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Views: New Alliances, Increased Repression Characterise Post-Arab Uprisings Middle East

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The Arab mass uprisings ended in popular demoralisation and – in countries that did not descend into outright civil war – a return to a repressive status quo ante. But in their failure, these popular revolts produced two additional outcomes harmful to the rights of the region's people. Each came as a response to an opportunistic actor seeking to fill emerging power vacuums.

One was the rise of supercharged surveillance states, which had witnessed in alarm how the Muslim Brotherhood's well-oiled mobilisational machine tried to seize the levers of state in Egypt and elsewhere. In response, they vastly scaled up their own capacity to crush dissent before it could spill into the streets.

The other was an Israeli strategy to respond to what it saw as a growing threat from Iran and its non-state proxies, which stepped in where governments had fallen or lost control over territory after 2011; this perception led Israel to push for greater security cooperation with these same authoritarian surveillance states. But in playing up external enemies, Israel also hit upon a potent means to continue to divert international attention and resources from any initiative to resolve its own conflict with the Palestinians, to the detriment of the latter's human rights.

The Rise of Surveillance States

State performance stood at the heart of the 2011 popular uprisings. When the region's autocratic regimes – custodians of the state – began to falter, they faced a critical choice: to accommodate some of the protesters' demands and promise reforms (perhaps even take some steps in that direction), or dig in. Then, if protesters scorned what was on offer or defied the violence unleashed against them, the regimes faced another choice: to step down or risk being brought down. Their decisions at these critical moments helped determine the shape of the states that emerged afterward.

On balance, in the contest between popular fury and regimes' willingness to pull out all the repressive stops, the latter came out on top. This was not inevitable. Before 2011, scholars

appeared convinced of Arab states' resilience in the face of pressures toward democratisation.¹ The uprisings forced them to rethink: clearly, regimes were coercive, but not enough to prevent protest movements from emerging and, in some early cases (Tunisia and Egypt), even succeeding. Eva Beilin, for example, observed that factors additional to a state's coercive apparatus should be taken into account, 'namely...the spread of social media'.²

When states survived, under the same or a new regime, they promptly applied the lessons they had learned to prevent a recurrence of popular challenges. They 'rearmed', especially in the field in which they had proved vulnerable – the mechanisms of mass mobilisation: social media – by scaling up their cyber capabilities. This allowed them to refine disinformation campaigns, which they had pioneered in less sophisticated form during the height of the 2011 revolts to sow discord and divide the people in the squares.

Leaders in this field were the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, whose vast wealth and ability to dole out patronage had largely shielded them – and their relatively resource-poor fellow monarchies Jordan and Morocco – from the 2011 shocks. It also enabled them to rush to the aid of another embattled ally, Bahrain, and to neutralise the mobilising power of Qatar's Al Jazeera media network. Qatar and Turkey had jointly put their economic and financial weight behind the Muslim Brotherhood, which, while not in the forefront of the protests, was in the best position to capitalise on them politically in countries such as Egypt and Tunisia, and to a lesser extent in Syria, Yemen and Libya.

Cyber technologies allow for a range of repressive behaviour: spying and surveillance, hijacking accounts, installing malware and viruses, spreading propaganda and disinformation, and so forth. States' access to superior resources allows them to build up such practices to industrial scale. Developers of cyber tools often claim these are designed for fighting crime and combatting terrorism.³ But these companies cannot fully control how their customers use this technology, or may not care to do so; for example, when the latter broaden the definition of 'crime' and 'terrorism' to include political dissent, journalism or even the normal functioning of an open society.

The case of NSO Group, an Israeli company that sold its spyware to, among others, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Oman and Morocco with the encouragement of the Israeli government, is illustrative.⁴ In July 2021, Amnesty International announced it had uncovered 'how governments worldwide were using NSO Group's invasive Pegasus spyware to put human rights activists, political leaders, journalists and lawyers around the world under unlawful surveillance'.⁵

Regimes' resort to cyber tools was a direct response to activists' use of social media to challenge official narratives and shape public opinion outside of state control, encourage people to turn to the streets and thus produce mass uprisings against authoritarian rule. Since these regimes could not shut down social networking sites, such as Facebook or Twitter, they could only try to beat activists at their own game. States like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, building on Israeli technology and expertise, launched extensive disinformation campaigns through social media, using 'armies' of real people and human-enhanced bots to present alternative narratives as a way to influence audiences and change the conversation.⁶ In doing so, the state agencies behind these campaigns instilled mistrust and fear, and increased political and social polarisation, including by using racist

tropes, character assassination and other nefarious practices, and by conveniently casting their opponents as terrorists as part of the global ‘war on terror’.

This new trend has given rise to new social science terminology, like ‘digital superpowers’, ‘weaponising social media’, ‘digital authoritarianism’, and Israel as ‘disinformation superpower’. Emerging literature provides examples from a rapidly expanding list of cases in the Middle East.⁷ ‘Influencing public opinion is a very old strategy’, commented an expert. ‘But with the use of social media, it has become a strategy on steroids’.⁸

As the pre-2011 police states metamorphosed into turbocharged surveillance states, whatever public space opened up thanks to people’s willingness to put their jobs, livelihoods and lives on the line closed again, seemingly even more effectively than before. This vastly complicates efforts at reforming the Arab state system and protecting people’s rights, yet makes it all the more vital.

Building an Anti-Iran Alliance

As Arab states faltered in the face of mass protests, Iran also tried to step into the vacuum – in Syria and Yemen, and less successfully in Bahrain. It had motives to do so, one of which was its experience during its eight-year war with Iraq in the 1980s, when it faced an invasion that enjoyed the financial, political and in some cases military support of an array of Arab states that sought to contain the Islamic revolution. At war’s end, Iran continued to feel vulnerable, though the subsequent Kuwait war and international sanctions placed on Iraq allayed its fears about a resurgent Iraq.

Iran began to move even before the 2011 uprisings. In Lebanon, it created Hezbollah in the 1980s to boost what it referred to as its forward defence against Israel – the capacity to counter an Israeli attack on Iran through its non-state ally in Lebanon to compensate for its own lack of a long-range air or missile capabilities. Then, when the United States overthrew Saddam Hussein in 2003, the Iranian leadership seized the opportunity to spread its influence in Iraq as a way to improve its strategic depth against a hostile Arab world. It supported some of the Shia militias that emerged, and infiltrated the state’s security forces and intelligence agencies.

The breakdown of Arab states in 2011 encouraged Iran to take this approach a step further by bringing Hezbollah as well as Iraqi and Afghan paramilitary groups into Syria, and promoting a non-state ally, Ansar Allah (the Houthis), in Yemen. In Iraq, the arrival of the Islamic State in 2014 encouraged Iran-backed militias to evolve into the al-Hashd al-Shaabi (‘popular mobilisation’) paramilitaries; the Islamic State’s territorial defeat three years later enabled the Hashd to extend their presence all the way to the Syrian border, as far north as Ninewa governorate.

Gulf Arab states saw these moves as evidence of Iranian hegemonic ambitions. Israel, which has been concerned in particular about Iran’s nuclear program, viewed them as an additional dimension of the threat posed by Iran.

The fear of a rising Iran, possibly further unleashed through funds freed up as part of the 2015 nuclear deal, prompted a somewhat unexpected nascent partnership between Israel and several Arab states. Israel already had peace treaties with Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994), but their mutual

relations have amounted to little more than a cold peace. Now Israel began to make efforts to strengthen its economic and security relations with other Arab states and, in the case of the UAE and Bahrain, to bring these into the open, encouraged by a Trump administration that sought to – at a minimum – dam in Iranian influence through a campaign of economic coercion.⁹

These efforts constitute a startling U-turn from the path David Ben Gurion, Israel's prime minister in 1955-1963, had taken when he launched the 'periphery doctrine', Israel's alliance with non-Arab Muslim state and non-state actors (Iran, Turkey, Iraqi Kurds) to counter a hostile Arab world. This strategy proved largely effective in helping keep the Arab world on the back foot, but lost its potency with the 1979 Iranian revolution. Today, in the wake of the popular uprisings, which exposed the weakness of Arab states' governing models, Israel reversed the roles Iran and Arab states played in its regional strategy, turning enemies into allies and vice versa. The clearest manifestation are the Abraham Accords, which Israel signed with the UAE and Bahrain in August 2020, and the times when Israeli leaders speak of a defensive alliance or 'regional [security] architecture' involving Arab states and designed to counter Iran.¹⁰

Arab states almost certainly are not prepared to accommodate Israel on the Iran front. It is not that they do not see an Iranian threat, or do not want protection. It is that they do not necessarily view Iran as the *primary* threat they face, or an alliance with Israel as the best form of (collective) protection, or *publicising* any security relations it maintains or might entertain with Israel as the *preferred* response.

Their strategic vision for the region is to have good ties with everyone (except Islamists), and to promote broader regional economic connectivity and development. This is because they see economic instability, rather than Iran, as the root of the problem, which has caused them to be surrounded by failed states whose power vacuum nonstate actors (backed by Iran, but also by Turkey and Qatar) can exploit. During President Joe Biden's July 2022 visit to the region, the Gulf Arab states hastened to publicly disavow any intention of joining an anti-Iran alliance and to clarify that they wished to have good relations with Iran, as well as with Israel. Anwar Gargash, a senior diplomatic adviser to the Emirati leadership, said that his country 'is not open to establishing an axis against any country in the region, especially Iran'.¹¹ Gulf Arab states prefer hedging their bets vis-à-vis a fickle U.S. that changes its priorities with each new election and whose security umbrella thus appears to them less reliable than before.¹²

What Palestinian Issue?

What passed for a peace process in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was run into the ground once the right took power in Israel two decades ago and, led by its vanguard group, the Jewish settler community, which mobilised the state's full resources in pursuit of colonising all Palestinian land and destroying the Palestinian leadership's organisational capacity. Even before, Israel's growing control over the territories it occupied in 1967 was aided by its success in dividing its external enemies and distracting its international allies from peace efforts by playing up the threat posed

by its enemies, first Arab states and then Iran. In mid-2022, Israel's de facto annexation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem was proceeding at full tilt.¹³

Until the popular uprisings in the Arab world, the unresolved question of Palestine had obstructed any rapprochement between Arab states and Israel. The 2011 revolts and the rise of Iran made it possible through an unusual convergence of interests.

The decisive shift came with the Trump administration, and its (correct) assessment that the peace process was dead with no early chance of reviving it, if only because of the extreme power imbalance between Israel and a fracturing Palestinian side. In early 2020, Trump launched his Peace to Prosperity plan, which sought to sidestep a political solution to the conflict by advancing Israeli annexationist objectives and attempting to pacify the Palestinians through vague promises of economic benefits.¹⁴

The September 2020 Abraham Accords were the next step. The accords brought Israel's largely hidden relationships with the UAE and Bahrain into the open, and formalised and expanded them. Apart from the deals' obvious economic and security benefits, they also effectively removed the Palestinian question from the regional equation by breaking the Arab consensus embodied in the Arab Peace Initiative. That 2002 Arab offer had conditioned normalising relations with Israel on the latter's full withdrawal from the occupied territories, a 'just settlement' of the Palestinian refugee problem, and the establishment of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital.¹⁵

Arab states that signed the accords may have believed that normalising relations with Israel would give them leverage on the Palestinian question, or at least on events at the Haram al-Sharif. If so, it clearly was far from their primary motive. In 2020, as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu threatened to formally annex almost a third of the West Bank, the Emirates announced they were prepared to normalise relations with Israel, but on the condition that Netanyahu drop his annexation plans.¹⁶ To the extent that their position influenced the prime minister's behaviour, it amounted to a Pyrrhic victory at best, as the prospect of de jure annexation is not what drives Israel's colonisation of the West Bank, and Netanyahu went no further than to forgo, not forswear, his ambition. A sincere effort at tackling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would require challenging Israel on its very presence in the occupied territories, consistent with the Arab Peace Initiative.

Gulf Arab rulers have no love for the Palestinians and their plight, and see great benefit in a relationship with Israel from which the Palestinian cause has long, and perhaps in their view unfairly and unprofitably, diverted them. The UAE and Bahrain pioneered the new arrangement with Israel.¹⁷ Saudi Arabia is slow-walking a decision on this, in part because of its leadership role in the Islamic and Arab community and stewardship of the Arab Peace Initiative, and in part because Saudi leaders may sense that the country's – much larger – population will not support formal relations with Israel.¹⁸ Riyadh is also likely to extract as much as it can from Washington before making such a momentous move.

So far, the Biden administration has confirmed its predecessor's approach toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as the president's July 2022 trip to Israel and Saudi Arabia showed, but minus the rhetoric. Biden endorsed normalisation and effectively uncoupled U.S. relations with Israel

from the Palestinian question.¹⁹ This means that, facing no serious external challenge, Israel virtually has free rein in continuing to colonise Palestine and suppress Palestinian rights.

Harm to Human Rights

The popular uprisings showed that there is a yawning divide between the region's ruling elites and ordinary citizens. The revolts' destructive aftermath has only widened the gulf. Repressive regimes' upgrade to supercharged surveillance states is shielding them from renewed popular mobilisation – for now. Without addressing pressing governance deficits, they can survive only as 'fierce' states: muscular in outward trappings but fundamentally fragile from within.²⁰ While superior surveillance techniques give them a tactical advantage over their domestic opposition, the human rights abuse that results from an even more intrusive method of repression than traditional spying can only deepen grievances.

The Abraham Accords are elite-based deals. No Arab participant submitted its normalisation agreement with Israel to a parliament or popular referendum. Effective legal mechanisms to contest a regime's signature are lacking. Nor have these Arab states exerted great efforts to sell the deals domestically. So far, apart from a segment of the business community, the Abraham Accords hold no obvious benefits for the mass of the population in the countries concerned. While there could be trickle-down advantages from trade and tourism, the principal drivers of at least the UAE's decision to ingratiate itself with Israel are access to Israeli technology and sophisticated U.S. weaponry, as well as the need to recalibrate the regional power balance.²¹

The uprisings specifically showed that Arab populations distrust their regimes to uphold their end of unspoken social contracts, and will act against them when a viable opportunity presents itself. Short of that, they smoulder. They despise the intrusiveness of these regimes' policing methods, perhaps even more than they oppose the role of the United States and Israel in the region. A broad sense of solidarity with the Palestinians remains, even if public manifestations of this have become increasingly rare. Opinion surveys suggest that public support for the Abraham Accords is low and possibly declining, including in the Gulf.²²

Simmering popular resentment will require intensifying domestic surveillance and greater repression, especially as economic and social conditions deteriorate due to rising prices of basic commodities. 'Fierce' states will become even fiercer. This could prompt a new backlash. Ultimately, the uprisings have shown that authoritarian police states are not immune to popular challenges, namely when people, inured to repression and fed up with arbitrary rule, shed their fear of reprisal.

The budding relationship between Israel and the region's autocratic regimes may be reinforcing this trend and further weakening Arab states. While the unintended beneficiary could be Iran, which will exploit any Arab power vacuum to extend its reach, the main casualty will be the rights of the region's people.

And in Israel-Palestine, the Abraham Accords dealt a blow to already diminishing chances to reach a just and lasting solution to the conflict, and removed a hurdle in front of Israel's ongoing

de facto annexation. Yet Palestinians repeatedly show that their cause remains alive, and has hardly lost in vigour, even with reduced Arab solidarity and support.

About the Author

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¹ For example, Beilin, Eva (2004) 'The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective', *Comparative Politics*, 36 (2), p. 143.

² Beilin, Eva (2012) 'Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring', *Comparative Politics*, 44 (2), pp. 142-143.

³ For example, Israel's NSO Group claims on its main webpage that it 'creates technology that helps government agencies prevent and investigate terrorism and crime to save thousands of lives around the globe'. It also claims to 'investigate any credible allegation of product misuse'.

⁴ Levinson, Chaim (2020) 'With Israel's Encouragement, NSO Sold Spyware to UAE and Other Gulf States', 25 August, *Haaretz*.

⁵ Amnesty International (2022) 'The Pegasus Project: One year on, spyware crisis continues after failure to clamp down on surveillance industry', 18 July. Critics allege that the NSO Group derives some of its technical expertise from staff who graduated from Israeli security and intelligence agencies, through which they honed their repressive surveillance skills in the laboratory of the occupied Palestinian territories. Cited in Farrow, Ronan (25 April/2 May 2022) 'The Surveillance States', *The New Yorker*.

⁶ I'm particularly grateful to Iyad al-Baghdadi of the Kawaakibi Foundation for his insights on regimes' use of social media to ramp up disinformation.

⁷ See, for example, Jones, Marc Owen (2022) *Digital Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Deception, Disinformation and Social Media* (Hurst Publishers); and Lynch, James (2022) 'Iron net: Digital repression in the Middle East and North Africa', 29 June, European Council on Foreign Relations.

⁸ Interview with an EU official, July 2022.

⁹ The U.S. 'maximum pressure' campaign against Iran at times had a 'regime change' agenda, at least in the intent of the likes of John Bolton when he was U.S. National Security Advisor (2018-2019).

¹⁰ This is the term Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett used during a visit to the UAE in June 2022. Caspit, Ben (2022) 'Israel's Bennett advances 'regional architecture' in Abu Dhabi', 10 June, *Al-Monitor*.

¹¹ Quoted in (2022) 'Gargash: Abu Dhabi is sending an ambassador to Tehran and wants to rebuild relations with it', *Arab News*, 16 July. See also, Jacobs, Anna, and Laure Foucher (2022) 'The Myth of an Emerging "Mideast NATO"', 3 October, International Crisis Group.

¹² Hiltermann, Joost (2021) 'Is "Little Sparta" Stepping Back? How the UAE Is Recalibrating in the Gulf', 2 December, *DAWN*; and Esfandiary, Dina (2022) 'The Ukraine Strain in the U.S.-UAE Partnership', *Lawfare*.

¹³ International Crisis Group (28 March 2022), "The Israeli Government's Old-New Palestine Strategy".

¹⁴ The White House (January 2020) 'Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People'. The plan, if implemented, would severely harm the possibility of a durable peace by accepting the extension of Israeli sovereignty over occupied East Jerusalem and approving the annexation of all Jewish settlements in the West Bank, among other concessions to Israel.

¹⁵ For an Israeli commentator's take on this, see Landau, Noa (2022) 'The Abraham Accords Might Bring an End to Israel's Occupation After All', 18 July, *Haaretz*. Landau observes that the Israeli right can claim that 'there is no diplomatic cost, that this is a sign of the Arabs' exasperation with the Palestinians and their growing need for Israel's military and technological capabilities in the face of the Iranian threat'.

¹⁶ (2020) 'Israel and United Arab Emirates Strike Major Diplomatic Agreement', *The New York Times*, 13 August.

¹⁷ Morocco and Sudan also signed normalisation deals with Israel. In Morocco's case, the trade-off was U.S. recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the disputed Western Sahara. The White House (10 December 2020) 'Proclamation on Recognizing the Sovereignty of The Kingdom of Morocco Over the Western Sahara'. For Sudan, the quid pro quo was the U.S. rescinding Sudan's designation as 'a state sponsor of terrorism' and a \$1 billion loan. See El-Gizouli, Magdi (2021) "Sudan's Normalization with Israel: In Whose Interests?" 17 August, *Bawader*.

¹⁸ In his speech at the Jeddah Summit in July 2022, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman reiterated his country's commitment to the Arab Peace Initiative. (2022) 'Saudi Crown Prince Speech at Jeddah Summit', 16 July, Saudi TV English, YouTube.

¹⁹ The White House (2022) 'The Jerusalem U.S.-Israel Strategic Partnership Joint Declaration', 14 July. See also, Samuels, Ben (2022) 'In Mideast Trip, Biden Uncoupled Israel from the Palestinians', 18 July, *Haaretz*.

²⁰ Ayubi, Nazih (1996) *Overstating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Arab World* (New York: I.B. Tauris).

²¹ While Israeli tourists have been flocking to the UAE, Emiratis have displayed little enthusiasm to visit Israel. In the first year after the signing of the accords, 250,000 Israelis reportedly visited the UAE. Corder, Josh (2021) '250,000 Israel tourists visit UAE since Abraham Accords', 17 October, *Hotelier*. Other sources put the numbers lower. No figures seem to be available for Emirati tourism to Israel. A prominent Emirati commentator speculated that no Emirati tourists had visited Israel in the summer of 2022. Tweet by @Abdulkhaleq_UAE, 25 July 2022.

²² Washington Institute for Near East Policy (2022) 'Arab Public Opinion on Arab-Israeli Normalization and Abraham Accords', 15 July.