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Social Media and Political Changes in *Al-Alam Al-Arabi*

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The Arab world (*Al-Alam Al-Arabi*) consists of 18 countries, all of which are members of the Arab League. *Al-Alam Al-Arabi* stretches from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the Arabian/Persian Gulf in the east, and from the Mediterranean Sea in the north to Africa and the Indian Ocean in the southeast. Covering 10% of the earth's surface, its population of 350 million represents 5% of the world's population (United Nations, *Arab Human Development Report 2010*). The people in the region are connected by historical, linguistic, cultural, traditional, tribal and religious ties, but are politically and economically separated into independent countries that also differ in wealth and economic status.

The political systems of Arab countries include republics, kingdoms and sheikhdoms, but they are all governed by authoritarian regimes. The Arab countries are typically described as lacking democratic traditions, freedom of the press, human rights and civil liberties. The Economic Intelligence Unit's *Democracy Index 2011* (London, 2011), for example, classifies the governments of 165 countries and two territories in the world into four types of regimes: full democracies; flawed democracies; hybrid regimes; and authoritarian regimes. The index ranks countries from 1 to 167, with full democracies ranked 1–25, flawed democracies ranked 26–78, hybrid democracies ranked 79–115, and authoritarian regimes ranked 116–167. Table 1 presents data on the different types of regimes in the Arab world based on this index, with rankings of individual countries in parentheses. The table shows that 12 Arab countries are governed by authoritarian regimes, while six are governed by hybrid regimes that combine elements of democracy and authoritarianism. No Arab country is governed by a fully or flawed democratic regime.

Missing the Wake-Up Call

The year 1989 witnessed the collapse of the Soviet Union, the fall of Berlin Wall, and the speedy end of despotic regimes in eastern Europe. Across the world, these dramatic changes generated hope for political stability, the acceptance of the idea of democracy, and the implementation of democratic governments. The circumstances favored the introduction of new democratic constitutions that helped the enactment of laws advancing human rights, freedom of the press, equality, elections and the respect of international relations. They also contributed to the election of new political leaders and the emergence of flourishing democracies. Along with the rest of the world, the people in the Arab countries

Table 1 – Types of Regimes in the Arab World*		
Authoritarian Regimes		
Algeria (130)	Morocco (119)	Saudi Arabia (161)
Bahrain (144)	Oman (134)	Syria (157)
Jordan (118)	Palestine Authority (99)	UAE (149)
Kuwait (122)	Qatar (138)	Yemen (150)
Hybrid Regimes		
Egypt (115)	Lebanon (94)	Mauritania (109)
Iraq (112)	Libya (125)	Tunisia (92)

There are no Flawed Democracies or Full Democracies in the Arab World.

*Source: Compiled from the Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2011: Democracy Under Stress* (London: The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2011).

looked favorably on these serious political reforms and admired what had occurred in Eastern Europe.

Leaders and political elites in *Al-Alam Al-Arabi* took notice of these dramatic changes as well. In 1998, the late King Hussein of Jordan spoke of the importance of introducing political and economic liberalization and democracy, and the Kingdom held elections that fall. Even the late Saddam Hussein of Iraq, arguably the most notorious and

the 1989 wake-up call for political change and retained their authoritarian regimes. As Iraqi writer Saad Al-Bazzaz noted, Arab leaders rhetorically recognized the imperative of political reforms but stopped short of translating their rhetoric into action (*A War Gives Birth to Another* [1992]).

The 1990s witnessed significant democratic transitions and economic liberalization across the world, but not in *Al-Alam Al-Arabi*. To make matters

Social Resentment

However, in the context of dramatic democratic changes across the world and social and economic stagnation in the Arab countries, rulers' arguments about real or perceived threats to national security as the justification for maintaining their authoritarian power were no longer acceptable to the people. Continued economic stagnation and social inequality produced frustration and resentment among them. The number of unemployed college graduates soared. By 2010, the poverty level had reached 41.8% in Yemen, 22.6% in Algeria, 16.7% in Egypt and 14.2% in Jordan. This agonizing situation coupled with serious restrictions on political participation, civil liberties, elections and political pluralism contributed to increased political resentment. The youth in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria took to the streets and protested against their governments.

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erratic one-man ruler, was attributed a series of editorials in the *El-thawarha* newspaper of Iraq, in which he commended the former Soviet Union leader Mikhail Gorbachev's concepts of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, democracy and social justice. However, in practice, Saddam never committed himself or his regime to any kind of *glasnost* in Iraq. Other Arab leaders also addressed the need for progressive developments, promoting elections and pluralism, and increasing political participation. Some academicians and intellectuals warned that disaster loomed if these changes were not introduced. However, while introducing limited social and economic changes, Arab leaders missed

worse, Iraq invaded its neighbor Kuwait in 1990, precipitating the 1991 Gulf War and catastrophic consequences. The traditional media in Arab countries failed to perform their characteristic role as watchdogs because they were (as some still are) owned and operated by government. Between 1986 and 1996, the levels of censorship of the media in *Al-Alam Al-Arabi* were remarkably high, allowing virtually no criticism of a head of a state or the wealth of leaders, of national security or military issues. And criticism of political issues was only slightly less censored (Al-Obaidi, *Media Censorship in the Middle East* [2007]).
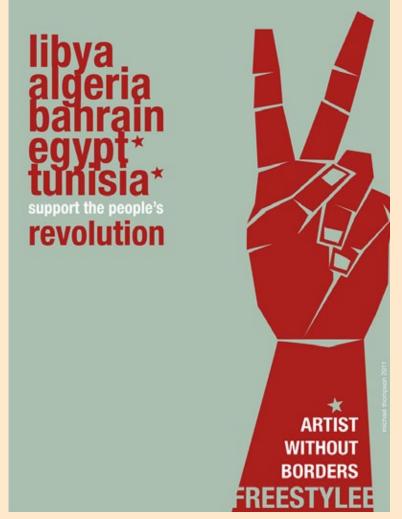
As in the rest of the world, information technology and mobile devices are now widely available to ordinary people in the Arab world. Satellite dishes sprinkle the roofs of homes across the region. *Al-Jazeera* and increasing numbers of other satellite television channels are widely popular, especially for their news programs. Consequently, the demand for political and economic reforms has gained momentum. The year 2010 signaled the beginning of popular expression of social resentment. *Al-Jazeera* aired news reports and analysis of events and incidents pertaining to social unrest and other controversial political issues. In response,

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the authoritarian regimes tightened censorship on the local, regional and international media. At this point, the utilization of social media for political purposes became crucial to the wide-spread expression of pent-up social discontent that precipitated the Arab Spring.

Bouazizi and the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring was ignited on December 17, 2010 in Tunisia. In the small town of Sidi Bouzid, a 26-year-old street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire as a protest against the police's arbitrary confiscation of his vegetable cart, the only source of his family's income. Bouazizi's self-immolation, from which he later died, was captured by cell phone cameras and broadcast around the country and the world. Backed by political activists and labor unions, residents of his city organized huge demonstrations to express their anger and frustration against the long-standing autocratic government and demanded political and economic reforms. The police and security forces confronted the demonstrators with force, arresting

Poster by Michael Thompson–Artist Without Borders Freestylee

Uploaded videos, photos, and Twitter feeds served to outrage people in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria.

some and injuring others. People with mobile devices recorded what happened and shared it through Facebook. The Tunisian female activist Rim Nouri observed that Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution and its shocking online imagery mobilized Tunisians through-out the country, including those in the capital of Tunis, and beyond its borders (*How Social Media Accelerated Tunisia's Revolution*, Huffingtonpost.com). Uploaded videos, photos, and Twitter feeds served to outrage people in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria.

Social Media as Enabler

Social media was an enabler of the Arab Spring. Wael Ghonim, an Egyptian Google marketing executive, spearheaded the effort and sent information and images to those Egyptians who had access to the internet. He encouraged them to take part of the uprising against President Hosni Mubarak and his regime. Ghonim also asked people to congregate in specific locations at specified times, and even prepared and transmitted slogans for them to chant. Ghonim and his online network helped to mobilize Egyptians throughout the country, and especially in Cairo, where Tahrir Square became a hub for protestors from across Egypt. Across the Arab world, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube became the principal means for rallying anti-government sentiment and demands for political and social changes.

Table 2 – Unrest, Corruption, Poverty, Age and Literacy in the Arab World*					
Country	Unrest Index	Corruption	Poverty	Age	Literacy
Algeria	51.3	105	22.6	27.1	73
Bahrain	37.7	48	n/a	26.3	91
Egypt	67.6	98	16.7	24	66
Jordan	50.3	50	14.2	21.8	92
Libya	71.0	146	n/a	24.2	88
Morocco	48.2	85	19	30.4	56
Saudi Arabia	52.8	50	n/a	24.9	n/a
Syria	67.3	127	n/a	21.5	n/a
Tunisia	49.4	59	7.6	26.5	78
Yemen	86.9	146	41.8	17.9	61

*Source: Compiled from Transparency International Corruption Index, 2010; World Bank; CIA *World Fact Book*.

> This volatile combination of a young population, authoritarian rule, corruption and poverty is prompting youth to spearhead political demonstrations and the demand for regime change.

The younger generation in *Al-Alam Al-Arabi* dominates the widespread use of social media. This is not surprising. Youth under 25 years comprises approximately two-thirds of the population in the Arab world, and the number is increasing. For example, the percentage of population under the age 15 is projected to reach 22.5% in Kuwait, 42.4% in Yemen, and 30.7% in Saudi Arabia by 2025. Educated youth, moreover, feel the burden of corruption and poverty among themselves, their immediate families, and the people (see Table 2). This volatile combination of a young population, authoritarian rule, corruption and poverty is prompting youth to spearhead political demonstrations and demand regime change.

The increase in the percentage of youth across the Arab world is matched by a dramatic increase in the use of social media in the region. According to one Arab social media report produced by the Dubai School of Government (*Facebook in the Arab Region* [2011]), the total number of Facebook users in the Arab world was expected to be more than 45 million by the end of June 2012. Across the Arab world, young people between 15 and 29 years comprise 75% of the Facebook users.

Mona Eltahawy, columnist and public speaker on Arab and Muslim issues, told the *Voice of America* in August 2010: "Social media has given the most marginalized groups in the region a voice" (www.voanews.com). They have become social media savvy and strive to improve their techniques of monitoring the developments in their countries. Although the political changes that transpired in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen could be viewed as positive, the youth of these countries are still mounting pressure on the newly elected or appointed leaders to do more and to answer to the people who elected them.

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