most influential ones in the context of democratic transition and by analyzing these factors, some lessons could be drawn from the post-communist transition experience for the Arab Spring.

Nature of Regimes in Eastern Europe and the Arab Countries

Prior to the revolts of 1989, the communist regimes of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union had one dominant ideology and highly similar forms of governments. Yet, the Arab regimes vary significantly both in their official ideologies and internal organization, ranging from limited forms of political pluralism to one-man dictatorships. Miller *et al.* categorizes regime types in the Arab world into two groups; hybrid regimes and authoritarian regimes. Hybrid regimes are the ones that have some institutions associated with democracy yet fall short of popular rule and accountability; Lebanon, Kuwait and Iraq fall into this category.¹⁴ The region contains a wide range of authoritarian regimes among which there are seven monarchies: Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Morocco, Jordan and Oman. Before the Arab Spring there were six republics headed by long-ruling autocrats: Syria, Yemen, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia and Egypt. As of early 2012, Tunisia was an electoral democracy at its initial stage; Egypt held parliamentary elections but has been experiencing a more uncertain transition than Tunisia while autocratic leaders have been removed in Libya (violently) and Yemen (through negotiation), but the transition process had hardly begun.¹⁵ Since March 2011, Syria has been going through civil war and the situation remains uncertain.

Some Arab countries have relatively well-established government institutions, whereas others have highly personalized one-man dictatorships such as Qaddafi and Saleh. Ideologically, these countries rested on a wide range of political ideologies from Baathist secularism to Wahabi Islam and sectarian divisions such as Sunni, Shiite and Sufi, combined with some forms of Arab nationalism (pan-Arabism) and Nasserite statism. In terms of regional relationships, the former communist countries of Eastern Europe formed a single geopolitical bloc which was dominated by Moscow and their political agendas and security issues were highly uniform, but the Arab countries today are faced with the weakest supranational ties through the Arab League. A further distinctive characteristic of the Arab world is that individual Arab countries have varying alliances and affinities with powers outside the region. External alliances such as Egypt-US, Tunisia-France and Syria-Iran are just a few examples. Basora points out that these rival power brokers attempt to exploit various competing ideologies and theologies, most notably the Sunni-Shiite sectarian division, and the divides between fundamentalism, religious moderation and secularism.¹⁶ Moreover, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict serves as a further complicating factor, which has had powerful influence within the region and with respect to external players. Therefore, in comparison to the former communist countries of Eastern Europe, which had uniform internal structures, ideology and alliance, the Arab countries are divergent in their

political systems, ideologies and regional relationships. In that regard, given all those differences, Arab Spring is even more complex than the fall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and it might be misleading to simplify their position in considering the Arab Spring as one set of democratizing attempt and expect similar outcomes from each individual state.

The Mode of Regime Change

The Arab uprisings and revolts of 1989 are quite different from each other in terms of how power has changed hands. At their initial stage, transition to democracy began with mass protests in both sets of revolts except Hungary, where the communists were willing to jump on to the democratic bandwagon even before regime change.¹⁷ However, the way in which regimes changed was obviously different in the post-communist transitions and the Arab Spring. A top-down (elite controlled) regime change including negotiated reform of the regime and the government took place in Eastern Europe whereas a bottom-up change was apparent in the Arab Spring.

Miller *et al.* classifies the transitions in Eastern Europe into three broad types: regime-initiated transitions, society-initiated transitions, and violent overthrow.¹⁸ Hungary, Poland and Bulgaria set precedent for regime-initiated transitions where the impetus for change came within the regime itself and it actually initiated and led the transition. For instance, in the Polish transition, efforts to liberalize began prior to the transition. With the deepening of political and economic crisis in Poland, the Communist Party agreed to hold roundtable discussions with Solidarity in 1989 expecting to gain Solidarity's support for its economic program. These talks culminated in an agreement to hold parliamentary elections and the formation of a noncommunist government. The Communist Party was not totally eliminated from power, rather it shared its power with the Solidarity forces initially. By 1990, with the erosion of the Soviet power in Eastern Europe, the leader of Solidarity reshuffled his cabinet removing the remaining Communist ministers. Thus, the initial transition phase was rather smooth and peaceful. Adding to the success of Polish transition was a strong, well-organized and popular opposition in addition to the role of Catholic Church which mediated between the government and opposition for several years in the 1980s. Secondly, in society-initiated transitions, the impetus for democratization came from within the society. German Democratic Republic (GDR) and Czechoslovakia set example for this type of transition. In these two cases, regimes resisted introducing meaningful reforms and were forced to make sweeping changes as a result of pressure from below. The transitions in Eastern Europe were generally prominent in their peaceful transfer of power with one exception, which is Romania. The initial transition phase of Romania was marked by violent overthrow of Nicola Ceausescu by force and later execution. In that respect, Romania may provide the closest Eastern European parallel to modes of regime change in the Arab World, given the violent rupture experienced there.¹⁹ The reason for such violent overthrow of regime was the highly repressive and authoritarian rule of Ceausescu which prevented the development of any opposition groups or political institutions and left no alternative other than violent revolt. The overthrow of Ceausescu resembles the toppling of regimes in the Arab World such as Mubarak, Ben Ali and Qaddafi.

One of the core assumptions about transition from dictatorship to democracy is that the central dynamic in a transition lies in bargaining between the authoritarian leaders and leaders of the democratic opposition. One reason why mass mobilization was so helpful in democratic transition in the post communist context is that they pushed authoritarian leaders and sometimes even the leaders of opposition to the bargaining table and gave opposition leaders a resource advantage when bargaining with authoritarian elites.²⁰ Bunce states that bargaining about the rules of the transition and the new political order should be limited to a small group of authoritarian elites and representatives of the democratic opposition.²¹ To Huntington, internal factors are the most important factors when it comes to triggering democratization while the role of elites and the existence of a split in the regime is a close second. Huntington stresses the importance of individual agents in the transition to democracy by stating 'democracies are created not by causes but by causers', and successful transition depends on elite choices, perceptions, beliefs and

actions while consolidation of democratic institutions lies in elite pacts and consensus.²² To McFaul, a united opposition- or at least the perception of one- appears crucial for democratic breakthrough.²³ Hence, in Eastern Europe, the existence of strong, united opposition groups such as Solidarity in Poland was key to a smooth transition and stability after the regime change. Likewise, the successful transitions in Eastern Europe were sustained by elite consensus, developed before the transition's opening or in its early stages, which prevented violence and long-lasting chaos in these states.

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In the Arab Spring, the view appears much gloomier with the absence of elite consensus and liberal opposition groups ready to succeed the old regimes. In other words, there is no Arab equivalent of Polish Solidarity movement and the democratic forces are remarkably weak and not unified in the Arab world. They also lack well-established organizations that could penetrate into their societies and mobilize consistent political support. In both Tunisia and Egypt, the best organized opposition groups seem to be rooted in traditions of Islamic movement such as Hizb al-Nahda (Renaissance Party) and Muslim Brotherhood which leads to a big question mark as to whether these groups will be committed to liberal democracy. The situation gets even more complex when the internal divisions within these groups are deconstructed and the hands of holdovers from the old regime are brought to the forefront. In Tunisia, veterans of the old regime continued to dominate the transitional government while in Egypt the military was very much in charge which has led to a growing anxiety about the Islamists' potential alliance with the military.²⁴ Democratization prospects appear to be dimmest in the case of Libya and Syria, even if the authoritarian regime is toppled. Levitsky and Way argue that the most authoritarian regimes are those that augment patronage with nonmaterial ties including family ties, shared ethnicity, or ideology.²⁵ In Syria, the long survival of Assad regime is due to the strong backing from Alawites, a religious minority group that also controls military and intelligence establishment. In the case of Libya where autocracy relied on family ties for decades, the central challenge is not only the potential dominance of old regime elites but also division along family and tribal lines.

In Eastern European transition, the external factor, that is the role of the Soviet Union as a regional hegemony, was vital in initiating transitions. This is because the communist governments of Eastern Europe had been imposed from the outside and survived for decades with the Soviet Union's guarantee. When the Soviet Union began to disintegrate in the late 1980s, these regimes became vulnerable to any revolt from inside. With the sharp economic decline experienced in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the legitimacy of communist parties in Eastern Europe was so weak that once Gorbachev decided to end Soviet Union's extensive backing of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and not to intervene militarily in the Warsaw Pact countries, the survival of regimes was severely challenged. If it hadn't been for the withdrawal of Soviet support for satellite regimes and the demise of the Soviet Union, these regimes could have remained for much longer. The situation in the Arab world is very different. Arab autocracies survived many decades largely by their own means, in some cases thanks to monarchial legitimacy originating from oil revenues, through political patronage, and by means of deeply entrenched national military and police forces.

Despite the overthrow of some Arab governments, the interlocking systems of political patronage, security forces and raw physical coercion, what political scientists refer as "deep state," is trying to hold on to some parts of their privileged role in the new system.²⁶ In contrast, in all of the Eastern European cases the former communist system together with its supporting institutions was completely rejected. We see a similar rejection in Tunisia, but this is not so evident in Egypt where the military has played a key role. From the post-communist experience, comparing the cases of Eastern Europe and Post- Soviet space, it hardly needs stating that the rejection of the former regimes with its institutions is essential for successful democratic transition. In the Arab Spring, the structural underpinnings of the former regimes are still prevalent and it is hardly possible to say that the legacy of Mubarak regime or Qaddafi totally ended as the Arab populations seem to be divided in their support for the previous regimes due to their privileged positions, tribal kinship or sectarian affiliation. According to Way, the contradictory results of the Arab Spring so far- including authoritarian retrenchment in Bahrain,

massive repression in Syria and instability in Libya and Yemen- illustrate that as long as the structural underpinnings of authoritarianism remain diffusion is unlikely to result in democratization.²⁷ Thus, the Arab Spring has acted as a catalyst for pressure for political change but still holdovers from the previous regimes remain strong in the region.

The role of military

One of the contributing factors to these interregional contrasts was the very different role of military in the Eastern transition and the Arab uprisings. From the lessons learned during past transitions in Latin America and Southern Europe most specialists in democratization literature argue that the biggest threat to democracy today, as in the past, is military. The history of military interventions in Latin American and Turkish politics indicates that democracy could be terminated by interference by military. In much of the post-communist world, by contrast, there is a long tradition of civilian control over military. This tradition dates back in Russian history, following the Bolshevik Revolution and demilitarization after the Civil War, this tradition was maintained at home and then after World War II it was projected outward to the members of the Soviet Bloc.²⁸ During the revolts of 1989, military played almost no role in the transition process, with the only exception being Romania.²⁹ The militaries in Eastern Europe were strictly controlled by the Communist Party and had no tradition of acting independently, which made it easier for the new noncommunist elites to neutralize the army and keep it confined to the barracks during the transition. In that regard, civil-military relations appear to be one area where the authoritarian past proved to be beneficial rather than a burden for democratization in the post-communist transition.

The role of military varied among different regimes under threat in the Arab world. Both the Tunisian and Egyptian militaries didn't use force against demonstrators whereas in Libya, Bahrain and Syria, military chose to intervene for the survival of authoritarian regimes. In Libya, the rebels with NATO assistance successfully defeated Qaddafi; in Syria the situation is still uncertain with the ongoing civil war and in Bahrain the military crushed the protest movement with the Saudi Arabian assistance.³⁰ Steiman suggests that in the Arab uprisings, the decision by the military whether to intervene in protests was dependent on the relationship between military and regime and whether the military viewed the survival of regime to be indispensable to their own survival, in which case they would chose to use repressive force against protesters.³¹ On the other hand, if the military concluded that they could survive the overthrow of the regime or even benefit from regime's fall, they refrained from using force against the protesters. This actually indicates the reluctance of military to intervene against protesters in Egypt and Tunisia. In addition, in these countries military enjoys a certain degree of autonomy from the central civilian leadership. In contrast, the military in Libya, Syria and Yemen is not an autonomous institution, but rather a part and parcel of the ruling regime. In Libya's and Yemen's case, Qaddafi and Saleh never built truly modern or autonomous government institutions but rather they secured their rule through tribal alliances. In that sense, in both regimes, military leadership and ruling regimes were essentially the same and their survival was connected to each other. In Syria, in key institutions such as military, intelligence and security services, Assad's family, members of his tribe and fellow members of the Alawite sect were positioned and naturally their interests depended on the regime's survival. Likewise, the role of military in each of these countries has been pivotal in determining the success of mass movements in early transition phases.

In analyzing the dynamics of nonviolent resistance in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria, Nepstad argues that military's decision to remain loyal to the regime or to side with civil resisters heavily shaped the outcomes of the Arab uprisings.³² So far, uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, where military sided with civil resisters, have been successful in toppling the older regimes and moving towards holding elections and making constitutions. The military is not an important actor in the transition process in Tunisia, yet the internal security apparatus built by Ben Ali to maintain control of politics and society seems to be a challenge for democratization.³³ On the other hand, in the Arab socialist republics like Syria and Egypt, given a series of military coups that took place

in the late 50s and 60s and popular support it retains, military has played a key role in regime change or survival. Though military played a crucial role in carrying out regime change in Egypt for a real democratic breakthrough, the challenge lies in bringing military under the democratic civilian control. Thus, ensuring military's support for democratization, despite its strong institutional interests in maintaining its political influence and lucrative business enterprises, will be decisive for the success of democratic transition.

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Past Experience with Political Pluralism and Civil Society

The post-communist experience indicates that civil society is one of the main pillars of democratic transition and consolidation as it promotes political participation, limits and controls the power of government, and develops a sense of democratic values. Today, most experts in democratization literature reject the tabula-rasa approach and regard prior experience with political pluralism and existence of civil society of great significance rather than having to start from scratch. The former communist regimes' ideological and institutional penetration of society was greater than those of authoritarian regimes in the Arab World. However, in some parts of the former communist bloc, some forms of civil society emerged before the fall of communist regimes. A very powerful explanation for the disparate outcomes of the post-communist transition in Eastern Europe lies in civil society and whether these countries had some previous experience with political pluralism and independent groups before and after transition phase. In countries where transition phase was rather smooth and peaceful such as Poland and Hungary, civil society and independent groups had begun to develop well before the transitions commenced and were able to play significant roles in negotiating the transitions.³⁴ On the other hand, the regimes that maintained the tightest control over the society and used the harshest methods to repress opposition prior to the initiation of transition, such as Bulgaria and Romania, had the most difficult and chaotic transitions.³⁵ Following the fall of communist regimes, civil society organizations started to flourish in Eastern Europe and the European integration gave a further boost to civil society development in these countries contributing to their democratization process. In contrast, weak civil society has been an important factor derailing democratization in Central Asia and the Post- Soviet Space in Europe.

After the Arab countries gained independence, a restrictive phase began in civil society development. New regimes feared that pluralistic, independent, associative life would threaten their own attempts to consolidate power. Thus independent civic activity was brought under tight state control as civil society organizations were transformed into state dominated institutions or were repressed.³⁶ In the following term, which began in the 1980s and continued to the Arab Spring, civil society witnessed a relative liberalization and diversification. There are a number of factors that contributed to this next phase such as the spread of Islamist movements leading to proliferation of religiously affiliated groups active in the civil society, many Arab governments' attempts to implement limited economic and political liberalization as a way of maintaining power, and the rise of the global human rights and prodemocracy movements.³⁷ By some analysts, this is called as an adaptive process of "authoritarian upgrading" through which authoritarian regimes respond to social, economic and international changes by modifying their modalities of rule as a substitute for, rather than a progression for fuller democratization.³⁸

Despite many constraints on civil society in Tunisia and Egypt, Mubarak and Ben Ali regimes promised more liberal politics than their predecessors. Both countries had strong civil society institutions which operated under authoritarian rule unlike Syria, where civil society organizations were much more restricted under the emergency laws imposed in 1963, and Libya, where space for civil society was almost closed. Upon a closer inspection in the civil society in the Arab World, Egypt seems to enjoy having thousands of registered NGOs (16000 civil society organizations in 2002) and in Tunisia, the number of NGOs increased in the 80s and in both countries they are prohibited by law from engaging in political activity.³⁹ In Syria, there is one federation of trade unions and another for women, both of which have branches across the country. No independent civil society organization has been allowed to be established under the

Assad regime. Likewise, there is no truly independent organizations in Libya.⁴⁰ With their previous experience with pluralism and civil society, Egypt and Tunisia seem to be more promising than Libya and Syria for democratic transition. A comparative analysis carried out by William Boose indicates that a robust civil society in Tunisia before 2011 will make it more likely to achieve state transition, whereas in Libya state transition might become a failure in the absence of any civil society.⁴¹ Given that a strong civil society is a precondition to democratic transition, the way how new governments handle civil society organizations will, to a great extent, determine the rise of democracy in the Middle East.

Social Cohesion and Statedness

The current social unrest and political upheaval in some parts of post-communist world reveals that in the absence of social cohesion and state building, social unrest and political upheaval are inevitable. Social cohesion, though hard to define, refers to the glue that holds a society together with its multiple dimensions such as ethnicity, religion, sect and shared history. In respect to social cohesion, national identity and ethnic or sectarian homogeneity comes to the forefront. The post communist experience tells us that the greater the degree of cultural, linguistic and religious pluralism is, the more complex democratic transition gets. Besides, preoccupation with building a nation state could delay the efforts for democracy and could even prevent democratization by the fear that democracy and liberalization might threaten nation building process. The reason why the Central European states were less troubled by the nation question is that they were more homogeneous in terms of ethnic make-up since in most of these states, ethnic cleansing was carried out half a century ago and they didn't have significant minority populations.⁴² Ethnic heterogeneity poses certain challenges for transition while ethnic homogeneity makes transition process easier and smoother. For instance, in Poland and Hungary, where ethnic population is relatively much more homogeneous, transition has been smoother and more successful compared to ethnically diverse Croatia and Bulgaria.⁴³ The post communist states with cultural and ethnic pluralism had to put their energy in dealing with the challenge of nationalism while mono-ethnic post communist states such as Hungary and Czech Republic could devote their energy to economic and political reforms.

A rapid break with the past and change into a new regime is only possible through strong national identity. National mobilization against communism was greater in the regions where national identity was stronger such as in the Baltic states, Western Ukraine and Poland in contrast to the regions with weak national identity such as Eastern Ukraine, Belarus and Central Asia, where large majority supported Sovietophile political parties.⁴⁴ Nation building and democratization are supposed to support and consolidate each other. That is, following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the post-communist states where national identity was rather weak, such as Belarus, Ukraine have gone through a consolidation of authoritarian, neo-Soviet type regime. In addition, in some cases the nation question and heterogeneity of ethnic makeup have been the source of internal and bilateral conflicts that have led to serious democracy deficits. Ethnic conflicts and territorial disputes in former Yugoslavia, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh are some clear examples of volatile and instable regions faced with ethnic conflicts.⁴⁵ Thus, prior settlement of the nation question and managing social cohesion serve as prerequisites for a smooth and peaceful democratic transition.

Looking at the Arab countries swept away by the uprisings, national identity seems strong particularly in the case of Egypt and Tunisia, yet it hardly needs stating that the Arab Spring has been threatened by ethnic, religious, sectarian and in some cases tribal conflicts. The outbreak of uprisings brought an end to the forced stability provided by the authoritarian regimes and set the sources of old grievances and tension free. Polarization on various levels has emerged due to religion in Egypt, fundamentalism in Tunisia, sect in Syria and Bahrain and clan in Libya.⁴⁶ In Tunisia, which is a relatively homogeneous country with well-educated population, cohesion problems are related mainly to the political sphere, in which moderate Islamist and secularist visions of governance are in conflict. According to polls, before the first election held, many

Tunisians feared that Islamist extremists would seize the power.⁴⁷ Ennahda Party regarded as a moderate Islamist group won 41% of the seats in the election held in October 2011 and the party is now ruling in coalition with two secular parties and the coalition is subject to internal frictions due to the three parties' divergent policy preferences.⁴⁸ In Tunisia, another key challenge relates to perceived inequalities between the interior, where more religious and tradition people live, and coastal areas, with a more secular minded population. A similar civic strife exists between the liberal-secular forces and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. They fear that Morsi, the leader of Muslim Brotherhood is seeking to consolidate Islamist control over the entire political system.⁴⁹ Besides, religious strife between Egyptian Muslims and Coptic Christians emerged as an important threat to stability in the early period after the fall of the Mubarak regime. Numerous clashes leading to destruction of churches, loss of life and wide scale violence indicate increasing polarization between the two communities.

Syria has one of the most heterogeneous populations in the Arab World. In Syria, sectarian division along with ethnic division (with thousands of Kurdish dissents in the North) has culminated in civil war, and in the case of Assad regime's fall, sectarian division might end up in permanent instability, which might delay prospects for democratization in the long term. Libya is another divided country along the lines of tribes and clans. Out of the more than 140 tribes and clans, thirty are power brokers.⁵⁰ After pledging for months that they would submit their arms to a central army after the overthrow of Qaddafi, many local military leaders now insist that they will hold onto their weapons as the new guardians of the revolution.⁵¹ Several other divisions- Islamist versus secular, centralized versus federated and Arabs versus Berbers- exist in Libya. Thus, democratic transition depends on whether the central government will be able to hold the country together following the 2011 civil war despite the conflicting interests among many groups and tribal differences.

Consequently, it is apparent that democratic transition is more complicated in the Arab countries, where ethnic make-up is more heterogeneous compared to the Eastern Europe. Egypt and Tunisia has better position with their relatively homogenous populations, yet the division along sectarian lines in Syria and tribal lines in Libya could delay prospects for democratic transition. Miller *et al.* point out that the threat to democratization that state and social problems pose comes less from the problems themselves than from how governments respond to them.⁵² Hence, the decisive factor in social cohesion is more about how the new Arab governments will handle ethnic, sectarian and tribal strife and it remains to be seen whether they will manage religious, ethnic and sectarian diversity in democratic terms.

External Environment

The post-communist transition in Eastern Europe occurred in a much more favorable external environment compared to the Arab Spring. In the case of the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, the European Union and NATO were open to eastward expansion. Through the Copenhagen criteria (1993), the EU imposed a prerequisite for membership stipulating that only consolidated democracies with market economies were to become members. In order to gain membership into this Western Club, the post-communist states in Eastern Europe had to implement various political and economic reforms to create sustainable democracies. The EU membership served as a golden carrot for these states. Without such an incentive, the transition processes in Eastern Europe might not have been so rapid and comprehensive. This was an important distinction from the post-Soviet states where democratization was rather slow as they didn't have a powerful incentive to integrate into a democratic club. In addition, the United States and the EU made available generous financial and technical assistance over long periods to facilitate the post-communist transitions.

Obviously, in the Arab world, there is neither any equivalent to the European Union nor any supranational entity that holds them together. The Gulf Cooperation and the Arab League remain inefficient in regional security, crisis management or in political and economic arrangements. The region's relations with the West aren't promising and there seems to be less

interest in democratic assistance to the Arab countries in stark contrast to the Eastern European states after the fall of communist regimes. To Lucan Way, for decades, both the threat of radical Islamism and key Western energy interests in the area have made it tempting for Western actors to support authoritarian forces and they will continue to give their support to the autocrats in the rest of the Arab world in some time to come.⁵³ In explaining why there are no Arab democracies, Larry Diamond, a prominent political scientist in democratization, highlights the external support for the authoritarian Arab regimes, which came from the Soviet Union historically and for decades mainly from Europe and the United States. Diamond states that by conferring crucial economic resources, security assistance and political legitimacy, US aid acted as oil, another source of rents regimes use for survival.⁵⁴ It is not clear to what extent the pro-democracy Arab leaders can benefit from Western financial and political support for democratic transition. Yet, apparently contrary to the Eastern European transition, where Nato and the EU membership played key role, democratization in the Middle East and North Africa will depend almost entirely on internal dynamics and domestic balance of power between democratic and anti-democratic forces.

The Impact of Oil and Islamism

In comparing the post communist transformation in Eastern Europe with the Arab Spring, the impact of oil and Islamism in the Middle East and North Africa can't be ruled out. Analysts and political scientists are divided in their viewpoints regarding the future of the Arab spring. To some analysts, such as Fuad Ajami, the 'silent Arab world was clamoring to be heard, eager to stake a claim to a place in the modern order of nations',⁵⁵ whereas others, like Khaled Abu Toameh warns the Arab Spring is becoming the Islamist winter in the absence of alternative leaders to the Islamists.⁵⁶ As discussed earlier, unlike the Eastern Europe, which hosted strong liberal opposition such as Solidarity Movement in Poland and benefited from the constructive role of elites in democratic transition, the Arab countries lack liberal opposition groups. Long authoritarian rule in most Arab countries eliminated middle class-liberal constituencies and at the moment Islamists appear to be the only organized group following the uprisings.

In explaining the resilience and durability of authoritarianism in the Arab world, much of the scholarly literature before the Arab Spring focused on the particular role of Islam as an integral part of Arab political culture. For decades, the Middle East and North Africa proved to be the only region where no democracy existed. Scholars engaged in democratization or the Middle East studies came up with variety of theories to explain the lack of democracy in the Arab world. When explaining the democracy deficit in the Arab world, scholars who hold culturalist outlook attribute it to the elements of Muslim or Arab culture. They argue that participatory government and individual rights are alien to the Muslim tradition because Islam vests authority in God and society must be guided by God's law, and thus there is no legitimate base for the sovereignty of man, civil codes or representative government.⁵⁷

On the other hand, Arab Barometer data carried out by Jamal and Tessler, limited to the individual level of analysis, reveals high support for democracy among Arab citizens and they state neither Arab intellectuals nor ordinary citizens accept the view that Islam and democracy are incompatible.⁵⁸ In fact, more religious Muslims are as likely as less religious Muslims to believe that democracy is the best political system.⁵⁹ However, Jamal and Tessler point out that in contrast to support for democracy, which is expressed by the overwhelming majority of the respondents in the Arab Barometer, respondents are divided on the question whether Islam should play an important political role. Whereas 56 percent of the respondents in the Arab Barometer survey agree with the statement that Islam should have influence over government decisions, 44 percent disagree, indicating that they believe Islam should not play an important political role.⁶⁰ Thus, according to this barometer, most Arabs support democracy but the perception of democracy in the Arab world is different from the Western notion of democracy, which emphasizes civil liberties and places sovereignty of man over sovereignty of God. On the other hand, division between the secular and liberal Arabs particularly concerning the role of Islam in

politics could bring further polarization in Arab societies and lead to more authoritarian leaders to provide stability.

Given that majority of Arabs supported Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Ennahda Party in Tunisia, the central question about prospects for democratization lies in which path they will take and their policy choices. These countries could follow Turkey and Indonesia as role models, and socially conservative Muslim parties could play active roles in electoral politics within democratic systems, or they could open up space for extremist groups to promote Islamist forms of government as in the case of Iran. So far, their political discourse has highlighted moderate line and upcoming developments will test their ability to pursue their social and political aims within a democratic system. Amichai Magen draws attention to the experience of Latin America, which was long assumed to be too Catholic to sustain the Protestant ethics, yet all of these countries except Cuba and Venezuela became democratic.⁶¹ The democratic transition in Latin America raises optimism for the Arab world, which was long considered an exception in terms of democracy.

Larry Diamond states that the deficit of democracy lies neither in Islam nor in its cultural and religious aspects pointing to a number of Muslim countries such as Albania, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Senegal and Turkey, which are democracies. To Diamond, it is political economy, particularly the so-called ‘oil curse’ which accounts for the riddle of Arab democracy deficit.⁶² Diamond argues that the problem is not the economic level but economic structure. In his article “Why are there no Arab democracies?”, Diamond observed:⁶³

Of the sixteen Arab countries, eleven are rentier states in the sense that they depend heavily on oil and gas rents to keep their states afloat. Most are so awash in cash that they don’t need to tax their own citizens. And that is part of the problem- they fail to develop the organic expectations of accountability that emerge when states make citizens pay taxes.

Since the oil rich Arab states don’t depend on taxing their population, they have failed to develop a system which relies on accountability to the citizens and representation that emerges with taxation. Besides, resource curse hinders the development of other sectors through investment and risk taking while it also increases corruption and enables Arab leaders to spend income extracted from natural resources on repressive security apparatus. From this point of view, democratization movements in the Arab states which are highly dependent on oil and gas such as Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain could face setback as oil and gas exports restrict chances for the development of a market economy which coexists with democracy.

From the post communist experience it is clear that the countries which are highly dependent on natural resources such as Russia and some Central Asian states mostly failed to achieve democratic transition and develop market economies as these states don’t depend on their citizens’ taxation. These states also don’t create wealth through investment in other sectors. They are heavily centralized and oil and gas incomes accrue to the central state officers in the form of ‘rents’. Decline in competitiveness of other economic sectors, volatility of revenues from oil and gas sector due to exposure to changes in the global market and governments’ mismanagement of resources in a heavily centralized system are endemic throughout the region. Resource curse influenced the oil and gas rich states in the post-Soviet space adversely and they all turned into some form of authoritarianism. In the same way, following the Arab uprisings, democratic movements in oil and gas rich countries in the Arab world might be heavily influenced by resource curse. In that regard, countries like Libya and Bahrain seem to be less advantaged than countries like Tunisia and Egypt which don’t export natural resources in terms of democratization prospects.

Conclusion

With the advent of the Arab Spring, it has been widely debated whether this recent wave of uprisings fit into the third wave of democratization. As surprising and unexpected as the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, many analysts made analogies to the post-communist revolutions of 1989-91. There are a number of striking parallels to be drawn between two regions in terms of their causes and ways such as decrease in legitimacy of authoritarian regimes, poor economic development and particularly snowballing effect in both regions. Yet, such a comparison needs caution since two sets of revolts differ in various dimensions and their outcomes will differ accordingly. This paper approached two sets of revolts in terms of seven different points; nature of regimes, mode of regime change, past experience with political pluralism, social cohesion, external environment and the impact of oil and Islamism. Firstly, Eastern Europe was homogenous given the one party rule dependent on communist ideology and the Soviet Union as a regional hegemonic power. In contrast, regimes in the Arab world are much more diverse and it is risky to approach these uprisings as one set of movement. Two regions also differed in terms of regime change given the fact that the regimes in the post-communist states changed with elite consensus and almost no role of military except Romania while the Arab uprisings were more of a bottom-up movement and military played key role in transition process. The homogeneity of ethnic make-up and a more favorable external environment with the chances for the EU and NATO accession enabled a smooth and speedy transition in Eastern Europe. Yet, lack of social cohesion in the Arab world due to sectarian strife in Syria and Bahrain, divisions between seculars and Islamists in Tunisia and Egypt and tribal divisions in Libya pose serious threats to stability and democratization attempts in these countries. In the absence of any supranational entity or any equivalent of the EU in the Arab world means that democratization movements in these countries will depend on their internal dynamics rather than external aid or integration. Besides, following the Arab Spring, the impact of potential Islamic movements and oil curse are supposed to heavily influence the destinations of these mass movements. Last but not least, it is still too early to make any prediction on whether the Arab states will go through similar processes of democratic transition like the post-communist states, yet the points highlighted in this paper are expected to bring disparate outcomes within the region.

Notes

¹ In reference to Eastern Europe, this paper focusses on the six member states of the former Warsaw Pact: Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, the German Democratic Republic, Bulgaria and Romania.

² Marc F. Plattner, "Populism, Pluralism, and Liberal Democracy", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2010, 92.

³ Katherina Dalacoura, "The 2011 Uprisings in the Arab Middle East: Political Change and Geopolitical Implications", *International Affairs*, 88:1, 2012, 66.

⁴ Ali Saruhan, "Is the Arab Spring in the Third Wave of Democratization? The Case of Syria and Egypt", *Turkish Journal of Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Summer 2012, p. 67- 85; Thomas Carothers, "Think Again: Arab Democracy", *Foreign Policy*, March 10, 2011; Vadim Nikitin, "Did the Russians Write the Script for the Arab Spring?", *The National*, August 26, 2011.

⁵ Thomas Carothers, "The End of the Transition Paradigm", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2002, 5-21.

⁶ Laurel E. Miller, Jeffrey Martini, F. Stephen Larrabee, Angel Rabasa, Stephanie Pezard, Julie E. Taylor and Tewodaj Mengistu, *Democratization in the Arab World: Prospects and Lessons from Around the Globe* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2012), 16.

⁷ Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late 20th Century*, (Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 46- 100.

⁸ Adrian A. Basora, "Do Post- Communist Transitions Offer Lessons for the Arab World?", *The Foreign Policy Research Institute*, August 20, 2011.

⁹ Ibid. & Katerina Dalacoura, "The 2011 Uprisings in the Arab Middle East: Political Change and Geopolitical Implications", 67-68.

¹⁰ Adrian Basora, "Do Post- Communist Transitions Offer Lessons for the Arab World?".

- ¹¹ Adrian Basora, “Do Post- Communist Transitions Offer Lessons for the Arab World?”.
¹² Katerina Dalacoura, “The 2011 Uprisings in the Arab Middle East: Political Change and Geopolitical Implications”, 68.
¹³ Laurel E. Miller *et al.*, *Democratization in the Arab World: Prospects and Lessons from Around the Globe*, 297.
¹⁴ Laurel E. Miller *et al.*, *Democratization in the Arab World*, 37.
¹⁵ Laurel E. Miller *et al.*, *Democratization in the Arab World*, 40.
¹⁶ Adrian Basora, “Do Post- Communist Transitions Offer Lessons for the Arab World?”.
¹⁷ Valerie Bunce, “Rethinking Recent Democratization: Lessons from the postcommunist Experience”, *World Politics* 55, January 2003, 171-172.
¹⁸ Laurel E. Miller *et al.*, *Democratization in the Arab World*, 181.
¹⁹ Ibid. 186.
²⁰ Valerie Bunce, “Rethinking Recent Democratization: Lessons from the postcommunist Experience”, 172.
²¹ Ibid.
²² Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late 20th Century*, 106-109.
²³ Michael McFaul, “The Fourth Wave of Democracy and Dictatorship: Noncooperative Transitions in the Postcommunist World”, *World Politics* 54 (January 2002).
²⁴ Lucan Way, “Comparing The Arab Revolts: The Lessons of 1989”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 22, No: 4, (October 2011), 25.
²⁵ Ibid. 20.
²⁶ Thomas Carothers, “Think Again: Arab Democracy”.
²⁷ Lucan Way, “Comparing The Arab Revolts: The Lessons of 1989”, 18.
²⁸ Valerie Bunce, “Rethinking Recent Democratization: Lessons from the postcommunist Experience”, 175.
²⁹ In the case of Romania, probably without the military involvement, the insurgents wouldn’t have succeeded toppling the old regime; for further discussion, see Laurel E. Miller *et al.*, *Democratization in the Arab World*, 202.
³⁰ Daniel Steiman, “Military Decision-Making During the Arab Spring”, *MUFTAH*, May 29, 2012.
³¹ Ibid.
³² Sharon Erickson Nepstad, “Nonviolent Resistance in the Arab Spring: The Critical Role of Military Opposition Alliances”, *Swiss Political Science Review*, Vol: 17, Issue:4, December 2011, 485.
³³ Laurel E. Miller *et al.*, *Democratization in the Arab World*, 307.
³⁴ Ibid.
³⁵ Laurel E. Miller *et al.*, *Democratization in the Arab World*, 182.
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³⁷ Amy Hawthorne, “Middle Eastern Democracy: Is Civil Society the Answer?”, 6.
³⁸ Rex Brynen, Pete W. Moore, Bassel F. Salloukh & Marie-Joelle Zahar, *Beyond the Arab Spring: Authoritarianism and Democratization in the Arab World*, (Lynne Rienner Publishers: 2012), 4.
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⁴² Jacques Rupnik, “The Post Communist Divide”, *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1999, 60.
⁴³ Steven M. Fish, “Post Communist Subversions : Social Science and Democratization in East Europe and Eurasia”, *Slavic Review*, vol. 58, no.4, 1999, 796.
⁴⁴ Taras Kuzio, “Transition in Post- Communist States: Triple or Quadruple?”, *Politics*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2001, 172.
⁴⁵ Ayfer Erdogan, “Dynamics of Transformation and Security Building in the Black Sea Region”, in Reinventing Cross-Border Cooperation in Black Sea Region: Visions for Future, (ed.) Kornely Kakachia, *Georgian Institute of Politics*, 2012, 15-16.
⁴⁶ Anthony Shadid & David D. Kirkpatrick, “Promise of Arab Uprisings is Threatened by Divisions”, *The New York Times*, May 21, 2011.
⁴⁷ Laurel E. Miller *et al.*, *Democratization in the Arab World*, 321.
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- ⁴⁹ Jeremy M. Sharp, "Egypt: Background and US Relations", *Congressional Research Service Report*, December 6, 2012, 1-2.
- ⁵⁰ Amichai Magen, "On Political Order and the Arab Spring", *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 6, No:1, 2012, 16.
- ⁵¹ David Kirkpatrick, "Local Militias in Libya Balk at Giving up Their Arms", *International Herald Tribune*, November 2, 2011.
- ⁵² Laurel E. Miller *et al.*, *Democratization in the Arab World*, 321.
- ⁵³ Lucan Way, "Comparing The Arab Revolts: The Lessons of 1989", 24.
- ⁵⁴ Larry Diamond, "Why Are There No Arab Democracies?", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 21, No.1, January 2010, 101.
- ⁵⁵ Fuad Ajami, "Demise of the Dictators: The Arab Revolutions of 2011", *Newsweek*, February 14, 2011.
- ⁵⁶ Khaled Abu Toameh, "From an Arab Spring to Islamist Winter", *Gatesstone Institute*, October 28, 2011.
- ⁵⁷ Laurel E. Miller *et al.*, *Democratization in the Arab World*, 44.
- ⁵⁸ Amaney Jamal and Mark Tessler, "Democracy Barometers: Attitudes in the Arab World", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 19, Number 1, January 2008, 101.
- ⁵⁹ In this Barometer, Jamal and Tessler identified the frequency of Koran reading as a valid and reliable measure of religiosity. Respondents were categorized according to whether they read the Koran every day, several times a week, sometimes, or rarely or never. Strikingly, at least 85 percent of the respondents in each category state that democracy is the best political system.
- ⁶⁰ Amaney Jamal and Mark Tessler, "Democracy Barometers: Attitudes in the Arab World", 102.
- ⁶¹ Amichai Magen, "On Political Order and the Arab Spring", 12.
- ⁶² Larry Diamond, "Why Are There No Arab Democracies?", 94.
- ⁶³ Ibid. 98.