Social Protest Movements and Civil Society in the Arab World: Attitudes Towards the Civil State

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ABSTRACT

The Arab Spring revolutions sought to transform governing systems through demands for political rights, public freedoms, social justice, and human dignity. However, they failed to establish the foundations of a civil state, largely due to structural and geopolitical constraints rooted in the historical formation of the modern state in the Arab region from the early nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. Although Arab constitutions formally guarantee political rights and public liberties for all citizens, ruling regimes have systematically imposed extensive restrictions that hollow out these constitutional commitments. Through the use of martial law and exceptional legislation, political authorities have endowed themselves with broad discretionary powers to curtail freedoms and violate the dignity of individuals suspected of opposing the regime, invoking national security and state sovereignty as legitimising justifications.

The literature on the nation-state in the Arab world highlights a set of distinctive institutional, economic, and political characteristics that structure the relationship between governing institutions, ruling regimes, and citizens. These characteristics have been shaped by colonial legacies and the continued political and economic interventions of major powers. Such conditions have constrained the development of democratic governance led by elected elites committed to the protection of rights and freedoms.

This paper examines the positions adopted by civil society and social protest movements during the Arab Spring. It extends this analysis to investigate the reasons behind the non-realisation of the demands articulated by these actors for the establishment of a civil state.

Keywords: *social movements, civil state, Arab states, authoritarian regimes, political economy*

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INTRODUCTION

When the Arab Spring erupted in December 2010, there were virtually no concrete institutional expressions of the civil state in the Arab world. Although Arab constitutions uniformly affirm the state's obligation to guarantee citizens the exercise of political rights and public freedoms—particularly the rights to vote and to participate in the public sphere independently of state authority—political reality reveals a pronounced gap between constitutional provisions and actual practice. The notion of the civil state has long been absent from the political practices of Arab states since their formation in the early twentieth century, a condition largely attributable to structural and geopolitical factors associated with the emergence of Arab statehood.

A civil state is governed by a political elite that is independent of military or religious authority and attains power through free, fair, and pluralistic elections. Such an elite is expected to articulate popular demands and respond to societal needs through state institutions. In the Arab world, however, states have not functioned as civil states for a range of interrelated reasons. A substantial body of academic literature has examined the particularities of the nation-state in the Arab region by tracing its intellectual, institutional, and elite formation through a political economy lens. This literature conceptualises the state as both an institutional and epistemic framework for governance, analysing its evolution from independence to the present.[1] Much of this scholarship is informed by neo-Marxist approaches, which emphasise the international division of labour that divides the world into a core of advanced Western states and a periphery comprising the developing countries of the Global South. From this perspective, core states maintain the political, economic, and intellectual subordination of peripheral states in order to preserve relations of dependency.

Structural causes are therefore rooted in the emergence of the nation-state in the Arab world as a historically imposed outcome of European colonialism and the post-independence period, shaped by dependency on Western models of modernisation and development.[2] On the eve of independence, ruling Arab elites typically emerged from military institutions or derived their legitimacy from traditional or religious authority. As a result, these elites were neither civil in character nor representative of society; instead, they relied on coercion and subjugation, often with the support of former colonial powers, the United States, and regional allies such as Israel and the Gulf monarchies.

In addition to these structural roots, a geopolitical explanation emphasises the role of Western powers in consolidating the economic and political dependency of Arab states. This dependency has been sustained through material and military support for ruling elites in exchange for the adoption of accommodative policies that do not challenge Western hegemony in the region.

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1 Raymond Hinnebusch, "Toward a Historical Sociology of State Formation in the Middle East," *Middle East Critique* 19, no. 3 (2010): 201–216.

2 Ali Dessouki, "The New Arab Political Order: Implications for the 1980s," in *Rich and Poor States in the Middle East: Egypt and the New Arab Order*, ed. Mark Kerr and Shafeeq Ghabra Yassin (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1982), 319–347; Hinnebusch, "Toward a Historical Sociology of State Formation in the Middle East."

Another school of thought examines the distinctiveness of the nation-state in the Arab region by drawing on historical institutionalism. From this perspective, state institutions have been continuously reconfigured in response to shifting international, regional, and domestic conditions that have shaped elite priorities, ideologies, and worldviews.[3]

This school of thought contends that Arab states never experienced a genuine civil state because the state, as the principal framework for governance, was imposed as a historical inevitability. In the Arab world, the state established the rules governing institutions and defined their relationship with citizens by adapting itself to particular temporal and spatial contexts, rather than emerging organically from indigenous economic, social, and historical transformations or reflecting local cultures and societal needs.

Leading contributors from both schools of thought have pointed to the failure of the nation-state in the Arab world and, consequently, the absence of a substantive civil state in political practice. They argue that the nation-state in the Arab region emerged through alliances and agreements between colonial powers and ruling regimes — a process that entrenched authoritarian modes of governance and produced a conflation between the concepts of the state and the political regime within the region.[4] As a result, the civil dimension of the state fails to correspond to the realities of Arab political systems, in which elites are divided between military actors who consolidated their authority through claims of revolutionary legitimacy, and elites embedded in traditional socio-cultural structures grounded in religious legitimacy.

An examination of Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Tunisia reveals that the ruling elites that assumed power after independence were predominantly military in nature. These elites constructed their legitimacy around narratives of anti-colonial struggle and consolidated their authority through reliance on military power, while invoking the imperatives of economic development and the fulfilment of popular demands related to social justice, administrative efficiency, and industrialisation. After coming to power, they introduced numerous constitutional amendments that ensured the predominance of executive authority over the legislative and judicial branches, while seeking to subordinate both the military and state resources to elite interests. The absence of constitutional and practical separation of powers thus obstructed the emergence of a civil state characterised by an elected government—neither military nor religious in nature—and subject to popular accountability.

On this basis, it becomes evident that external intervention by former colonial powers, the United States, and their regional allies has further impeded the consolidation of a civil state. These actors have supported ruling elites through material and military assistance to secure regime continuity, even under repressive and authoritarian conditions, provided that such regimes refrained from adopting policies that challenged external hegemony in the region.[5]

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3 Ali Dessouki, "Managing Ambivalence: Egypt's Changing Regional Environment," in *Egypt at the Crossroads: Domestic Stability and Regional Role*, ed. Phebe Marr (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 1999), 193–201; Dessouki, "The New Arab Political Order."

4 Raymond Hinnebusch, "The Middle East in the World Hierarchy: Imperialism and Resistance," *Journal of International Relations and Development* 14 (2011): 213–246.

5 Hinnebusch, "The Middle East in the World Hierarchy."

This dynamic points to an implicit understanding, or tacit agreement, between Arab ruling elites and external powers—an arrangement that has effectively shaped processes of state and regime formation in the Arab world and has obstructed democratic transformation and the emergence of a civil state grounded in political pluralism and committed to justice and equality for all citizens.

Accordingly, external intervention is a critical factor in the study of the civil state in the Arab world and in the analysis of positions adopted by civil society and social protest movements during the Arab Spring. Although these movements aspired to democratic transition, they were unable to achieve their objectives largely due to political, economic, and military interventions by external actors. Consequently, the positions of civil society and protest movements remain largely conceptual and theoretical, representing visions of a normative legal and epistemic framework for a state with institutions capable of representing citizens without discrimination. Such a framework envisages elected executive and legislative authorities that respect the independence of the judiciary and are subject to popular oversight. Any political transformation of the ruling elite through free and fair general elections would effectively disrupt the tacit agreements that underpin the legitimacy of these regimes and would curtail the influence and hegemony of former colonial powers and the United States in the region.

This study investigates the reasons for the absence of a civil state by examining the distinctive characteristics of the nation-state in the Arab world—particularly its structural and geopolitical composition and the implications of this composition for the susceptibility of ruling regimes to external influence. It further analyses how these dynamics contributed to the failure of the Arab Spring uprisings and undermined the efforts of social protest movements and civil society to institutionalise the values of the civil state in the region, with a particular focus on the countries that experienced the Arab Spring revolutions.

I. The Emergence of the Nation-State in the Arab World and Its Implications for the Civil State

Centuries before the rise of the modern nation-state, civil society in the Arab world was a source of economic and social support to citizens. This history notwithstanding, the ruling elites who assumed power after independence obstructed the development of an autonomous civil society capable of delivering essential services and fostering citizen participation in the public sphere. The same dynamic applied to social protest movements, whose capacity to mobilise and raise public awareness regarding rights and freedoms was systematically constrained. Their emergence was contingent on specific historical moments shaped by structural opportunities permitted by authoritarian regimes, and occurred in the absence of any legal framework to protect them from repression and persecution.[6]

6 Ibid.

To understand the limited effectiveness of civil society and social protest movements, it is necessary to examine the factors that produced the fragility of the nation-state and entrenched authoritarian governance. These factors, in turn, impeded the emergence of a civil state in the Arab region.

The Middle East was historically an open regional space, characterised by interwoven ethnic, religious, and cultural communities living under locally administered governance structures that enjoyed a degree of autonomy from distant centres. Over time, however, the region transformed into independent political and economic entities, delineated by borders that hindered cultural, social, and economic integration. This fragmentation had profound consequences for the structural weakness of these emerging states and the composition of their ruling elites. It fostered competition and border disputes, often driven by nationalist sentiments and complex networks of interests involving Western powers, thereby undermining the prospects for establishing a cohesive and viable civil state.

The nation-state in the Arab world emerged as a product of elite struggles over spheres of influence, particularly in the Gulf and the Levant, during the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the intensification of colonial intervention in the region. In many cases, including Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, political, economic, and cultural occupation was transformed after independence into structural and epistemic dependency on Western powers. External actors played a decisive role in enforcing the nation-state through processes of division and fragmentation, fostering nationalist sentiments, and supporting elites who advanced these agendas, rather than allowing the state to develop as an intellectual and political project reflective of the specific needs and characteristics of its constituent communities.

The imposition of the nation-state as an epistemic and authoritative framework for governance—without regard for the integration of diverse ethnic groups or the articulation of their needs—became a primary mechanism for sustaining the dependency of regional states on Western powers. This was achieved by linking the longevity of ruling elites to the protection of Western interests.[7]

To sustain this arrangement, reliance on coercive power became essential to prevent political pluralism and the freedoms associated with participation in the public sphere, which could have disrupted this dependency and threatened elite interests.

Across the Arab world, states vary markedly in size, population, material resources, and ethnic and cultural composition. These disparities fostered rivalry and conflict, inhibiting the development of political or economic convergence that could have facilitated regional cooperation and integration.[8]

Consequently, vertical alliances between political elites in the Arab region and Western powers became a cornerstone for securing and sustaining elite rule. Following independence, many Arab states engaged in political conflicts with neighbouring states, including Algeria and Morocco, Iraq and Kuwait, Sudan and Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, and Syria and Lebanon. These conflicts were further compounded by regional disputes involving other actors, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Iran, Turkey and Syria, Turkey and Iraq, and Iraq and Iran.

7 Ibid.
8 Hinnebusch, "Toward a Historical Sociology of State Formation."

With respect to dependency on Western powers, the emergence of many Gulf states and the formation of their governing systems were closely linked to the economic and political privileges secured by Britain, particularly through oil exploration concessions granted to British companies.[9] A comparable pattern can be observed in Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco, where long-term concessionary agreements with Western firms facilitated the extraction of minerals and other natural resources. These arrangements were accompanied by labour-migration contracts that sent workers to France under exploitative conditions.

Under the rule of Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egypt pursued policies that openly opposed Western intervention, most notably the nationalisation of the Suez Canal, support for national liberation movements, and military confrontation with Israel. These policies were shaped by the broader geopolitical context of Cold War bipolarity, a framework that soon came to an end.

This shift facilitated the consolidation of dependency across the Arab region through the imposition of neoliberal economic reform programmes, presented as mechanisms for achieving development and addressing economic crises arising from weak or entirely absent industrialisation. The persistent reliance of Arab states on imports to meet basic needs contributed to chronic balance-of-payments deficits and a continuing inability to satisfy essential domestic requirements.

An examination of ruling Arab elites reveals that they have been primarily political and economic actors whose legitimacy has long depended on the approval and support of external powers, particularly Western colonial and post-colonial actors. These elites emerged within coercive political structures designed to accommodate Western—especially American—hegemony in the region, a legacy rooted in the Sykes–Picot Agreement of 1916 between France, Britain, and Russia. That agreement divided the Middle East into spheres of Western influence and laid the foundations for the establishment of a Zionist entity in Palestine.

Even after independence and the formal withdrawal of European colonial powers, this hegemony persisted through policies pursued by former colonial actors in partnership with the emerging national elites in Arab states. These policies extended across economic and commercial spheres and, at times, political affairs. Outwardly framed as mutually beneficial cooperation, they served in reality to justify intervention in and control over the internal affairs of Arab countries. In return, ruling elites received political protection and assurances of continuity in power.

The formation, size, and traditional economic and political systems of the Gulf states exemplify a clientelist model that facilitates Western hegemony. This model began with long-term, exclusive concessionary rights to exploit raw materials, particularly oil, and extended to the establishment of military bases in exchange for guarantees of protection against external intervention or challenges to ruling regimes. Because these states do not usually rely on their own militaries to secure their territorial integrity or independence, they remain dependent on external protection—provided today by the United States and previously by Britain—due to concerns that national militaries might stage coups against ruling families, given the traditional, tribal character of their governance structures.[10]

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9 Ibid.

10 Raymond Hinnebusch, "Authoritarian Persistence, Democratization Theory and the Middle East: An Overview and Critique," *Democratization* 13, no. 3 (2006): 373–395.

Despite their limited reliance on national armies, these states maintain political and societal control through coercion and the consolidation of economic power, either via the allocation of privileges in the oil sector or through business networks rooted in familial ties loyal to the ruling order. By maintaining a tight grip on state institutions and society, these elites effectively preclude any possibility of political change or meaningful challenge from opposition forces independent of the state.

Authoritarianism, as the predominant model of governance in the Arab world, has been the principal mechanism sustaining structural and epistemic dependency on the West. The character of Arab authoritarian systems is closely linked to the composition of their ruling elites. In states that experienced twentieth-century revolutions which toppled regimes perceived as supportive of colonial powers, new elites emerged based on different socio-economic coalitions. These elites relied on the mobilisation and instrumentalisation of civil society as a mechanism both to control society and to prevent the emergence of genuine political opposition.

In Egypt, Iraq, Libya, and Tunisia, for instance, the overthrow of monarchical regimes by socio-political forces originating in the military produced revolutionary governments that derived their legitimacy from achievements in relation to national independence and the pursuit of social justice. These regimes asserted control over labour unions and political parties while imposing military authority across all state institutions.[11] This model entrenched a form of political legitimacy grounded in military power in the absence of electoral processes, aimed at subjugating society and restricting political participation. The state assumed the functional role of civil society or subordinated charitable organisations rooted in individual or religious initiatives, while mobilising citizens through a single mass party that secured popular support by distributing economic and social privileges.

With the abolition of political parties, the suppression of labour unions, and the consolidation of control over the media, the ruling elite became the sole authority within state institutions, subordinating society in exchange for economic and social benefits in education, health, and housing. Consequently, the military-based legitimacy of these elites effectively precluded the emergence of an autonomous civil society and obstructed the formation of independent political movements capable of representing the demands of the populace.

In Morocco, by contrast, the monarchy remained firmly in power, and no revolution was mounted against it, largely because the king aligned himself with popular resistance movements. The regime established its legitimacy and popular support on the basis of religion and descent from the Prophet.[12] The title "Commander of the Faithful," held by the king, embodied this form of religious legitimacy, which, like military-based legitimacy, obstructed the emergence of a civil state founded on an elected ruling elite independent of military or religious authority.

11 Hinnebusch, "Authoritarian Persistence, Democratization Theory and the Middle East."

12 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* 42, no. 1 (2014): 12–30.

Morocco's ruling class has been closely allied with traditional social groups composed of notables and landowners, who later emerged as the dominant economic actors in the private sector following the implementation of neoliberal policies. This arrangement contrasts with theories of economic development and democratic transition, which posit that democratisation arises through a socially and economically independent class whose resources and economic activity are autonomous from the ruling elite, enabling it to accumulate wealth independently and challenge state authority. The economic and social alliance between the monarchy and the economic elite has therefore constituted a significant obstacle to genuine political reform capable of fostering a civil state.

II. How Authoritarian Regimes Undermine Civil Society and Social Protest Movements

Political and economic constraints have limited the capacity of civil society and social protest movements to flourish, hindering their ability to support citizens and provide services that encourage participation in the public sphere independent of the state. Although many Arab states have adopted neoliberal models—implementing policies that reduce the role of the state in the economy and prioritise the private sector—these economic reforms were not accompanied by political changes that might have facilitated independent initiatives free from state control. Consequently, numerous charitable, educational, and social institutions linked to civil society continue to operate under strict state surveillance, both materially and legally, constraining their ability to positively influence citizens, deliver social support, or strengthen political participation.[13]

In states such as Egypt, civil society functions under close coordination with the state and direct oversight by the Ministry of Social Solidarity. This became particularly evident following the military council's rise to power in 2011 after the Egyptian revolution, when it launched a sweeping security campaign against civil society organisations. Many political research centres and charitable institutions were closed, foreign staff expelled, and local employees imprisoned on charges of receiving foreign funding purportedly intended to destabilise national security and regional stability. In Lebanon, civil society has been profoundly affected by sectarian divisions, which have shaped the provision of social and economic services across different regions of the country, thereby undermining its overall effectiveness.

This created a vicious cycle in which the absence of democracy, the persistence of authoritarian regimes, and the weakness of civil societies reinforced one another: weak civil societies are unable to mount effective challenges to authoritarianism. Authoritarian rule has facilitated the dominance of regime-aligned business elites and the military, in the absence of popular oversight mechanisms capable of curbing administrative corruption. This has undermined national economies, which remain largely under state control, without genuine incentives for investment or the development of a fair and competitive economic environment.

[13] Mervat Rishmawi and Tim Morris, *Overview of Civil Society in the Arab World*, Praxis Paper 20 (Oxford: INTRAC, 2007).

Compounding these challenges are high levels of poverty, illiteracy, and inequality, partly resulting from the lack of support for independent, individual, and community-based initiatives that could more effectively serve citizens.

The weakness of civil society leaves it ill-equipped to function as a credible counterweight to entrenched authoritarian–military power structures. Civil society organisations in the region are frequently dominated by professional associations that moderate their activities and rhetoric to secure permission to operate. This authoritarian pattern reinforces state-centric, rent-based economies, impeding the development of a robust, free-market system grounded in industrialisation and exacerbating poverty, illiteracy, and inequality—particularly in the context of neoliberal reforms and the absence of institutional and popular oversight necessary for democratisation.

Authoritarianism in the Arab world is characterised by the predominance of military structures over the civil character of the state. Unlike in democratic systems, where military professionalism is subordinated to civilian governance and oversight—ensuring a politically neutral army under civilian control—the military in many Arab states is frequently instrumentalised to serve ruling elites and suppress challenges to political authority. This pattern is evident in Egypt, Libya, and Syria. In Egypt, the ruling elite deployed military force to overthrow the country's first democratically elected government in 2013; in Libya, key military actors challenged the UN-recognised, popularly mandated authority of the House of Representatives; and in Syria, the ousted regime used the army to violently suppress popular uprisings, ultimately plunging the country into a protracted and devastating civil conflict.

The close relationship between ruling authorities and the military has been entrenched since Arab states that had experienced coups against incumbent elites achieved independence, including Egypt in 1952; Iraq in 1958, 1963, and 1968; Syria in 1963 and 1970; Yemen in 1962; and Libya in 1969.[14] While some scholars have theorised that the military could contribute to modernisation by fostering a new middle class to lead social, economic, and political development, historical experience demonstrates that the military has primarily functioned as a coercive force, seeking to acquire and exercise power for its own interests. This dynamic has been particularly evident in Egypt since the 1979 Camp David Accords, after which the military assumed an increasingly dominant role in development projects, acting as both producer and investor with monopolistic privileges, including tax exemptions and access to cheap labour. These practices distorted market competitiveness and encouraged business investors to relocate capital abroad.[15]

Egypt, Iraq, and Syria have operated as praetorian states, in which the military frequently intervenes in governance and dominates the executive branch. Political leaders often emerge from the military, which exerts a hegemonic influence over political institutions. This produces a clear conflation between a "ruling army," which seeks to shape political decision-making behind the scenes, and an "army of the ruler," which governs directly for extended periods.

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14 Bård Kårtveit and Maria Gabrielsen Jumbert, *Civil-Military Relations in the Middle East: A Literature Review* (Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2014).

15 Yomna Samy, "The Growth of the Military Economy in Egypt Since 2014: The Impact on Investment Dynamics and Investor Rights," *Rowaq Arabi* 30, no. 1 (2025): 74–88.

Thus, in Arab countries with authoritarian regimes, the military often acts in accordance with its own institutional interests rather than the broader national interest. This occurs because ruling elites rely on military professionalism to protect themselves from coups, thereby reinforcing the army's institutional identity and political ambitions.[16]

An exception can be observed in the Gulf states, where relatively small military forces are partly composed of foreign mercenaries. By contrast, Jordan and Morocco maintain conscription-based armies that retain a degree of institutional independence, with senior officers enjoying moderate privileges in exchange for loyalty to the regime.

At times, the military may permit multi-party elections, as occurred in Algeria and Egypt, while simultaneously suppressing actors perceived as serious threats to the regime and its privileged position, such as Islamist parties. The authority and autonomy granted to the military by ruling elites is further reinforced by its role in countering extremist Islamic movements.

In Algeria, a specialised unit was established in 1993 during the civil war to combat Islamist groups, employing both army and police forces. In Egypt, the army forms part of a broader security apparatus, acting as a barrier against the Muslim Brotherhood and other perceived threats, particularly following the removal of Mohamed Morsi from the presidency in July 2013. In Syria, the army consolidated its role as the primary defender of the regime against internal challenges, from the suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood uprising in 1982 to the popular uprisings that began in 2011.

The army's role in countering internal enemies is also embedded within nationalist projects that confer privileges on certain groups and identities at the expense of others, thereby undermining the possibility of a civil state. In Egypt, for example, the army, as a defender of Egyptian nationalism, has marginalised the Coptic community both within the military and in broader state–society relations. This marginalisation is evident in the near absence of Copts among senior military officers, instances of military violence against Coptic civilians, and the army's failure to protect Copts from attacks following 2013.

III. The Position of Social Protest Movements and Civil Society on the Civil State during the Arab Spring

The term "civil state" gained prominence during the Arab Spring, following the overthrow of dictators in Egypt and Tunisia in 2011. Non-governmental actors, particularly youth, played a central role, actively participating in a range of activities, events, and discussions within civil society forums.[17]

16 Kårtveit and Jumbert, *Civil-Military Relations in the Middle East*.
17 Shaimaa Magued, "Marginalizing Revolutionaries in Egypt's Civil State Debate," *Peace Review* 30, no. 4 (2018): 518–26.

Representatives of Arab youth attended regional events and meetings in Tunisia and Egypt to exchange experiences and learn from their peers. Youth in countries such as Syria and Libya were inspired by the political transformations in Tunisia and Egypt. The primary slogans of the Arab Spring— "bread, freedom, dignity" and "the people demand the fall of the regime"—mobilised protests and demonstrations across the region.

Tunisia's 2014 Constitution formally defined the country as a civil state. Similarly, Egypt's 2012 and 2014 constitutions enshrined the notion of the civil state in distinct ways. While the 2012 Constitution emphasised the civilian nature of the ruling elite—understood as regularly elected civilians—and limited the army's authority to safeguarding that civilian character, the 2014 Constitution implied a conception of the civil state in which Islamist parties are prevented from assuming power, alongside a politically and economically empowered military. In Lebanon, President Michel Aoun advocated for the formal declaration of a civil state. In Iraq, the mass protests of 2015 were organised under the slogan "bread, freedom, civil state." Even in Saudi Arabia, voices emerged calling for the establishment of a civil state.[18]

Since 2011, non-governmental actors have assumed an increasingly prominent role in Arab social and political life, playing a crucial part in movements that contributed to the overthrow of authoritarian governments in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. In Tunisia, the revolution against Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was initially driven by young protesters but gained momentum as anti-regime forces were bolstered by the Tunisian General Labour Union, lawyers' syndicates, political parties (both legal and clandestine), and the Islamic Ennahda movement.

In Egypt, the protest movement was spearheaded by youth mobilised online, particularly through the April 6 Movement and supporters of the "We Are All Khaled Said" Facebook page. These young activists were joined by other non-governmental actors, including labour activists, youth wings of political parties representing both secular and Islamist ideologies, and independent youth movements.

In the years following the uprisings, there was a marked expansion of civil society organisations, particularly in Tunisia, where 5,000 new organisations were established within four years of the revolution, and in Libya, which witnessed the emergence of 3,000 new organisations following the fall of Gaddafi.[19]

The term "civil state" became closely associated with the Arab Spring because the uprisings articulated demands for political and social rights and public freedoms across many Arab countries. These demands emerged in response to widespread political repression, economic weakness, unequal resource distribution, and administrative corruption under the ruling regimes.

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18 Limor Lavie, "De-Theocratizing the State? The Debate over the Civil State Model in Saudi Arabia," *Journal of Arabian Studies* 12, no. 1 (2022): 64–83.

19 Ibrahim Natil, "Civil State in the Post–Arab Spring Countries: Tunisia, Egypt and Libya," in *The Arab Spring, Civil Society, and Innovative Activism*, ed. Cenap Çakmak (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 217–231.

Since the early 1990s, many Arab states have undergone a shift towards neoliberal economic policies, including those that had previously relied on state-centred systems to provide public services, such as Syria and Libya. These reforms involved reducing the role of the state, opening the economy to the private sector, and borrowing from international financial institutions.[20]

These changes had significant adverse consequences for public freedoms and citizens' political rights. Although the policies were primarily economic, reshaping the functioning of the economy and the organisation of public services, the neoliberal shift simultaneously increased the repressive capacity of Arab regimes by imposing social and economic hardships that hindered citizens from meeting their basic needs.

The implementation of neoliberal policies in Arab countries prompted numerous strikes and protests demanding higher wages and improved living standards. These demonstrations were frequently met with repression, while the state continued to channel economic privileges through the processes of privatisation and the expansion of the private sector, favouring businessmen and economic actors closely aligned with the ruling regimes. Such distribution of resources was carried out with little regard for production efficiency or equitable allocation among the population.

As the state retreated from providing education, health, housing, and other social support policies that had historically underpinned the legitimacy of regimes—particularly revolutionary regimes in Egypt, Libya, and Iraq—the diminished role of the state eroded legitimacy and produced widespread social and economic hardships for citizens, including rising unemployment and declining purchasing power and living standards.

The dismissal of numerous public sector workers and the privatisation of state institutions at prices far below their real value exacerbated unemployment. The liberalisation of national currency exchange rates triggered inflation and further diminished purchasing power, particularly as wages failed to keep pace. These economic pressures pushed middle-class citizens toward poverty and forced lower classes into extreme deprivation, impeding their ability to meet basic living needs. Many affected citizens subsequently joined protests demanding economic rights, especially equitable distribution of resources.

These revolutions and mass protests played a crucial role in amplifying public anger against ruling regimes, which were widely perceived as corrupt and unable to meet the basic demands that underpinned their legitimacy. This widespread discontent ultimately sparked the Arab Spring, which began in Tunisia in December 2010, following the self-immolation of a street vendor in response to police harassment, an act that triggered mass demonstrations demanding the fall of the regime.[21]

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20 Raymond Hinnebusch, "Introduction: Understanding the Consequences of the Arab Uprisings – Starting Points and Divergent Trajectories," *Democratization* 22, no. 2 (2015): 205–217.

21 Rishmawi and Morris, *Overview of Civil Society in the Arab World*.

The Tunisian uprising was soon followed by protests and uprisings across Egypt, Syria, Bahrain, Libya, and Sudan, where demonstrators called for fair economic distribution, political freedoms, human dignity, an end to police abuses, curtailment of unchecked executive authority, and a halt to repression, torture, and enforced disappearances of regime opponents.

Following Ben Ali's removal in Tunisia, civil society organisations, including trade unions and political parties, actively advocated for the establishment of a civil state. The Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), the largest civil society organisation in the country, has historically played a central role in Tunisia's political and social life, particularly during the transitional period after the 2011 revolution.[22]

Civil society organisations, including the UGTT, spearheaded the National Dialogue Quartet, which played a pivotal role in the adoption of Tunisia's first post-revolution constitution in January 2014. The National Dialogue Quartet—comprising the UGTT, the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts, the Bar Association, and the Tunisian Human Rights League—engaged in complex and often tense negotiations with various political factions to achieve a consensual constitution.

The UGTT also led the national dialogue aimed at replacing the Islamist-led government with a transitional administration to prepare the country for new elections. The UGTT succeeded in this complex role by balancing the interests of Tunisia's diverse social and political groups. All Tunisian political parties and civil society organisations demonstrated considerable maturity in their efforts to rebuild a civil state for all citizens under a consensual constitution. However, this progress proved short-lived, particularly as business interests aligned with the executive authority, which subsequently employed military pressure to dissolve the parliament.[23]

In Libya, the February 17 anti-Gaddafi movement brought together commercial actors, tribal groups, and Islamist factions, forming a multi-ideological coalition, alongside foreign interventions supporting the anti-regime rebels.[24]

Prior to the 2011 Libyan uprising, the absence of political awareness and the lack of organised relations between the ruler and the ruled posed a significant obstacle to the establishment of a civil state—formal political activity had largely been absent in the country for over four decades. This political disengagement profoundly influenced the trajectory of the revolution following Muammar Gaddafi's rule.

Gaddafi introduced the *Jamahiriya* (commonly translated as "state of the masses") as an alternative to communism and capitalism, with revolutionary committees exercising control over all aspects of social, political, and economic life, while preventing citizens from forming political parties or civil society organisations. The tribal, conservative, and religious character of Libyan society has posed additional challenges to the establishment of a civil state.

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22 Natil, "Civil State in the Post–Arab Spring Countries."

23 Ghassen Ben Khalifa, "Ten Years into the Tunisian Revolution: The Specificities and Limitations of Exceptionalism," in *The Arab Uprisings: A Decade of Struggle* (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute and RLS North Africa, 2021), 47–65.

24 Natil, "Civil State in the Post–Arab Spring Countries."

Libya has also been affected by deep divisions between Islamist and nationalist groups competing over power and the identity of the state. The ongoing conflict between the "Operation Dignity" alliance and the "Operation Libya Dawn" coalition has undermined national unity, security, and reconstruction efforts.

Operation Dignity comprises forces drawn from eastern tribes, former Gaddafi regime officers, and militias from Zintan in the west, under the leadership of retired General Khalifa Haftar, with the stated aim of restoring security in conflict-affected cities. The alliance is supported by the internationally recognised House of Representatives and the Tobruk-based government led by Abdullah al-Thinni. In turn, Operation Libya Dawn, comprises militias from Misrata and allied Islamist groups based in Tripoli, as well as Amazigh factions. These groups rejected the authority of the House of Representatives and established parallel parliamentary and governmental structures.[25]

The conflict between Operation Libya Dawn and Operation Dignity is not purely ideological; it is also influenced by the continued involvement of former Gaddafi regime officers in the political process. Following the fall of Gaddafi's regime, Libya witnessed the proliferation of numerous armed militias. Since 2012, these militias have become increasingly politicised, forming alliances through links with political parties. Such affiliations are frequently grounded in family, regional, tribal, religious, or ideological ties.[26]

Armed groups were incorporated into two broader coalitions—the Libya Shield Force and the Supreme Security Committee—both of which were established as transitional security forces under the authority of the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Interior. Despite this formal integration, militias of varying types—religious, local, personal, and criminal—have retained a high degree of autonomy and continued to pursue their own ideological and political agendas.

These militias played a central role in sustaining Libya's ongoing conflict between the Islamist-dominated General National Congress in Tripoli and the House of Representatives in Tobruk, with each side relying on different regional and international backers.

In Yemen, although the Saleh regime collapsed, the anti-regime protests brought together youth movements, political parties, and non-governmental actors from both northern and southern regions, including groups seeking independence from the Sanaa-based government. However, limited political experience, continued repression, and the absence of mechanisms for addressing sectarian and tribal grievances further destabilised the country. This fragility created conditions conducive to external intervention, most notably by Saudi Arabia and the UAE against the Houthis.[27]

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25 Ibid.

26 Raymond Hinnebusch, "Historical Sociology and the Arab Uprising," *Mediterranean Politics* 19, no. 1 (2014): 137–140.

27 John Hill, "[Review of *The Libyan Revolution and Its Aftermath*, edited by Peter Cole and Brian McQuinn]," *The Maghreb Review* 40, no. 4 (2015): 509–511.

Similarly, in Syria, the conflict that emerged after the violent crackdown on protests against Bashar al-Assad's regime escalated into a wide-ranging, multi-layered rebellion. Anti-regime non-governmental actors included both Islamist and non-Islamist groups, with significant divisions within the Islamist camp between those opposing the violent extremism of ISIS and other militias like Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham.[28] In 2013, several Islamist militias formed the Islamic Front, aiming to expel ISIS from areas under their control. The regime also opposed the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which was formed in 2011 by army defectors seeking to overthrow Assad and consisted of various armed groups, some secular and some Islamist.

The internal situation was further complicated by external interventions from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Turkey, Iran, and Russia, plunging Syria into a protracted civil war until late 2024 when the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra reached Damascus and Assad fled to Russia.[29]

The onset of the Arab uprisings also triggered protests and calls for reform in Saudi Arabia. Scholars associated with the Sahwa movement demanded greater political freedoms and a reconsideration of the application of Islamic law, grounding their arguments in religious discourse. These demands implicitly called for the establishment of a civil state, serving as a critique of the existing political system. Salman al-Awdah, one of the most influential figures of the Sahwa movement, argued that a "religious state" is not Islamic and that a "civil state," understood as the establishment of a fair civil social contract between authorities and institutions, is compatible with Sunni political thought. [30]

In 2011, a public debate emerged in Saudi Arabia over the concept of the civil state, revealing divergent interpretations of the term "religious state" and a noticeable reluctance among journalists to explicitly employ the term "civil state." [31]

Some journalists argued that Saudi Arabia should be treated as a civil state and challenged the principle, enshrined in the Basic Law of Governance, that the Qur'an and the Sunnah constitute the kingdom's constitution. They called for transforming the Basic Law into a formal written constitution. This position reflected an attempt to reconsider the religious nature of the Saudi state and to question the supremacy of the Qur'an and the Sunnah over any man-made constitutional framework. Their argument rested on the claim that a "religious state" is one governed by clerics, a condition they maintained does not apply to Saudi Arabia.

Conversely, some religious scholars contended that, in an ideal religious state, Islam should regulate all aspects of life—political, civil, and personal—and therefore rejected the notion of a "civil state with an Islamic authority," arguing that it reduces sharia to a mere legislative source. They viewed the concept of the "civil state" as a product of Western influence, asserting that Western political thought perceives the application of sharia as an impediment to progress.

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28 Kårtveit and Jumbert, *Civil-Military Relations in the Middle East*.
29 Magued, "Marginalizing Revolutionaries in Egypt's Civil State Debate."
30 Salman al-Awdah, *Questions of the Revolution* (Casablanca: Qatar Al-Nada Foundation for Culture, Media and Publishing, 2012).
31 Lavie, "De-Theocratizing the State?"

In Egypt, economic transformations were accompanied by political changes that opened the public sphere to protests, civil society participation, and engagement in political parties. This opening enabled politically active groups to articulate social and political demands and to organise large-scale anti-regime protests. These developments ultimately paved the way for the January 2011 Revolution, which called for the resignation of the president, whose regime had failed to respond to popular demands for genuine political reform, the protection of rights and freedoms, social justice, and human dignity for all citizens.[32]

This opening facilitated the emergence of civil society organisations that provided social and legal assistance while raising public awareness of the importance of participation in advocacy movements for expanded rights and freedoms. For example, the El Nadeem Center supported citizens' political rights and defended detainees against pre-trial detention and systematic torture.[33] The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, along with other rights-based organisations, similarly promoted individual rights and freedoms within Egyptian society. Political research and advocacy organisations, such as the Ibn Khaldun Center, which criticised the repressive nature of the Egyptian regime and its succession plans aimed at transferring power from Hosni Mubarak to his son, played a significant role in mobilising diverse social and political forces against the ruling system. [34]

During this period, several social protest movements emerged, including the April 6 Movement, which originated from textile workers' protests demanding better working conditions and higher wages, uniting young Egyptians in calls for constitutional amendments and genuine political reforms to establish democracy. Despite the government's use of excessive force to suppress these demonstrations, the persistence of their leaders and continued strikes in the early 2000s encouraged further sit-ins and inspired other popular solidarity movements.[35]

Additionally, the Youth for Change movement brought together broad segments of society from diverse professional, educational, social, cultural, and ideological backgrounds, all advocating for expanded rights and freedoms. The movement adopted a strong oppositional stance towards the state. During the presidential elections of 2005, which followed apparent constitutional amendments permitting multi-candidate elections, these movements campaigned to prevent the president from running for a second term.[36]

The 2005 parliamentary elections also saw the Muslim Brotherhood secure 15% of the seats, establishing itself as the largest opposition force in the People's Assembly. The Brotherhood assumed a dual role, both opposing the regime politically and advocating for the provision of public services to poor communities.

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32 Shaimaa Magued, "Mobilization Structures and Political Change in an Authoritarian Context: The National Association for Change as a Case Study (2010–2011)," *The Journal of North African Studies* 25, no. 1 (2018): 34–52.

33 El Nadeem Center against Violence and Torture.

34 Ibn Khaldoun Center for Democratic Studies. Human Rights Watch, *Egypt: Events of 2005* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2006).

35 Ali Hamiyeh, "Authoritarianism, Economic Liberalization, and the Roots of the 2011 Uprisings," in *The Arab Uprisings: A Decade of Struggle*, ed. Transnational Institute and RLS North Africa (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute and RLS North Africa, 2021).

36 Magued, "Mobilization Structures and Political Change in an Authoritarian Context."

Although multiple political parties existed at the time, their capacity for mass mobilisation was largely ineffective due to the repressive policies of the Mubarak regime, which had severely curtailed genuine political participation since the 1980s. During the 2005 presidential elections, the state arrested several candidates who ran against Mubarak and obstructed many citizens from reaching polling stations by deploying regime-backed thugs who used violence against voters.

However, in 2010, these parties, together with the Muslim Brotherhood, were able to unite around the Egyptian Association for Change, launched by Mohamed El Baradei. The association sought genuine political and constitutional reforms aimed at introducing competitive and transparent multi-candidate presidential elections.[37] The April 6 Movement, Youth for Change, the Muslim Brotherhood, and representatives from various political parties rallied around El Baradei, whose international standing provided some protection from regime repression and positioned him as a potential presidential candidate. This coalition became the nucleus of the political force that participated in the January 2011 Revolution, calling for freedom, social justice, and human dignity.

These forces held differing positions regarding the concept of the civil state. The secular bloc, represented by liberal political parties and secular intellectuals, argued that a civil state should be secular, with no individual of religious or military background permitted to rule. In their view, a civil state is democratic, where rulers are elected through free and fair elections and derive legitimacy from the people and the constitution rather than from religion or military authority. This elite called for the abolition of Article 2 of the constitution and maintained that a civil state must be grounded in public rights and freedoms, including freedom of worship and freedom of expression, which should not be subordinated to religious law.[38]

Meanwhile, the religious parties that emerged after the revolution held divergent views on the civil state. The Muslim Brotherhood supported the concept of a civil state, arguing that rulers should not come from political, military, or religious backgrounds. They maintained that the application of Islamic sharia does not contradict the civil state, as sharia is compatible with public rights and freedoms and provides a framework for regulating them according to religious principles.[39] While public freedoms should be promoted and exercised in accordance with religious norms, they remain guaranteed for all citizens, irrespective of their ethnic or religious background.

In contrast, the Salafi parties largely rejected the civil state, equating it with a secular state. They argued that it is based on non-Islamic, Western principles and therefore incompatible with Islamic sharia. Salafi parties relied on the principle of *hakimiyya* (God's sovereignty), which, in their view, entails that one must not rebel against a ruler who implements Islamic law, even if some of those rulings conflict with the rights and freedoms associated with a civil state.[40]

37 Ibid.
38 Magued, "Marginalizing Revolutionaries."
39 Ibid.
40 Lavie, "De-Theocratizing the State?"

Despite the varied circumstances and developments across the countries affected by the Arab Spring uprisings, external intervention was a major factor preventing these revolutions from achieving their aim of establishing civil states.[41]

In Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE supported opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood, particularly through their media platforms, contributing to the removal of President Morsi. They also provided substantial economic assistance to the military and the post-2013 ruling system, while pressuring other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states to follow suit and criminalise the Muslim Brotherhood. Similarly, in Libya, Saudi Arabia and the UAE intervened by supporting Khalifa Haftar's forces against the UN-recognised majority in parliament, supplying them with weapons and equipment. In Syria, Saudi Arabia and the UAE backed opposition forces, particularly Islamist factions such as Jabhat al-Nusra, providing arms to counter Assad's regime and Hezbollah's support for it. In Bahrain and Oman, the GCC deployed police and military forces to suppress protests in public squares against the ruling authorities.

Following the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood's rule, the Egyptian Constitution ratified in 2014 declared the state to be civil, yet it introduced exceptions that undermined this civil character with respect to the military background of the head of state. While many articles emphasised that the president should not have a religious background and prohibited religious parties from political participation or holding power, the constitution also included numerous provisions granting the military significant legal and economic privileges, thereby compromising a key aspect of the civil state.

Under the 2014 Constitution, civilians may be tried before military courts, the military budget is exempt from any form of oversight, and the army is entitled to participate in investments and the national economy, enjoying economic advantages over other economic actors within the state.[42]

External interventions by Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, as well as by Turkey, Iran, and Israel, have continued to undermine Libya, Syria, and Yemen's capacity to reach political agreements. These interventions have prevented political forces from participating effectively and have obstructed the development of a broadly acceptable framework for the nature of the state and its system of governance.

Conclusion

The fragility of the nation-state and the elite-driven nature of political formation played a decisive role in constraining the emergence of a civil state in the Arab world, even after the Arab Spring revolutions, whose core demands embodied the very foundations of the civil state.

41 Shaimaa Magued, "Authoritarianism and Virtual Regionalism: The Gulf Cooperation Council during Arab Uprisings," *Democracy and Security* 15, no. 2 (2018): 150–171.
42 Magued, "Marginalizing Revolutionaries."

The presence of authoritarian ruling elites, who derive their legitimacy from either their struggle for independence or from religious authority and provide public services or rent-based benefits in exchange for citizens' acquiescence to limited political participation and curtailed public freedoms, has strengthened authoritarian rule both institutionally and socially. This has, in turn, undermined popular efforts to demand democracy, the rule of law, and fair distribution of resources. Ruling elites have relied on the military and leveraged their accumulated wealth to consolidate power, while collaborating with elites in neighbouring states to suppress popular uprisings, extinguishing any real prospects for establishing a civil state.

These elites, whose rise was shaped by security and economic ties with Western powers, had little incentive to implement genuine political or economic reforms that might foster industrial development, protect private businesses, create a fair and competitive market, or enable authentic political participation. Such participation would require pluralistic political parties with real supporters, competing through policy programmes to gain power and represent the people under the rule of law.

A shift towards a truly democratic system based on civil state principles requires compelling reasons for the ruling elite to relinquish power and submit to popular accountability. The Arab Spring and subsequent events—counterrevolutions, civil wars, and foreign interventions—reflect the ruling elites' refusal to cede power to elected groups, despite widespread popular demands. In Egypt and Tunisia, for example, mass mobilisation succeeded in removing Mubarak and Ben Ali, yet loyalist elites persistently sought to reassert their dominance and safeguard their political and economic privileges.

Similarly, in Syria, popular calls for Assad's departure devolved into a protracted civil war due to the regime's intransigence, its refusal to implement political reforms or transfer power peacefully to the opposition, and the involvement of external actors and non-state armed groups within complex pro- and anti-regime alliances. In Libya, demands for genuine political reform and regime change were met with obstinacy and violence, provoking conflict between loyalists and opponents that ultimately led to NATO intervention aimed at toppling the regime and halting the fighting.

In Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Oman, popular uprisings prompted direct Saudi and Emirati military intervention, alongside coordinated Gulf Cooperation Council measures to suppress protest movements and political Islamist forces across the Gulf, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, and Sudan. These actions were intended to reinforce existing regimes politically and materially, while obstructing any meaningful change or reform that could pave the way for a civil state.

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