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## **There is More to the Arab World's Malaise than Dictators**

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The ongoing 'Arab Winter' is showing that there was always more than dictatorships to blame for the Arab world's malaise.

Popular protests across the Arab world in early 2011, which led to the overthrow of deeply entrenched authoritarian dictatorships, were warmly welcomed around the world. The term 'Arab Spring' was coined, in homage to the 'Prague Spring', and many spoke excitedly of a fourth wave of democratisation.

In hindsight, Prague Spring comparisons were very apt since Czechoslovakia's brief period of liberalisation and reform in early 1969 was abruptly brought to an end by the Soviet Union and members of the Warsaw Pact later that year. The Prague Spring became a harsh winter, and the Arab Spring seems to be heading the same way.

The overthrow of Saddam's regime in 2003, by a US-led coalition, led to an outbreak of chaos, criminality, sectarian strife and political in-fighting that has yet to subside. It was easy to blame it all on the US-led intervention and a lack of workable post-war plans, and to an extent that was true.

But the removal of a brutal dictator in Iraq was always going to unleash tensions that had been simmering under the surface for decades and open up new fractures in a society that was once termed 'a prison camp above ground and a mass grave below it'.

The mistake many made was to view events in Iraq as an exception rather than a harbinger of what was yet to come. The removal of dictatorships in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt seems to be having the same effect it did in Iraq, except it is much harder to blame the US this time, though many will try.

Talk of an Arab Spring is starting to sound increasingly absurd. Well-armed militias still control parts of Libya; leading liberal opposition politicians are being assassinated in Tunisia; al-Qaeda remains an existential threat in Yemen; and Egypt faces fresh protests every week. Beyond political stability, very little has improved in these countries and many things have got

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a lot worse. Onlookers are waking up to the realisation that dictatorships were never the root cause of the malaise affecting the Arab world.

In truth, this idea was being discussed long before the recent wave of revolutions in the Arab world. Back in 2002, for example, a team of Arab scholars, led by the Egyptian Nader Fergany, compiled a report entitled the 'Arab Human Development Report 2002'. This report, which was published by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and caused a huge stir, identified attitudes towards three key things that were holding Arab societies back: freedom, knowledge, and women's status.

I can remember giving a speech in Cairo back in 2010 and being struck by just how restricted and narrow the scope for self-expression was. Intellectual and artistic freedom is simply not able to thrive. Freedom as we know it simply does not exist. Tribal patriarchy, religious obscurantism, and political authoritarianism often combine to create an intolerant and suffocating social atmosphere that can only lead to sudden outbursts of misdirected anger and rage.

As for knowledge, in the last 1000 years, Arabs have translated as many books as Spain translates in a single year. Education systems are woefully inadequate, spending on research and development is a fraction of the world average, and adult illiteracy rates are still very high. Knowledge is simply not valued and certainly not disseminated en masse.

Finally, societies in which half of the citizens are treated as second class citizens can never hope to prosper. The participation of women in political and economic life in Arab societies is the lowest in the world. At the same time sexual harassment rates, certainly in Egypt, are amongst the highest in the world.

There is little reason to believe that progress has been made on these three key issues since the report's publication in 2002. In fact, the opposite case can be made.

Now that nationalist and secular dictatorships have been overthrown, Saudi-funded Salafist groups roam the streets of Tunisia and Egypt trying to enforce their own twisted interpretation of morality. Post-revolution, life for women has been made that little bit worse. Personal freedoms seem as distant as ever.

Democracy has never been simply about holding a set of elections. A democratic political culture needs to be matched by appropriate social, cultural and economic changes too.

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Eastern European states had their western counterparts to look up to and imitate; Arab states lack such role models and instead are at the receiving end of Saudi and Qatari-funded initiatives that favour more regressive forces.

What was termed the 'Arab Spring' was simply the start of a long period of chaos and uncertainty in which anything could happen. The region is being pulled in different directions with very little consensus on the best way to move forward. Western powers have not come out in support of liberal and secular forces in the region, instead preferring to watch from the side-lines and focus on realpolitik.

There was no Arab Spring; there was a harsh winter that could be followed by a spring. Whether it will or not remains to be seen. If the past two years are anything to go by, the winter will last for quite a while yet.

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