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## **REVOLUTION IN THE CONTEMPORARY MUSLIM WORLD: REVIEW OF THE 1979 IRAN'S REVOLUTION AND THE 2011 ARAB UPRISINGS**

*This article reviews the two major revolutionary events occurred in the Muslim world- the 1979 Iran's Revolution and the 2011 Arab Uprisings. In particular, it highlights the snapshots of events' background and examines the factors that ignited the mass uprisings, both in Iran in 1979 and selected countries in the Middle East and North Africa in 2011. These two momentous events were significant in the context of Muslim politics as the nature and outcome of these events shared several common aspects for instance the elements of popular mass protest to topple an autocratic regime, 'exports' of the revolution to the global Muslim community as well as the prospect for political change in the countries involved. The methodology of this work employs document analysis, predominantly through published reports and secondary sources. This article revealed that serious economic downturn and unemployment crisis, along with the persistence of autocratic leadership and centralisation of power are the core reasons why the Iranian revolutionaries in 1979 and the Arab protesters in 2011 took to the streets to demand economic and political reform as well as an immediate resignation of their respective ruling regime. Regarding the trajectory of post-Arab Uprisings development in Syria, Yemen and Libya, the situation seems unpredictable, let alone to determine the prospect for democratic transition. Contrary to Iran's case, those few Arab countries in the post-Uprisings are very unlikely to experience any holistic political change in the near future due to the escalation of on-going domestic tensions and global conflicts across the region.*

**Keywords:** *Iranian Revolution, Arab Uprisings, Economic Downturn, Authoritarianism, Political Islam*

### **Introduction**

The Iranian Revolution of 1979, also dubbed the 'Islamic Revolution' by some Iranian Islamists, was a popular uprising in Iran that resulted in the toppling of the Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi's monarchy on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1979 and led to the establishment of an Islamic republic of Iran.<sup>1</sup> The revolution undoubtedly sent shock waves throughout the globe and marked a turning point in the Muslim

world.<sup>2</sup> The consequences of the Shah's wrong-headed policies and repressive leadership, which affected the majority of Iranian citizens, created a strong and solid opposition to the regime. Jahangir Amuzegar in his publication "The Dynamics of the Iranian Revolution" explained that the Shah's human rights violations against the people for the sake of modernization and 'Westernization' policies inevitably created a deep hatred among the Iranians toward the regime and modernization itself.<sup>3</sup>

Apart from the political repression of the regime, the popular uprising in Iran was also interpreted by many as a rejection of modernity since the majority of Iranians believed that modernization would bring harm to the existence of Iran's traditional and social culture. During the period of struggle against the Shah, the mass movement steadily increased, and it was estimated that three million people came onto the streets in Tehran in the biggest mass mobilization in Iranian history. The revolution managed to attract widespread popular support from different layers of society encompassing the tradesmen, bazaar merchants, urban-middle classes, civil servants, lawyers, newly urbanized and 'proletarianized' working classes - all of them participated in the revolution to topple the autocratic regime of the Shah.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Enqelāb-e Iran- Origins of the 1979 Revolution***

The beginning of early protest in modern Iran took place on June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1963 when Khomeini, the spiritual leader and founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, was arrested and put under house arrest as ordered by the Shah after being seen as a threat to the regime. This incident sparked protests and riots which resulting in over 400 deaths. On April 7<sup>th</sup>, 1964 Khomeini was released for a temporary period and returned to Qom. However, in November 1964 Khomeini was re-arrested and forced to leave the country, which resulted in him living in exile in France for 14 years. In the meantime, throughout the 1960s, the Shah regime began to exercise increasing control over the government after dissolving parliament in 1961.<sup>5</sup> Programmes of agricultural and economic modernization were pursued, but the regime took charge of economic and social development, leaving very few benefits to reach the ordinary citizen. The Shah made the grave mistake of 'promising too much and delivering too little'. The results of rapid industrialization and modernization without taking into account low productivity, shortage of port facilities and lack of skilled workers proved disastrous to the regime's plans. In other words, the Shah's ambitious industrialization plans drained the state's wealth and treasury.<sup>5</sup>

Despite growing prosperity, as the economic modernization was perceived as partly successful, opposition to the Shah was widespread, fanned mainly by conservative Shiite Islamists, who wanted the nation to be governed by Islamic law. While Iran underwent economic and social transformations, a parallel political transformation never took place. The authoritarian regime

in Iran did not permit the exercise of the democratic process – there was prohibition of self-expression, as well as lack of political participation. In addition, the regime created a reign of terror for those who did not support the Shah. It was estimated that tens of thousands of people were jailed and tortured by the ‘secret police and intelligence force’- the SAVAK (*Sāzemān-e Ettelā’āt va Amniyat-e Keshvar*)- in order to protect the regime. These circumstances led Iran to gain a very poor reputation on human rights issues and deepened the people’s resentment against the regime- resentment that turned into strong hatred and later ignited the revolution.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the Shah’s extreme policy of political repression, was perceived as the most important reason for the emergence of the popular Iranian Revolution.<sup>8</sup> Prior to the revolution, circa early 1977, civil rights protests were held by a group of lawyers, journalists and writers to demand more freedom of press and expression. These protests escalated from month to month and year to year until it alerted the regime and led Shah to become fed up with so-called “revolutionaries” and began to execute them.

On September 8<sup>th</sup>, 1978, the Shah gave an order for his military forces to shoot into the crowd in Tehran’s Jaleh Square, killing thousands of the demonstrators. This event was known as Black Friday and is thought to have marked the point of no return for the revolution and led to the abolition of Iran’s monarchy less than a year later. It is also believed that Black Friday played a crucial role in further radicalizing the protest movement, uniting the opposition to the Shah and mobilizing the masses. By the very next day, the strike against the regime had spread like wildfire to Tahriz, Isfahan, Shiraz and Abdan as a response and so as to show solidarity with the Black Friday tragedy. As the rhythm of the strike movement was intensified, every section of citizens from oil workers to public sector staffs were all drawn into the struggle. Later, on December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1978 over two million people filled the streets of Tehran’s Azadi Square to demand the immediate removal of the Shah and return of Khomeini. Without delay, on January 16<sup>th</sup>, 1979 as the political situation deteriorated with continuous movement of the masses on a huge scale, the whole situation took a sharp turn when the helpless Shah’s regime finally collapsed. The Shah and his family were forced into exile and left the country forever. Finally, in February 1979, revolutionary forces under Khomeini seized power after his return to Iran and a referendum was approved in March for the establishment of an Islamic republic with Khomeini in control.<sup>9</sup>

### **Beyond the 1979 Revolution: Impact on Global Muslim Community**

Throughout the Muslim world, the socio-political impact of the Iranian revolution was profound. The revolution in Iran undoubtedly had explosive international consequences as there were persistent attempts to ‘export’ the revolution to neighbouring countries and across the Muslim world by

Khomeini.<sup>10</sup> Like many other great revolutionaries, Khomeini and his men had set their minds on carrying their creed and practice into other Muslim countries<sup>11</sup> The Iranian revolution and Khomeini himself called for the promotion of revolution abroad - 'the export of revolution' as part of the consolidation of the revolution at home.<sup>12</sup> Khomeini was calling for confrontation with the Western powers or "Great Satan" and the liberation of occupied territories. In order to demonstrate the revolution as an Islamic one, rather than an Iranian one, he also engaged himself with the issues close to the hearts and minds of Arabs and Muslims, namely the question of Palestine and pan-Islamism. To bring the message of the revolution and secure the newly formed- Islamic leadership to the people at home as well as to the outside world, the new Iranian administration used all available channels such as mass media, education, conferences and Friday sermons. Moreover, diplomats of Iranian embassies abroad were openly requested to proclaim their commitment to using embassy facilities and resources to support groups sympathetic to the revolution.<sup>13</sup>

In terms of concrete export, four states in particular - Bahrain, Iraq, Afghanistan and Lebanon<sup>14</sup> were supported and provided with military assistance by the republic. Iran in the post-Khomeini period was also adhered to the declared policies of 'Islamic revolution', by strengthening its relations with the Muslim nations and began to reassert its role in the politics of the Middle East<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that although the Iranian revolution did not lead in the establishment of Islamic Caliphate, it formed a new Islamic paradigm, which was increasingly radicalising dissatisfied Muslim communities who were desperate for political and economic change. By export of its revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran intended to highlight one of the principal religious and political developments - the revival of Islamic fundamentalism, which originally emerge from Iran, and stretching to Southeast Asia and the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>16</sup> As pointed out by Osman - a senior political counsellor for the Arab world at the European Bank for Reconstruction & Development, "It is highly doubtful that Khomeini ever thought his system would be exported to Egypt, Syria, Morocco, Malaysia, Pakistan or any of the large Sunni Islamic countries. But the notion of the rise of Islamic scholars to command their societies seemed to him, not only possible but an Islamic obligation."<sup>17</sup>

The consequences of post-Iran's Revolution undoubtedly affected the development of some Muslim countries, particularly with regard to the issues of Islamism and political Islam. However, after nearly four decades, the popularity of Iranian revolution seems did not last long when the world has witnessed a new dramatic political scenario in the Muslim world with the fall of several long-serving Arab rulers, particularly in Tunisia and Egypt via mass uprising dubbed the 'Arab Spring' revolution. Detail on how the mass protests erupted in each involved state in the Middle East and North Africa region will be discussed in the following sections. It will also highlight major causes of the uprisings, as well as some issues within the development of the post-2011

revolutions.

### ***Ar-Rabī' al-'Arabī: Geneses of the 2011 Arab Uprisings***

Over the last few years, political 'tsunamis' and mass uprisings have shaken the region of MENA more than one could ever imagine. It tragically surged in Tunisia on December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2010 when Mohamed Bouazizi, a street vendor set himself on fire in protest of the injustice and brutality he received from the government authority. His death led to massive demonstrations, as the Tunisians thought it was the state regime's fault. This mass protest resulted in the overthrow of the 23-year dictatorship of Ben Ali on January 14<sup>th</sup>, 2011. Like a domino effect, popular uprisings then became rampant across the Arab world, from one country to another until the entire region was immersed, leading to a new era in the history of the region known as the Arab Uprisings.<sup>18</sup>

In the same month, a vast number of Egyptians flocked to famous Tahrir Square to organize a rally to fight against the brutality of government forces, government corruption and economic depression, an action that led to the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak. In February 2011 anti-government protests were organized in other Arab major cities including Manama, Algiers, Tripoli, Benghazi, Sana'a, Damascus and Aleppo. The Yemeni President, Ali Abdullah Saleh stepped down in response to the protests, while Muammar Qaddafi was captured and killed in a NATO-joined operation, after several months facing local armed rebellion and NATO intervention. As Agathangelou and Soguk demonstrate, the Arab Uprisings' phenomenon caught the global elites flat footed as they watched Arab peoples challenge the structure of repression and injustice in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>19</sup> These uprisings indirectly signalled to the rest of the world that the relations and institutions of political and economic control and domination were far from being permanent; they could be rattled to the core, pushed into a crisis, and be transformed in radical-democratic ways. In the words of Al Jazeera's senior political analyst, Marwan Bishara;

“Never in the history of the region have people been so hopeful, so ready and so adamant to change their lives for the better as they were in 2011. Never has the spread, speed and similarity of uprisings across continents been so breath-taking, and the contagion so instantaneous. Never have the young and the old, men and women, middle-class and working class worked so closely and so satisfyingly. Never have the religious and the secular, the liberal and the conservative marched so trustingly in the streets and public squares of the Arab world as they did at the outset of the Arab Spring”

Since the launch of the Arab Uprisings, many scholarly works tend to focus on the two cases of countries that heralded the Spring – Tunisia and Egypt. Little attention has been paid to other countries in the MENA region, which also affected by the wave of revolution. Therefore, this article will specifically provide some background of the case of Algeria, Libya, Syria, Morocco, Yemen and Bahrain's Uprisings - with specific attention on the genesis to the revolts, key aspects of events and causes of the uprisings.

### **The Arab Uprising in North Africa: The Case of Libya, Algeria and Morocco**

Civil uprising in Libya began in the aftermath of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions when a coalition of groups called the National Conference for the Libyan Opposition, which later on became the National Transitional Council issued a call on social media for Libyans to participate the “Day of Rage” to pressure Gaddafi to step down.<sup>20</sup> According to Vandewalle, of all the Arab Uprisings, Libya's rebellion against the regime of Muammar Gaddafi stands as one of the most distinctive and unexpected in the region of Middle East and North Africa as the outcome saw massive foreign interventions which led by NATO and the approval of UN.<sup>21</sup> As stated by Gelvin, the date they chose was February 17, 2011 as it was the fifth anniversary of the 2006 ‘Italy’s demonstration.’<sup>22</sup> On that day, residents in Benghazi and other north-eastern towns like Derna and Tobruk took to the streets and gathered pace after the shocking news of Mubarak’s departure in Egypt. Within days, the unstoppable uprising had spread to Libya’s main capital, Tripoli where the revolutionaries set fire to authorities’ buildings as well as engaged government forces in street clashes. From the beginning, the regime faced the uprising with a dreadful level of viciousness. As Maya Bhardwaj points out, realising that the wave of the Arab Uprisings swept closer to Libya, Gaddafi condemned the protests, extending his 1973 rhetoric of dissenters as “stray dogs” to put the protesters in Benghazi as “rats” and “cockroaches” to be eliminated.

It was reported by numerous global mainstream news such as Aljazeera, BBC and Reuters that security apparatus treated the Libyan revolutionaries as “enemy” in which the state forces deployed helicopter gunships to put down the mass uprising in Tripoli.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, in August 2011 after six months of intense ‘civil war’ as well as with the involvement of NATO jets providing intensive air support to the rebels, Tripoli was seized by the anti-regime protesters which marked the end of the Libyan Spring. Two months later, on 20 October 2011, Gaddafi last bastion in his hometown, Sirte was stormed which resulted his tragic death. The 69-year-old Gaddafi is the first leader to be assassinated in the wave of popular uprisings that swept the Middle East, demanding the end of autocratic rulers and the establishment of greater political change.

Another North African states and close neighbours to Tunisia and Libya, the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria or in the conventional short form- 'Algeria' was in no exception to experienced popular protests, which began in the first week of January 2011. Although the demonstrations seemed modest in size, especially if compared to the scale of mass uprisings in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, the protests managed to send 'alarm' to President Abdul Aziz Bouteflika about future of 'democratic' Algeria. According to James Gelvin, over the last 20 years that pave the way to the mass uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa, it seemed the common cause that made other autocratic regimes in the Arab region vulnerable, without any doubt made the Algerian regime vulnerable as well.<sup>24</sup> Not long after the protests had spilled over from Tunis into Algiers, efforts were made to set up a national protest movement.<sup>25</sup> As Benakcha demonstrates, during the "Algeria's Spring", up to 3,000 Algerians marched in January and February 2011 in Algiers, led by the fragile coalition gathering opposition parties and members of the civil society-the National Coordination for Change and Democracy (CNCD).<sup>26</sup> Demonstrations in Algeria is believed to be driven by the same social dissatisfactions afflicting neighbouring countries such as determination of recovering dignity through better life conditions and demanding more political and human rights.<sup>27</sup>

The Algerians were also took to the streets throughout the country as a response to price hikes in commodities and other basic staples. Violence had already erupted regularly in the slums of Algiers and other big cities due to the government's inability to meet the people's need for decent housing and social services. In the month following the ill-fated February 12 rally, a strike wave spread throughout the country, as did sporadic rioting, which reflected continued dissatisfaction with the issues of unemployment, housing and high prices. Unemployment has reached 35 percent and the population struggles to make ends meet as prices-including food and convenience goods reached a peak.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, it was obvious that Algeria seemed to be one the 'survivors' from the wave of Arab Uprisings, as Gelvin argues, 'the Algerians did not have their Tahrir Square, and they did not have the pleasure of hearing a shocking announcement over the radio that their president had resigned, as had Egyptians.'<sup>29</sup> Observer such as Lise Storm believed that one of the crucial reasons of this exceptional undoubtedly was the memories of series of horrific civil war that still fresh in most people's mind as majority of Algerians were fearful that political turmoil would lead to further chaos, killings and perhaps even trigger into another civil war.<sup>30</sup>

Morocco is one of the last of the so-called Maghreb countries of Northern Africa to experience series of mass street protests in the wake of the fall of Tunisian and Egyptian regimes in 2011. On February 2011, the first coordinated demonstrations, organized by the Mouvement du 20 Fevrier also known as Morocco's pro-democracy February 20 Movement took place across the country in cities such as Agadir, Casablanca, Fes, al-Hoceima, Laayoune,

Marrakech, Rabat and Tangier. Thousands of protesters took to the streets in Morocco to demand full-fledge changes to the state's constitution as well as plea for political reform and limits on the powers of King Mohammed VI.<sup>31</sup> In Rabat, a crowd of up to 10,000 people marched through the streets chanting: "down with autocracy" and "the people want to change the constitution," as well as slogans against the government, corruption and state television.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, in 2011, unlike Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, Morocco did not experience any revolutionary or radical change as well as massive political upheaval in the context of the Arab Uprisings.<sup>33</sup> According to Storm, in comparison to the events in Cairo and Tunis, the Arab Uprisings protests in Rabat were not only much smaller, they were also much more peaceful. However, it would not be accurate to suggest that the Arab Uprisings had no political impact in Morocco although Storm has argued that this event and the activities of the 20<sup>th</sup> February Movement did not improve the prospect for democracy in Morocco.<sup>34</sup> Despite the momentum of the protests in Morocco was slightly different to its Arab neighbours, in response to the unprecedented public protests in the country, King Mohammed VI had announced new political reforms in February 2011, including an early parliamentary election, a constitutional reform process to grant citizens new civil rights, and the abandoning of some of the King's administrative power.<sup>35</sup>

### **The Arab Uprisings in West Asia: The case of Yemen, Bahrain and Syria**

Starting with Yemen, like their counterparts around the Arab region, a younger generation and vast majority of Yemeni political activists were inspired by events in Tunisia and Egypt to take to the streets in early 2011 - an effort to topple the autocratic regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh.<sup>36</sup> Anti-government protests appeared in the districts of North and South Yemen in mid-January 2011, after a coalition of opposition parties called the Join Meeting Party (JMP) began a series of demonstrations in Yemen's capital, Sana'a - to protest the proposal adopted by parliament to eliminate presidential term limits as well as rumour that Saleh's plan to 'transfer' the presidential power to his son, Ali Ahmed Saleh.<sup>37</sup> The electrifying news of Mubarak's departure on February 11 seemed to transform the demonstrations in Yemen into a large-scale rally calling for immediate Saleh's downfall.<sup>38</sup>

That night, students and activists gathered outside the Sana'a University and marched to the city's main square. As a result, almost over 20 000 people flooded the main roads in the city of Sana'a and while thousands of protesters marched in several other major cities such as Aden, Ta'iz and Ibb to protest against the ruling government. The protests did not end there as few weeks later, on 25<sup>th</sup> February, nearly 100,000 of Yemenis, with full of support of JMP took part in a demonstration in Ta'iz, with tens of thousands coming



out in Sana'a and Aden. People's efforts to bring President Ali down continued when, on June 3rd, his office building was destroyed by explosions resulting in 11 death and several others injury including the President himself.<sup>39</sup> The rocket attack which struck the mosque which is believed where the president was praying severely wounded Ali Abdullah Saleh which forced him to get treatment in Riyadh. Then, on September 23<sup>rd</sup> 2011, President Saleh was forced to sign an agreement on the transfer of power. After few months of tensions and chaos in large part of the country, involving the pro and anti-regime protesters, Finally, Saleh finally bowed to his opposition. He resigned and left the presidential office to give power to his new successor, in the post-Yemen's Uprising.<sup>40</sup>

In Bahrain, in the aftermath of Ben Ali and Mubarak's departure in Tunisia and Egypt, the 2011 'Pearl Roundabout' uprising dubbed 'the Pearl Revolt' was a defining moment in the political life of Bahrain which saw an exceptional challenge to the tiny island kingdom's ruling bargain.<sup>41</sup> Prior to the uprisings, Bahrain's youths and activists were seen taking full advantage of the anonymity of new social media to call for their own Day of Rage protests in Manama.<sup>42</sup> According to Noueihed and Warren, the protesters chose February 14 as this date held the significance of being a full decade since the approval of National Action Charter which is believed to protect the status quo of Bahrain's ruling monarch. Calling for peaceful protests, the '14 February' youth movement demanded constitutional reform, free elections, investigations into claims of high-level corruption, release of prisoner<sup>43</sup> and an end to political naturalisation.<sup>44</sup>

In Manama, at their peak, the demonstrations would have involved about a fifth of Bahrain's half a million people which drove organisers to make the Pearl Square roundabout as their 'camp'. However, in the early hours of February 17, the kingdom's security apparatus, backed by the Gulf Cooperation Council<sup>45</sup> stormed the camp and cleared the site. Five people were reportedly killed and while hundreds and more were seriously injured. A few days later, authorities destroyed the roundabout in a failed attempt to suppress the uprising. Whatever the case, the uprising in Bahrain stands out from all the others for two causes. First after regime met the protesters' initial request for reform with fierceness, the uprising took a decidedly anti-monarchy turn. Second, the manner of its suppression marked a new strategy for mounting counterrevolution in the region.<sup>46</sup>

In Syria, the beginning of the uprising bears a closer resemblance to the beginning of the uprising in Libya than to that in Egypt. Whereas protesters in Egypt made the capital city, Cairo, the symbolic centre of the uprising, in Syria, as in Libya, the uprising broke out in the provinces (Gelvin 2012). On March 2011, the Syrians decided to protest peacefully against the regime of Bashar Al-Assad,<sup>47</sup> which they believed the president and his wife, Asma Al-Assad have 'looted' the country's wealth for nearly decades. They

were demanding reform in state's economy and politics after a long period of repression and hardship. Began with a small revolt in Southern province of Deraa,<sup>48</sup> the protests have spread throughout the country encompassing Houla, Damascus,<sup>49</sup> Aleppo, Homs, Latakia, Hama, Al-Raqqa, Idlib and many more. The response from the regime personnel was upset.

On March 18, the security forces opened fire and killed several protesters which further enraged the anti-regime sentiment and escalating the uprising. Protests were met with a deadly response, therefore sparking even greater demonstrations which later turned into civil wars, and now further into another global crisis—the migration of massive Syrian refugees in Europe. At first, focus of the protests' chants were ranging quickly around local issues, like the removal of an unpopular governor before escalated to national issues such as to call for an end to emergency law, brutality of the Syrian regime, corruptions, absence of democratic institutions and finally to demand the immediate overthrow of Assad.<sup>50</sup> It also seemed that the democratic aspirations of the Syrian revolutionaries who filled streets and public squares across Syria in early 2011 were among the strong reasons for Syrian uprising which later turned into one of the modern bloodiest conflicts in the Arab region.<sup>51</sup>

## **Major Causes of the Iranian Revolution and the Arab Uprisings**

While extensive debates and research have evolved around the nature and roots of the Iranian Revolution and the 2011 Arab Uprisings, there is a consensus among political analysts regarding the combination<sup>52</sup> of major factors that, when combined created the social and political explosion as witnessed in the two cases of revolutions being studied. The general causes of both cases of revolutions reside in decades such as frustration with long authoritarian rule, old political grievances, emerging demographic factors and economic difficulties.<sup>53</sup> Based on previous literatures on the Iranian Revolution and the Arab Uprisings, I argue that there are two crucial factors that caused the revolutions - namely economic downturn and political repression as evident in all cases of mass uprisings discussed earlier.

Indeed, the repressive and violence nature of the Shah Pahlavi and majority Arab regimes and their suppression of individual rights against a backdrop of on-going corruption and deterioration of the economy have been the major factors leading to the Iranian and Arab revolts.<sup>54</sup> All these two factors, to a large extent contributed to the causes of these popular uprisings which led to the collapse of the previous regime in the respective countries. Indeed, the works of Goodwin, Skocpol and Foran on the theory of revolution established some common elements on the two powerful sources which can potentially ignite a revolution – the failure or disturbance of economic and wealth distribution and the practice of political repression.<sup>55</sup> However, given the sole aim of this article - which is to review the background and contributing

factors of Iran's Revolution and the Arab Uprisings, it is not my intention to include the above-mentioned scholarly works in great detail. Discussions on the state of economic and political condition of Arab countries prior to the Uprisings are presented in the following subsections.

### **Economic Downturn**

Similar to Iran's case, economic pressures and critical unemployment crisis were in the top of every list of catalysts and causes of the 2011 Arab Uprisings (Salih 2013). Prior to the revolution, the unemployment crisis<sup>56</sup> in several Middle East and North African states have claimed its victims for decades, mainly among youth and university graduates due to economic instability,<sup>57</sup> high level of corruptions and the culture of cronyism and nepotism in wealth's distributions.<sup>58</sup> During the pre-revolutionary years, the Iranian and Arab youths had become increasingly educated and yet remained underemployed or unemployed while national wealth and opportunities were squandered by leaders more interested in power and position.<sup>59</sup> These statements are also supported by Malloch-Brown as he agreed that the causes of the recent Arab Uprisings lay, in large part, in the absence of jobs and unequal sharing in economic growth across the Arab world.<sup>60</sup>

Moreover, the gap between the rich and the poor was so great that it led to the problem of inequality and imbalanced development. For example, in Egypt, the total number of the unemployed Egyptian on the eve of the uprising was about 2.5 million, mainly youth aged 20-24 who constituted the main striking force of the revolution.<sup>61</sup> Thus, I concur with Esposito, Sonn, Voll, and Axworthy claims that economic grievances, with unemployment at the forefront, were undoubtedly the strong reason why people took to the streets and serve as the heart of the revolutions – both in Iran and MENA region.<sup>62</sup>

### **Political Repression**

It is widely known that over the years, the region of Middle East and North Africa used to become home to one of the most repressive, corrupted and autocratic regime in the continent. The closure of political system, coupled with the practise of political repression and violent nature of the regimes in the region were listed as major factors contributing to the 1979 Iran's Revolution and the 2011 Arab Uprisings.<sup>63</sup> Most of the Arab regimes, with the exception of a few, are classified as highly authoritarian systems in which political openness was simply dead in which power is monopolized by the few rather than shared by the many.<sup>64</sup> Take for instance in Tunisia, among the causes of mass grievances which led to the fall of Ben Ali regime was its brutal ruling nature -with all potential spaces for public expression such as the media, research centres and civil society organisations were controlled, and some were closed

down during his era.<sup>65</sup>

On top of that, the role of security apparatus such local enforcements, police and military forces was undoubtedly excellent in securing Shah's power and those Arab regimes from any public resistance including from opposition parties.<sup>66</sup> Apart from that, human rights abuses by security forces, plus the extreme corruption by no doubt brought a feeling of frustration, injustice and humiliation among fellow Iranians and Arab citizens for many years before the revolutions. In Syria, Libya, Algeria, Morocco, Bahrain and Yemen, the scenario of power abuses, corruption at various levels and the autocratic rule of the government were no different if compared to the case of Tunisia and Egypt. These regimes have confiscated fundamental individual liberties like freedom of the press, freedom of organisation and freedom of expression which had been a factor that provoked the popular Arab Uprisings.<sup>67</sup>

### **Beyond the Arab Uprisings' phenomenon**

Undoubtedly, the Arab Uprisings' phenomenon has caused a lot of excitement and eagerness about the prospect of change as well as political transition in the Middle East and North Africa. In each of the states which involved in the popular Arab Uprisings, as previously discussed, the causes of social and political contestation were almost consistently the same such as the narrowing of political space at the hands of the state and a parallel growth of economic and political grievances – as in the case of Iranian Revolution. However, it is important to note that the outcomes were different as it depends on how the government react and the state's capacity to use force and violence against those 'revolutionaries.'<sup>68</sup> Although the final destination of the Arab Uprisings is, as of yet quite unclear, the outcome of this phenomenon also, as Rivetti points out have generated a tremendous amount of scholarly reflections on how politics functions in the Middle East and North Africa, apart from the issues of prospects for democratisation and the new wave of Islamists 'awakening.'<sup>69</sup>

While far from any fix conclusion, the events of Arab Uprisings onward have relatively made it reasonable to have in faith for a new prospect for Arab world politics.<sup>70</sup> To this extent, the 2011 Arab Uprisings represent a significant historical development in the MENA region as the events initially seemed to promise to usher the region into twenty-first century not via dictatorship but via democracy- the thing which many people thought would never occur.<sup>71</sup> Besides, a recent studies conducted by the research team based in Aberdeen University called the 'Arab Transformation Project' found significant percentage of respondents from selected countries which involved in the Arab Uprisings (Egypt, Libya and Morocco) – whereby the respondents were expressing a hope for a new democratic leadership which can reform their government, politics and eventually create economic stability in the post-Arab Uprisings environment<sup>72</sup>. However, to be realistic, the situation in the

post-Arab Uprisings can be seen as very fluid and fluctuates between hope and despair which dragged the whole region into qualm and uncertainties. The hopes raised by the Arab Uprisings – for more inclusive politics and more responsive government, for more jobs and fewer presidential cronies carving up the economy – have somehow been dashed with more unexpected tragedy of civil wars, political instability and economic disorder as evident in Syria, Egypt, Yemen and Libya.<sup>73</sup>

Indeed, some Arab countries (e.g. Tunisia, Bahrain, Morocco) may be seen succeed in restoring peace and stability after the Arab Uprisings, but majority are still struggling to achieve, at least a ‘cooling period’ after the massive uprising which affecting the vast majority of the citizens.<sup>74</sup> For instance, as pointed out by Lise Storm, there was real change took place in Tunisia, a country where the Arab Uprisings originated. The former dictator, President Ben Ali, who had been in office for decades, was overthrown and replaced with a new president from a political party that had been prohibited under the previous regime. A number of new political parties were established and legalised, and the 2011 and 2014 parliamentary elections were perceived as truly competitive legislative elections which saw nineteen new parties succeed in obtaining seats in parliament.

## **Conclusion**

This article briefly reviewed the historical background of two major revolutionary events in the Muslim world – the 1979 Iran’s Revolution and the 2011 Arab Uprisings. It is clear that these two historic events were important in the context of global political Islam as these events shared several common aspects for instance the elements of popular mass protest to topple an autocratic regime as well as the rise of Islamism or political Islam in the post-revolution period. This article found that economic downturn, unemployment crisis, political repression, autocratic leadership and centralisation of power are the main motives why the Iranian revolutionaries in 1979 and the Arab protesters in 2011 spurred to their main cities to request for prompt political and economic reform. The path of post-Arab Uprisings development in Morocco, Bahrain and Algeria seems to have, at least a positive prospect for long term political stability and democratic transition in the near future. Nevertheless, in other countries such as Syria, Yemen and Libya, their political and economic trajectories after the Arab Uprisings seems unpredictable. With the escalation of on-going tensions and conflicts involving the pro and anti-regime groups, coupled with indirect involvement of external powers, I argue that the citizens in these countries are very unlikely to experience any political change in the near future.

## Endnotes

1. Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic*, London, Penguin Group, 2014, pp. 1-4.
2. Farish A. Noor, "Blood, Sweat and Jihad: The Radicalization of the Political Discourse of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party from 1982 Onwards" *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 25 No.2, 2003, p. 204.
3. Jahangir Amuzegar, *The Dynamics of the Iranian Revolution*, New York, The State University of New York Press, 1991, p. 37.
4. Asef Bayat, *Workers and Revolution in Iran*, New York, Zed Books, 1987, p. 77.
5. See also Axworthy, 2014, pp. 58-59.
6. Gürbüz, M.V, "The Iranian Revolution". *Ankara Üniversitesi SBF Dergisi*, Vol. 58 No. 4, pp. 2003, 107-122.
7. See Gürbüz, 2003 and Axworthy, 2014.
8. Michael Axworthy, *Iran: What Everyone Needs to Know*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017.
9. Ibid.
10. See Abdul Halim Daud, Zarina Othman and Nor Azizan Idris, "Iran – Saudi Arabia Relations And The Middle East Stability" *Jebat: Malaysian Journal of History, Politics & Strategic Studies*, Vol. 45, No.1, July 2018, p. 162.
11. David Menashri. (ed.), *The Iranian Revolution and the Muslim World*, Oxford, West View Press. 1990, p.4.
12. Fred Halliday, *Revolution and World Politics: The Rise and Fall of the Sixth Great Power*, London, Macmillan Press Ltd. 1999, pp. 126-127.
13. See Menashri, 1990 and Halliday, 1999.
14. In the case of Lebanon, Iran sent several thousand Islamic guards, and considerable financial resources to support the Shiite forces, most notably the Hezbollah group against the Israel. See also Halliday 1999, p.127.
15. See Emadi, Hafizullah, "Exporting Iran's Revolution: The Radicalization of the Shiite Movement in Afghanistan", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 3, 1995. pp. 1-12;  
Abdul Halim Daud, Zarina Othman and Nor Azizan Idris, "Iran – Saudi Arabia Relations And The Middle East Stability" *Jebat: Malaysian Journal of History, Politics & Strategic Studies*, Vol. 45, No.1, July 2018, p. 151.
16. Details can be found in Ramazani, R.K. 1990. "Iran's Export of the Revolution: Politics, Ends and Means". In Esposito, J.L. (ed.), *The Iranian Revolution: Its Global Impact*, Florida: University Presses of Florida. pp. 40-62.

17. See also Tarek Osman, *Islamism: A History of Political Islam From the Fall of the Ottoman Empire to the Rise of ISIS*, New Heaven, Yale University Press, 2017, p. 194.
18. Larbi Sadiki, "Towards A 'Democratic Knowledge' Turn? Knowledge Production In The Age of The Arab Spring", *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 20, No.5, 2015. pp. 702-721.
19. See Agathangelou, A. M. and Soguk, Nevzat. (eds), *Arab Revolutions and World Transformations*, Oxford, Routledge, 2013.
20. Gelvin J. L, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012; Buera, A.A, "Libya's Arab Spring -Revolution against a 42-Year Dictatorship: Prospects of Governance and Democracy". In Sadiki, Larbi. (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of The Arab Spring: Rethinking Democratisation*, Oxfordshire, Routledge, 2015, pp.105-118.
21. The Libya government was accused for "crime against humanity" which resulted the resolution 1973 being adopted to impose the 'No Fly Zone' over Libya airspace. For more on the resolution please refer, United Nation (2011) Security Council Approves 'No-Fly Zone' over Libya, Authorizing 'All Necessary Measures' to Protect Civilians, by Vote of 10 in Favour with 5 Abstentions. Available at <http://www.un.org/press/en/2011/sc10200.doc.htm>. (retrieved on 13 September 2013).
22. In February 2006, protesters in Benghazi had attacked the Italian consulate after an Italian politicians had suggested that T-shirts should be made of Prophet Mohamed cartoons that had appeared in Danish newspapers. The demonstrations broadened into a general protest against the regime, when protesters began shouting anti-regime slogan and chanting which responded with a mix of force- police killed at least eleven people and conciliation. For more information, see Noueihed and Warren, 2012, p. 178.
23. See Gelvin, 2012, pp. 81-82.
24. Ibid.
25. Lise Storm, *Party Politics and the Prospects for Democracy in North Africa*, Colorado, Lynne Rienner, 2014. p. 158.
26. Narrimane Benakcha. "The Algerian Regime: An Arab Spring Survivor", *Journal of International Affairs*, 2012. Available at <https://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/online-articles/algerian-regime-arab-spring-survivor> (retrieved on 17 September 2015).
27. Frédéric Volpi, *Revolution and Authoritarianism in North Africa*, London, Hurst & Company, 2017.
28. See Benakcha, 2012.
29. See Gelvin, 2012, p. 98.
30. See Storm, 2014, p. 159.

31. Ibid.
32. Marc Champion, "Morocco Joins in, Defying Predictions". *The Wall Street Journal*, 2-2011. Available at [http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424\\_0527487034988\\_045761561804089\\_70252](http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424_0527487034988_045761561804089_70252) (retrieved on 29 September 2015).
33. Majority of the Arab uprising protests have taken the form of sustained campaigns involving thousands of ordinary citizens using the same techniques of civil resistance: strikes, demonstrations, marches and rallies. See also Salih, "The Roots and Causes of the 2011 Arab Uprisings", *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 2, 2013. pp. 184-206.
34. See Storm, 2014, p. 63.
35. Jeffrey Haynes, "The 'Arab Uprising', Islamists and Democratization", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 18, No.2, 2013, pp. 170-188.
36. He became president of the Yemen in 1978 when the country was still separated into two independent states, the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen or formerly known as South Yemen. He ruled the YAR until the merger of the two states in 1990, at which time he was elected the first president of the new unified Republic of Yemen, a position he assumed for nearly 32 years, which ranked him as one of the longest ruling president in the Arab world. See also Gelvin, 2012, p. 67 and Durac, 2012, p.163.
37. See Gelvin, 2012, pp. 78-79.
38. See Durac, 2012, p. 164.
39. See Noueihed and Warren, 2012, p. 204.
40. See Durac, 2012, p. 161.
41. Frederic Wehrey, "Bahrain's Decade of Discontent", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 24, No.3, 2013. pp. 116-126.
42. See Gelvin, 2012, pp. 135-136.
43. There were allegations that activists who had been rounded up in recent years had been tortured in jail. See also Noueihed and Warren, 2012, p.152.
44. Since majority of Bahrainis are predominantly Shia-Muslims, they demanded an end to the practice of naturalizing Sunni Arabs as citizens to raise the composition of Sunni-Muslims in the population and to expand the predominantly Sunni military and security forces. See Gelvin, 2012 p.136. According to Wehrey, the royal family has eschewed its policies of gerrymandering electoral districts and "sectarianizing" parliament in order to neutralize Shia's power. See Wehrey, 2013, p.117.
45. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is an organisation made up of six Gulf kingdoms; Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Bahrain that was formed in 1981 to promote



- cooperation in cultural, economic and political affairs. Three years after its founding, the council took on a military dimension as well as with the formation of a joint military force known as Peninsula Shield to deter and respond to aggression against any member state. For further information, see Gelvin, 2012, p. 138.
46. See Gelvin 2012
  47. Bashar Al-Assad came to power in 2000 after his father, Hafez Al-Assad (former Syrian president) death.
  48. The Deraa revolt began after a handful of local boys, some of more than ten years old, were arrested by police for daubing walls with graffiti that included what had become the powerful slogan of the Arab Spring: “The people want the fall of the regime”. After failing to secure their release, hundreds of Deraa residents took to the streets to voice their anger at the children’s brutal treatment. Deraa was seen as the torch that set light to uprisings in other provinces, as people across the country took to the streets in solidarity with those in the southern border town. See also Noueihed and Warren, 2012, p. 227.
  49. One such demonstration, held in Damascus on March 15, was organized by a group called “Syrian Revolution 2011 against Bashar al-Assad”.
  50. See Noueihed and Warren, 2012.
  51. Steven Heydemann, “Tracking the Arab Uprising: Syria and The Future of Authoritarianism”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 4, No. 4, 2013. pp.59-73.
  52. As argued by Hinnebusch, a combination of neoliberal economics and neo-patrimonial regimes were relatively present across North Africa and seen as the underlying causes of the Arab uprising. See Raymond Hinnebusch, “Change and Continuity after the Arab Uprising: The Consequences of State Formation in Arab North African States”. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, No.1, 2015. p.22.
  53. Vincent Durac, “Protest Movements and Political Change: an Analysis of the ‘Arab Uprisings’ of 2011”, *Journal of Contemporary African studies*, Vol. 31, No.2, 2013. pp. 175-193; Jacqueline and Shereen, “The Arab Spring and the Uncivil State”, *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No.3, 2013. pp. 229-240.
  54. See also publication by Salih, 2013, Saikal and Acharya, 2014, Axworthy, 2017 and Abdul Halim Daud, Zarina Othman and Nor Azizan Idris, 2018.
  55. Jeff Goodwin and Theda Skocpol, “Explaining Revolutions in the Contemporary Third World”, *Politics & Society*, Vol. 17, No. 4, 1989. pp. 489-509 and John Foran, “A Theory of Third World Social Revolutions: Iran, Nicaragua, and El Salvador Compared”, *Critical Sociology*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 1992. pp. 3 – 27.

56. The youth employment crisis posed the most widely publicized challenge to Arab states. It can be further explained by rising rates of university graduation, the result of earlier development progress and states subsidies to education as well as the shift toward longer lives and longer adolescence.
57. In Tunisia for instance, the European recession in 2009 has affected the state's economy which led to a decrease in exports and lower expansion in services. Furthermore, the Eurozone crisis continued to exacerbate in 2010 which further declined revenues in many North African states which forced the government to closed down both local and foreign businesses as the international credit interest continued. See also Arieff Alexis, "Political Transition in Tunisia". In De Leon, J.C and Jones, C.R. (eds.), *Tunisia and Egypt: Unrest and Revolution*, New York, Nova Science, 2012. p. 34.
58. Since the mid-1980s, the majority of the Arab economies have been exposed to tremendous pressure from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to reform their economies based on the Structural Adjustment Program. Due to the adoption of that program, government subsidies of basic essential commodities were cancelled, government jobs were substantially reduced, and taxation on consumption was increased for citizens while local and foreign investors were granted custom and taxation exemption. See also Salih, 2013, p. 187.
59. See Mehran Kamrava (ed.), *Beyond the Arab Spring: The Evolving Ruling Bargain in the Middle East*, London, Hurst & Company, 2014; Michael Axworthy, *Iran: What Everyone Needs to Know*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017.
60. Malloch-Brown, L.M, "The Economics of the Arab Spring". *The World Today*, Vol. 67, No.10, 2011, p. 8.
61. See Korotayev, A.V. and Zinkina, "Egyptian Revolution: A Demographic Structural Analysis", *Entelequia Revista Interdisciplinar*, Vol. 13, 2011, p. 167.
62. See John L. Esposito, Tamara Sonn and John O. Voll, *Islam and Democracy After the Arab Spring*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016. p. 251.
63. See Durac, 2013, 176.
64. See Salih, 2013, p. 187.
65. Habib Ayeb, "Social and Political Geography of the Tunisian Revolution: The Alfa Grass Revolution", *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 38, No. 129, 2011, pp. 467-479.
66. See Bishara, 2011, p. 5.
67. See Salih, 2013, pp. 187-188.
68. See Kamrava, 2014, p. 5.

69. Paula Rivetti, "Continuity and Change before and after the Uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco: Regime Reconfiguration and Policymaking in North Africa", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, No.1, 2015, pp. 1-11.
70. See Jacqueline and Shereen, 2013, p. 238.
71. See Isakhan, Mansouri and Akbarzadeh, 2012.
72. See "Arab Transformation Project: Project Structure and Outputs" 2016. Available online <http://www.arabtrans.eu/work-packages/project-structure/> (Retrieved on 17 October 2017).
73. The Economist, "Politics in the Middle East: The Arab Winter", *The Economist January 9<sup>th</sup>*. 2016, pp. 41-46.
74. For instance, as pointed out by Lise Storm, there was real change took place in Tunisia, a country where the Arab Uprisings originated. The former dictator, President Ben Ali, who had been in office for decades, was overthrown and replaced with a new president from a political party that had been prohibited under the previous regime. A number of new political parties were established and legalised, and the 2011 and 2014 parliamentary elections were perceived as truly competitive legislative elections which saw nineteen new parties succeed in obtaining seats in parliament. See Storm, *Party Politics and the Prospects for Democracy in North Africa*, Colorado, Lynne Rienner. 2014. p. 182.

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