

Protest Dynamics and Authoritarian Repression in the Arab World

What Do We Know a Decade after the Arab Spring?

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Introduction

What is the logic of civil unrest in the Arab world and how does it interact with authoritarianism over the last few decades? The dominant thread of the past decade is, naturally, the civil unrest of the Arab Spring and its devolution into an Arab Winter dominated by an authoritarian comeback in countries that experienced a democratic transition, civil war in those that attempted but failed to topple authoritarian leaders, and co-optation with limited democratic reforms in many others. In this chapter, we draw from previous studies of civil unrest in the Arab world to elaborate a review of the past few decades of protests in this part of the world. First, we lay out a state of the question of civil unrest in the Arab world today. In so doing, we join some of the most recent voices in the literature by arguing that the short-term failures of Arab Spring protests do not spell an end to mass upheavals in the region, but instead the start of a new, intensive cycle of protests, based on the broken aura of authoritarian invulnerability. We challenge the conventional wisdom that authoritarian resilience is the main *mot d'ordre* of the past decade, and contend that, if anything, the Arab Spring has spelled out the start of a new logic of contentious politics in the region. In the empirical part of the chapter, we demonstrate this argument by showcasing what is, to our knowledge, the first time series decomposition of two decades of protest event data for the Arab world. We discuss and describe the seasonal patterns and overall trends of the series and show a notable increase both in the frequency of protests in the region since 2011 and in the frequency of repression. This, we argue, demonstrates that the euphoria—or disappointment—that comes with focusing too much on particular, small-picture events, case studies, or specific actors, can be circumvented by more studies of the larger dynamics at play in this part of the world—and elsewhere. In fact, if scholars of the Arab world have had much success in studying the particular, we contend that the bigger picture is often lost to us because of a lack of attention to the kind of larger patterns that can be more easily gleaned from larger-N studies.

Civil Unrest in the Arab World: État de la Question

What do we know today, more than a decade after the Arab Spring? Naturally, the past ten-odd years have been dominated by a larger-than-life interest in the uprisings of 2011–12, and in their devolution into authoritarian counterrevolution, civil war, or regime co-optation. Immediately following the Arab Spring, several scholars claimed that authoritarianism is more fragile than we once imagined, breaking with a large literature documenting the very opposite.^[1] In fact, according to some, the Arab Spring shifted back our paradigm of study of Arab politics—and protest events—toward one more focused on democratization once more, after spending the 2000s focused on authoritarian resilience.^[2] This post-Arab Spring shift back to a focus on democratization echoed the focus on democratization that dominated the study of the region in the 1980s and 1990s.^[3] Yet, many scholars theorizing the Arab Spring in its immediate aftermath still warned that the importance of authoritarian resilience should not be disregarded altogether.^[4] Whether they had been made because of the jubilation of the moment or based on genuine long-standing convictions, democratization arguments of this era still fell short very fast given the devolution of the democratic transitions of the Arab world into a maelstrom of violence, counterrevolution, and electoral fiascoes.

Many studies explored why some authoritarian regimes fell while others survived. Some argue that the answer to this puzzle lies largely in the behavior of the coercive apparatus—that is, whether states employed armed violence against protesters in the defense of the incumbent regime, or not.^[5] In light of the increased repression of the past decade, this could mean a longer cycle of repression and dissent between state and protesters, as we will show in the next section. Others suggest that different governmental responses to protests affected the outcome of civil unrest during the Arab Spring. They argue, for instance, that some authoritarian regimes fell while others did not during the Arab uprisings because of the different solutions offered by autocrats to address popular revolts. In one group of cases—Tunisia and Libya, for instance—those in power implemented the wrong policy responses, while in others—Morocco, Algeria—policies enabled reform pathways that could be channeled into non-revolutionary political action.^[6]

When discussing the Arab uprisings of 2011, many observers noted the logic of learning that prevailed in the protesters' ranks. Yet, what was quickly recognized as the protests unfolded is that autocratic governments also learned very quickly—they adapted to the repertoire of actions of the protesters and developed strategies to survive despite the protests. A large part of the new strategy of authoritarian regimes was the increase in repression—^[7]something many observers say is still noticeable when civil unrest erupts in the Arab world today.^[8]

Other observers focused on the determinants of protests during the Arab uprisings of 2011. For instance, they claimed that the uprisings were based on economic grievances that were often inflated by identitarian disparities, in a context of global democratic aspirations.^[9] Using a quantitative model with data from 2006 to 2011, Basir and Datta showed that regime type also matters—"intermediate regimes," or governments falling between authoritarianism and democracy, were actually more resilient than relatively democratic and purely authoritarian regimes, while regimes with checks on authoritarianism had a mitigating impact on protests.^[10] Yet today, the democratic backsliding that dominates around the world and the increased willingness of Arab autocracies to repress dissent may shed doubt on what remains of the 407 democratic aspirations that once shook much of the Arab world. This is in addition to regimes' better engagement with the technologies that enabled the revolts against them—social media and digital technologies.^[11] For instance, some studies find that post-Arab Spring countries that experienced democratic transitions saw a decrease in citizen support for democracy. Using Arab Barometer data, they show that citizens rationally evaluated the poor economic and political performances of these challenged democratic transitions and were left disappointed.^[12] As we will show in the next section of this chapter, empirical evidence shows that protests did not necessarily decrease despite this new logic. According to other researchers, the individual protests of 2011 and 2012 were only able to trigger mass mobilization—and therefore an intensified cycle of protests—because of the surprise factor.^[13] At the time, this surprise factor was likely a function of the absence of similar protests in the past *and* the amplifying factor that was the new digital technologies. Indeed, newfound internet access has since been correlated with higher frequencies of protests in authoritarian societies.^[14] Today, mass mobilizations akin to those of the Arab Spring may be hindered because no substantial innovation has emerged that could amplify the organization of protests—as social media did in the 2000s—while regimes are much more aware of the risks of events similar to those that happened only a dozen years ago.

Recent work also suggests that repression is more complex than once assumed by scholars. Findings suggest that repression can be a tool to build public support for autocratic regimes in the Arab world, such as when it targets groups portrayed as being dangerous—like the Muslim

Brotherhood.^[15] Such findings are consistent with previous work theorizing that Arab autocracies often use strategies of “divide and conquer” in the public sphere, by pitting various parties and interest groups against each other.^[16]

Scholars have largely studied the Arab uprisings of 2011 and 2012 with a focus on robust authoritarianism or a focus on social movements, using comparisons at the national level. Schwedler suggests looking at within-case variation—how mobilization and state repression varied across cities and regions.^[17] At the time of writing this chapter, more than a decade after the Arab Spring, we notice that most studies employ the same approach. More salient today, we would argue, is the missed opportunity to compare variation in cases across a large time interval in order to better understand larger dynamics that only become evident through proper time-series estimation. While we agree with those who call for a better, often qualitative, understanding of within-case dynamics,^[18] we also argue that there is substantial value in taking advantage of the large amounts of data scholars and scholarship-adjacent fields have been able to amass over the last few decades to better compare trends on dynamics like protests and repression across time and space. Following from the seminal works of King, Keohane, and Verba, this means exploring the variation in protests and repression in order to test our intuitions and validate our premises about the ways things evolved across the Arab world.^[19]

In elaborating our argument, we join some recent voices in arguing for a reconsideration of the past decade of civil unrest—i.e., civil unrest *since* the Arab Spring, such as the 2019 protests in many Arab countries—in favor of a more nuanced reading. By civil unrest, we mean collective action by civilians that morphs into a social movement aimed at laying contentious claims in relation to the government and/or its policies. We therefore encompass protests and riots of whatever level of violence in our definition, but we do not include military engagements (such as kinetic fighting) or military coups.

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As we will show in the next section, protests have neither gone down nor has authoritarian resilience become all-powerful.^[20] This is despite the fact that most analysts, especially in the policy world, consider that protests against authoritarianism in the Arab world ended with the Arab Spring and that authoritarian resilience is the *mot d’ordre* of the region now. Yet today, more and more voices emphasize that the counterrevolutions of the Arab Winter do not spell the end of mass upheaval in the region. They point at the renewed protest waves of 2019 in Lebanon, Algeria, Sudan, and Iraq to show that the political transformation of the region has not ended, and is now affecting the rentier republics,^[21] and some monarchies.^[22] In so doing, these scholars emphasize that what may appear as an end to popular uprisings really turned into a “relentless cycle,” where neither stability was achieved by autocrats nor democracy was attained by the people. While Lynch argues that the factors that have the potential to lead to more mass uprisings according to them have not proven substantial so far,^[23] the current trend of increased civil unrest and increased repression that we discuss in the next section does lend credence to the relentless cycle argument. First, the authoritarian takeover of many societies—and co-optation in others—was by no means the end of mass uprisings in the Arab world. And second, authoritarian resilience is itself mired by a paranoia of repression, which is certainly noticeable in the increased repression of the past decade. While social media has changed enormously—and been affected too much by repressive agents, through bots, malware, and monitoring by security apparatuses^[24]—the recent events in Algeria, Lebanon, Sudan, and Iraq prove that mass uprisings are by no means dead. The balance of power has simply shifted somewhat, and the struggle for the Arab world

remains. Even the COVID-19 pandemic—despite offering new opportunities for Arab regimes to suppress protests^[25]—has not substantially shifted the trend witnessed over the past decade. The current context is therefore one where both authoritarian societies and protesters have changed tremendously, while international attention and support have shifted irrevocably.

Recent behavior by the international hegemon—the United States—shows more than ever before that both Arab rulers and their citizens are on their own as the United States shifts its interest toward East Asia, despite no stable status quo in the Arab world. The 2011–24 years are therefore marred by more civil unrest and more repression than ever before, making of the Arab Spring upheavals nothing more than the beginning of a new logic of contention in this part of the world.

Two Decades of Protest Event Time Series: An Empirical Investigation

As discussed in the previous section, scholarship on civil unrest and Arab politics has been heavily impacted by the uprisings of the Arab Spring. Scholars have discussed the evolution of authoritarianism in its co-optation of prodemocracy movements in some countries (such as Saudi Arabia and Bahrain),^[26] or the failure of democratic transitions in others (Tunisia, Egypt). At the same time, there has been a substantial interest in trends and shifts in political repression in this part of the world.^[27] In this section, we elaborate a time series decomposition of civil unrest in the Arab world throughout the past decade to properly understand the region’s evolution in relation to 409 dynamics such as repression. Few others have used this approach, with the notable exception of some recent works on Morocco.^[28] Using autoregressive distributed lag (ARDL), Houguia shows that repression in Morocco over the past few decades helped embolden protests by increasing social resentment and radicalization of political behavior.^[29] Where others have compared sheer frequencies of protest-related events,^[30] we adjust it to conventional time series components to better understand how repression evolves over time.

We conduct the following analysis using Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) for protest events and fatalities in the MENA region from 2000 to 2022.^[31] The data includes daily records of protest events and associated fatalities across many countries of the region—Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Yemen. Our primary objective is to identify and understand the underlying components—trend, seasonality, and residual—of these time series at different aggregation levels—weekly, monthly, quarterly, and yearly—in order to better understand the logic of civil unrest in the Arab world. As a result, we first aggregated the data at various time intervals in order to better showcase its patterns—we used seven-day, monthly, quarterly, and yearly intervals and performed time series decomposition using an additive model. This allowed us to separate the observed data into trend, seasonal, and residual components. We conducted decomposition for each country individually to identify unique and common patterns, as well as an aggregate analysis to understand regional trends. However, it is important to note that for the Middle Eastern countries included in the dataset, the data is only available from 2016 onward, thus limiting the analysis for these countries to this time span.

The monthly decomposition of protest events and deadly repression in North Africa and the Middle East below lends credence to the argument we make in this chapter that protests (and repression) have only increased since the Arab Spring, well over a decade ago, making those uprisings the start of a new logic of civil unrest under authoritarianism. The monthly protest decomposition panels show a significant increase in protests over time, with moderate seasonal variations and substantial irregular events. In North Africa, protests have surged since 2011, marked by regular monthly fluctuations and notable irregular peaks. Meanwhile, in the Middle East, available data from 2016 onward indicates a steady rise in protests, especially around 2019–20, with consistent seasonal patterns and sharp irregular spikes. Fatalities follow a stable upward trend with occasional sharp spikes, particularly in January, March, June, and November, reflecting major violent outbreaks or governmental crackdowns. Quarterly and yearly decompositions reveal longer-term trends and smoother seasonal patterns, indicating broader sociopolitical dynamics and structural issues leading to unrest. The consistent analysis methodology across both subregions (the Middle East and North Africa) ensures robust and comparable insights despite differences in data availability.

Figure 1. MENA aggregate time series decomposition—protest events and fatalities.

Despite the common features outlined in Figure 1, many countries exhibit case-specific dynamics, especially in magnitude of protests and fatalities, seasonal effects, and varying rates of trend increase. Varying rates of protest increases across specific countries reveal different capacities of authoritarian regimes to manage dissent. This ongoing tension between civil society and authoritarian governance shows that repression often fails to address underlying discontent and mobilization potential, exposing the vulnerabilities of authoritarian control in the region. For instance, since 2011, many North African countries have experienced significant increases in protests and fatalities due to intense political turmoil, particularly during significant national events. Taking Algeria as a specific example, monthly data shown in Figure 2(1) reveals high variability and a steady rise in protests, with peaks in January and February tied to political anniversaries and national holidays. The high residual variability indicates spontaneous protests and sudden political changes. In Egypt, as shown in Figure 2(2), protest activity peaks in January and June, linked to political anniversaries like the 2011 revolution, showing a steady increase over time with irregular spikes in fatalities.

Figure 2. Country-level monthly protests decomposition—Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria. (1) Algeria monthly protests decomposition (2) Egypt monthly protests decomposition (3) Lebanon monthly protests decomposition (4) Syria monthly protests decomposition.

For Middle Eastern countries, the dynamics of protest are also complex and influenced by historical events and cultural factors. Lebanon (Figure 2[3]) saw a pronounced peak in late 2019, driven by economic conditions and political corruption, with a rising trend into 2020, less regular seasonal patterns, and intense sporadic events. Such patterns likely reflect the volatile nature of civil unrest amid acute economic crises and political scandals in Lebanon.^[32] Similarly, Syria (Figure 2[4]) shows high variability in protest events and deadly repression, especially during periods of major kinetic warfare between rebels and the Assad government, with peaks in March marking the Syrian Civil War’s anniversary. This variability indicates a volatile and unstable environment where civil unrest is closely tied to ongoing conflicts, particularly challenging authoritarian regimes during culturally significant periods. Persistent unrest in Syria demonstrates the regime’s difficulty in maintaining control and the population’s willingness to mobilize during key historical moments, despite the threat of deadly violence.^[33] In December 2024, this trend resulted in the final collapse of the Al Assad dynasty in Syria, after fourteen years of protests turned to a bloody civil war. While our analysis does not specifically adopt a correlational approach, some protest spikes may align with significant events like Israel’s wars in Gaza. For example, the Unity Intifada of 2021 triggered widespread protests across the MENA region in solidarity with Palestinians, which were often met with state repression. Such instances illustrate the influence of the broader Palestinian cause on regional unrest.^[34]

To study the dynamics of authoritarian control, we developed a Repression Intensity Score which quantifies state responses to protests across the Arab world. This score is based on the presence of specific repression-related keywords in protest descriptions available in the ACLED dataset, covering both general measures like arrests and detentions and more violent actions such as shootings and killings. We counted the occurrences of terms such as “arrest,” “violence,” “detained,” “force,” “crackdown,” “beaten,” “tear gas,” “shot,” “killed,” “injured,” “rubber bullets,” and “water cannon” in the descriptions of protest events to construct our score of the intensity of state repression. As a result, intensity is defined by the cumulative frequency of these keywords. Thus, a higher Repression Intensity Score corresponds to a greater degree of state violence and aggressive suppression tactics. It is determined by tracking the relative frequency of specific repression-related keywords in protest descriptions, ranging from nonlethal actions like arrests and detentions to more violent tactics such as shootings and killings. A higher score will therefore reflect more frequent use of violent repression methods, like deadly force, while a lower score will indicate less severe measures, such as mass arrests or nonlethal crowd control. The score’s construction helps us uncover patterns between state repression and unrest outcomes, supporting our argument that the Arab Spring initiated a new logic of contentious politics, and challenging the notion of enduring authoritarian resilience.

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The historical context of the Arab Spring is crucial for understanding the subsequent waves of state repression in the MENA region. The 2011 upheavals marked a turning point, with massive protests demanding political reform, economic opportunities, and an end to autocratic rule. This period saw peak repression scores in 2010 and 2011 and the highest recorded fatalities, as governments employed arrests, detentions, and lethal actions, resulting in numerous incidents of police brutality and violent crackdowns. This severe repression underscores the lengths regimes were willing to go to in order to maintain power and the dire consequences for those challenging the status quo.

In North Africa, repression and fatalities showed significant volatility, with sharp increases around the Arab Spring (Figure 3[2]). Following these uprisings, repression levels fluctuated, with significant spikes around 2018 and more recently. Fatalities peaked immediately after the Arab Spring, highlighting continued instability and harsh government responses. Recent data suggests a resurgence in repression as regimes stifle ongoing dissent. Similarly, the Middle East experienced volatility in repression and fatalities post-Arab Spring. Since 2016, repression scores and fatalities have risen, reflecting ongoing conflicts and government crackdowns. The upward trend in repression scores illustrates the persistent use of state violence to control dissent amid major political and economic crises.

Following the Arab Spring, the MENA region has seen significant volatility in repression and fatalities, with spikes around 2017 and in the early 2020s. From 2020 onwards, these spikes have been linked to crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, economic hardships, and renewed political demands, indicating intensified state efforts to control protests through both general and deadly tactics. This trend suggests that repression has become a systematic tool for maintaining power, highlighting the need for actual measures aimed at addressing protesters' concerns, such as meaningful reforms.

As a specific example, we turn to North Africa, where countries like Libya and Tunisia (Figures 3[3] & 3[4]) exhibit significant spikes in repression scores and fatalities around 2010–11, correlating with the Arab Spring uprisings. In Libya, there is a dramatic increase in both metrics during this period, reflecting the state's efforts to reassert control following the initial revolutionary fervor. This was succeeded by another notable spike in repression post-2015, indicating a sustained strategy of state violence to curb dissent and restore order amid ongoing political turbulence and economic challenges.^[35] Similarly, Tunisia, despite its relative success in transitioning to a more democratic governance structure, shows a marked increase in repression score post-2015. This suggests a governmental response to persistent social and economic challenges, demonstrating that state violence remains a tool for maintaining control even in the face of sociopolitical reforms.^[36]

Figure 3. Aggregate yearly repression score and fatalities. (1) Middle East (2) North Africa (3) Libya (4) Tunisia (5) Syria (6) Yemen

In North Africa, the patterns of repression in Libya and Tunisia reflect broader trends observed across the MENA region. Similar to most of the MENA countries, where repression scores and fatalities peaked post-2015, Libya and Tunisia exhibit a pattern whereby initial revolutionary movements give way to intensified state violence. These two countries serve as good cases to show how governments across the region facing both internal and external pressures have employed repression to consolidate power and manage persistent sociopolitical challenges. This highlights the durability of authoritarian practices and the strategic use of repression to maintain regime stability in the face of potential threats.^[37]

Conclusion

417What do the findings of this chapter mean for scholars of the Arab world? Well, if on one hand civil unrest has certainly not disappeared—and therefore its threat to authoritarian regimes is very present—on the other hand, the repressive power of authoritarian rulers has also increased, in terms of both capacity and willingness to incur violence on citizens. In many ways, the increased willingness to repress as a new trend in the MENA region aligns with established theories in political science. These theories emphasize that authoritarian regimes often resort to repression not only as a reactionary measure but also as a systemic tool to sustain governance and counteract existential threats. Our analysis here underscores the entrenchment of these tactics within the political strategies of Arab regimes, aiming to maintain control amidst varying degrees of social upheaval and calls for reform.

The increased threat of repression does not mean that mass upheavals will not happen again in the future of the Arab region, though. New evidence drawing on extensive data from much of the past century suggests that mass revolutionary-type uprisings against autocracies build up over time into a breaking point. In other words, protracted, low-level popular contention—especially in the context of personalist regimes and long-tenured incumbents in office, like those of autocratic, post-Arab Spring nations—yields mass uprisings. This is especially true when a contagion effect may be at play, whereby uprisings have happened in nearby countries or not long ago in time. Noticeably, monarchies and military regimes are not associated with revolutionary mass uprisings, something with important implications for the Arab world.

Finally, the findings of our chapter suggest that scholars studying protest events and contentious politics in the Arab world should employ or engage with large-N studies and cross-country (or within-country) variation to generate insights about larger patterns and tendencies. While case studies provide in-depth insights into specific contexts, they often fail to capture broader patterns and dynamics that might be shared across different settings, especially when trying to understand larger trends. As we have shown here, by using large datasets and comparative approaches, researchers can identify structural drivers and context-specific mechanisms, offering a more comprehensive understanding of protest dynamics. This approach helps to disentangle localized phenomena from broader regional trends, fostering more generalizable theories of contentious politics in the Arab world.

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