

The People Want to Topple the Regime: Exploring the Arab Spring in Egypt, Syria, and Jordan

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Abstract

For most observers, the Arab Spring seemed to come out of nowhere. Although it would be difficult to label the Middle East as stable, the autocratic regimes of the area have, for the most part, customarily managed to preserve the delicate balance needed to govern the states of the region. Was the act of an individual enough to fundamentally shift this balance or was it the catalyst for a revolution destined to happen? Moreover, why were some governments in the region overthrown while others remained in power? This article explores possible answers to these questions.

Keywords

conflict, conflict resolution, criminology and criminal justice, human rights, international security, revolution, violence, terrorist studies

As-Shaab/Yoreed/Eskaat el nizam! (The people/want/to topple the regime!). Boys in Dara, Syria, borrowed this slogan from the uprisings in Cairo and Tunis and spray painted it onto a wall in their town. A total of 15 suspects were summarily rounded up by Syrian secret police for this act of insolence. The youths, ages 10 through 15, were beaten and burned and some had their finger nails pulled out. The secret police were under the direction of General Atef Najeeb who is a relative of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (CBS News, 2011).

Dara is a rural town on the southern border with Jordan where tribal customs and traditions take precedence over government rule. The children came from some of the area's most well-known families, the Baiazids, the Masalmas, the Zoubis, and the Gawabras. Family members subsequently rallied at the local governor's house asking for the release of their children. Security forces responded by opening fire on them. In the following days, with protests growing in size and frequency, the response of the security forces became more violent culminating with a raid on a mosque where five people were killed, including a doctor who had been treating the injured. At the funeral for those killed, security forces again opened fire resulting in more deaths. In a society where family honor is sacred, a blood feud had been created. The boys were released after 2 weeks in prison, and the signs of torture that they endured further enraged the entire community (CBS News, 2011).

When a Tunisian man set himself on fire, he turned the global spotlight onto the totalitarian-like regime of Tunisia as well as to similar style governments throughout the greater

Middle East. Soon after, citizens of other countries followed the people of Tunisia's example and immediately began to aggressively demand change from their respective governments. Syria had initially escaped this style of uprising. However, the arrest and torture of the children was the tipping point that caused a series of cascading events that now places Assad's control of the country in true jeopardy. Torture may be common in Syria, but the failure of the regime to anticipate the results of creating a blood feud against members of numerous tribes is demonstrative of the arrogance with which the country is ruled.

Syria, like most governments in greater Middle East, has not changed its modus operandi in decades. Common strategies used to keep the populace appeased include a system of large-scale public employment, various types of subsidies, allowing tribal autonomy, state-influenced religiosity, and continually focusing attention on external issues. What changed this spring?

Following an examination of the commonalities throughout the region, which set the stage for the Arab Spring, this article will explore the nuances of the individual governments and reform movements in Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. One can discuss general factors that may influence the collective uprising, but as each state is unique, it is important to frame observations into a country-specific context.

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Demographics

Religion, median age of the population, and unemployment are demographics that are key to understanding the current situation in the Greater Middle East. Over 90% of the population of the Middle East is Muslim (Pew Research Center, 2011). There are two main denominations of Islam: Sunnis, which represent approximately 84% of the population of Muslims throughout the world and Shi'a, which make up the remaining 16%. Sunni Islam has no organized hierarchy. This has traditionally allowed regimes in the region to exert government control of local religious leaders via financial and administrative support (Brown, 2000). The byproduct of this sponsorship is state manipulated, monitored, and controlled messages from mosques. Religiosity and perceived piety influences social standing in the Greater Middle East.

There is a higher degree of recognition and acceptance of a difficult life on earth as expounded on in Islamic doctrine. Muslims also believe that they will be rewarded in the afterlife for their suffering on earth. These belief structures, often dependent on age, experience, and education, pacify the populations and maximize their degree of tolerance in terms of leadership expectations. Prior to the days of satellite television and the Internet, what an Imam said during Friday prayers was, for most, beyond question. The ability to sway large segments of the populace via religion has been an asset continually exploited by Middle Eastern leaders. However, with increasing technology, which governments have struggled to censor and manipulate, no longer are religious leaders the only credible source of information.

Illiterate populations are more likely to believe in what others say than literate populations who possess more cognitive capabilities to question the spoken word. Illiterate populations also do not possess the problem-solving skills that enable them to question the basis of their circumstances like literate populations do. Education in those countries is rising and, with each increase, the demands for problem solving at the executive level will also increase.

When compared to Western nations, a disproportionate percentage of each Middle Eastern state's population is under 25 years of age. In Egypt the figure is 52.3%, 55.2% in Syria, and 54.4% in Jordan. Compare these figures to Germany where 24.8% of the population is under 25 years old (United Nations, 2010).

Twenty-six-year-old Muhammad's father died when Muhammad was 3 years old. Since the age of 10, he had been the main provider of his family. Eventually, at 19 years, he stopped pursuing his education. Unable to find steady work, Muhammad resorted to selling produce in the street to earn money. By all accounts, he was popular and hard working. Muhammad was known to provide fruit and vegetables to the needy. Unfortunately, because he was unlicensed a police-woman confiscated his fruit, vegetables, and scales. Muhammad argued with the policewoman prior to the seizure and was subsequently cursed and slapped by her. Distraught

and angry in Tunisia, Mr. Muhammad Bouazizi set himself on fire (Ryan, 2011). He has become a martyr, a symbol of the oppressed versus the corrupt elite and their cronies.

Although this tragic incident occurred in Tunisia, there is vast unemployment throughout the Middle East. In many Middle Eastern countries, youth unemployment is above 20% (Abdih, 2011).

The Coercive Apparatus

According to Eva Bellin, the author of *The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective*, the coercive apparatus in most Middle East states is the army or other security forces. The leader of the state is often highly dependent on coercive apparatuses to survive. In return, leaders, via better salaries, benefits, and ignoring corruption, take disproportionate care of personnel employed by the coercive apparatus (Bellin, 2004).

In the Middle East, the coercive apparatus manages to be both institutional in nature, thus having its own traditions, customs, as well as allegiances, and at the same time can be patrimonial with key positions being decided by on the basis of cronyism and politics. Being a member of the coercive apparatus carries a certain status as well. Men in these positions normally find wives because their positions guarantee a salary. Many youth take these positions because they have a steady income and families are more likely to accept them as partners for their daughters. Generally, the more professionally trained a coercive apparatus is, the more it has the ability to remain independent during times of political change. Conversely, if those in key positions owe the leaders for their appointment, it is likely that the coercive apparatus will not attempt to maintain neutrality during times of crisis (Bellin, 2004). Moreover, if they are aligned historically with their leaders, they cannot turn around and deny their allegiance easily when the leaders fall so it is in their interest to keep the leaders in power. In such cases, when the leaders fall so will they.

Relevance of the State

Bellin further expounds that "In short, the Middle East and North Africa lack the prerequisites of democratization. The lack of a strong civil society, a market-driven economy, adequate income and literacy levels, democratic neighbors, and democratic culture explains the region's failure to democratize" (Bellin, 2004, p. 141). This is coupled with the region's history of ruling empires providing a great degree of autonomy to local tribal entities to handle their own affairs in exchange for paying taxes and providing troops to fight for the empire as needed. These factors combine to create a fragile balance for governing Middle Eastern "states." This so-called balance is an unstable foundation from which to erect contemporary governments.

Governments must be relevant to garner popular loyalty. In the case of Middle Eastern states, instability in the extreme

is irrelevant. Max Weber said that “If the state is to exist, the dominated must obey the authority claimed by the powers that be” (Weber, 1918/2010, p. 115). If the state is not relevant then why would the people obey rather than seek alternative relevant structures based on ideology or social organizations like tribes? States built on similar questionable foundations risk collapse.

Change

Shifting to new sets of laws or rules can have and often does trigger an unforeseen domino effect on others. This realization at times results in resistance to change for parties who believe that, given current circumstances, they are contextually advantaged. Moreover, because people have expectations based on an established norm, it is often difficult for a person to transition to new rules. Therefore, citizens may prefer to live by established societal rules because the long-term effects of new ones are unknown. Illiterate populations fear change much more than literate populations. Frequently, when the rules are changed, society balks at upfront costs and prefers to maintain the status quo (Steinmo, 2008).

The Economy

Referring to the U.S. Federal Reserve, Andrew Lilico of *The Telegraph* asserts that “the Fed seems very clearly to have achieved more in the Arab world in six months than the Pentagon achieved in decades” (Lilico, 2011, para. 1).

Food prices mostly evened out in 2009 and early 2010. However, prices rose again from mid-2010 as quantitative easing was started. During an 8-month period, prices rose nearly 40% (Lilico, 2011). Even if one disagrees with Mr. Lilico’s conclusions about the correlation of the Federal Reserve’s actions and food prices in the Middle East, nearly anyone in the region will say that the costs for basic needs have risen, whereas salaries have largely remained stagnant. History shows that revolutions become more likely, the faster that food prices rise (Lilico, 2011).

Discussion

Egypt, Syria, and Jordan have much in common in relation to how the regimes have attempted to govern and manage change. For example, when the people’s anger became apparent, all of the mentioned governments replaced key officials, including ministers or governors in an effort to soothe rising tensions.

Now let us examine the individual nuances in each country that makes each respective situation unique.

Egypt

In Egypt, the response of the police and the army support Bellin’s observations about the coercive apparatus. Since

signing a peace accord with Israel, the Egyptian army has routinely received massive amounts of U.S. military aid and training. As such, U.S. military “corporate culture” has influenced the Egyptian military for more than a generation. High-level Egyptian military officials have had relationships with U.S. military officers that span decades. In the context of the region, the Egyptian army is considered professional. In addition, as Egypt has conscripted service, a great percentage of the population has served in or has some sort of personal connection to the army (“Egypt’s Moment,” 2011).

The Egyptian police are the complete antithesis. Under President Hosni Mubarak, the Egyptian police were traditionally viewed as brutal and corrupt, ill trained, and to have no regard for basic human rights. Cronyism ran rampant. Approximately 900 protestors were killed during the Egyptian uprising, and the police are believed responsible for the overwhelming majority of these deaths (Fadel, 2011).

The army was viewed positively by the people, and its leadership made a concerted effort to maintain goodwill of the public by proclaiming neutrality. But this is also due to the media propaganda that runs rampant in Egyptian society that the army protects the mother or the great Egypt.

The police were privileged under the Mubarak regime. Many relied on bribery as a means to supplement their income. The police, in general, realized that should Mubarak’s government fall, then at best they would no longer enjoy such corrupt perks. At worse, they could potentially face criminal charges and prison.

Although much contributed to the chain of events that led to the Egyptian uprising, the army was the deciding factor in the toppling of Hosni Mubarak. Due to the professionalism and the neutrality displayed by the army, the people have been generally supportive of the military serving as head of a transitional government for the time being. However, army leadership must remain cognizant that the people want expeditious and tangible change. Therefore, to maintain its credibility, the army must remain transparent and neutral and continue to rapidly pursue democratic reform.

Syria

Syria’s economy is failing. Like other Middle Eastern rulers, President Assad raised public sector employment salaries as well as various subsidies. However, as *The Economist* notes, “He cannot afford to do this. The government will probably print the money to meet its promises, so runaway inflation is likely, further fuelling popular anger as cash deposits become worthless” (“The Squeeze on Assad,” 2011, para. 14).

Approximately 60% of lending in Syria are loans to buy cars. Many are now struggling to make their loan payments. Increasingly, as more default on their loans, the financial institutions are becoming unstable, thus making a run on the banks likely. Banks have begun to display huge bundles of cash in an effort to provide reassurance to the public that the

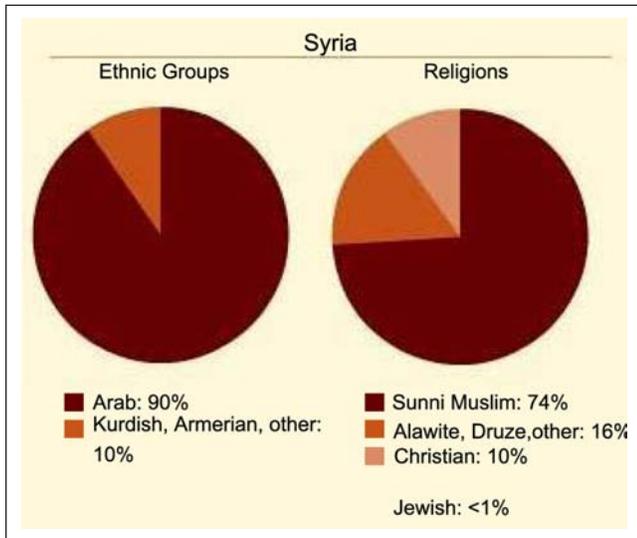


Figure 1. Syria

banks have the capacity to repay depositors immediately. However, many of the affluent in Syria expatriate their money overseas. Others without sophisticated means are simply driving large bags stuffed with cash to Beirut and setting up bank accounts there (“The Squeeze on Assad,” 2011).

Since coming to power in 1970, the Assads have used absolute violence as the preferred tool to maintain control of the various ethnic groups that make up the country. Sunnis, Shiites, Alawites, Christians, Kurds, Druse, Circassians, Armenians, and more all compete for influence. Sectarian violence is feared among these groups, and because of this, the anarchy-like conditions in countries such as Libya and Yemen are an asset to the Assad regime. Should Assad be overthrown, there is a possibility that the situation in Syria could result in a Lebanese-style civil war (Sullivan, 2011a). Despite the concerns of ethnic violence, it is worth noting that Syria has not had a conflict of this type since 1862 when Muslims set fire to Christian houses in Damascus (“The Squeeze on Assad,” 2011).

Figure 1 depicts the ethnic and religious breakdown of the Syrian population (WGBH Educational Foundation, 2002).

The protestors have shown unity and sophistication, and it is thought that the momentum of the uprising may escalate with the coming of Ramadan in August. Mosques serve as rallying points for demonstrations. During the holy month, attendance at the mosque becomes more of a daily rather than weekly event. Some of those involved in the uprisings are reportedly contacting well-known economists for input on market reforms. Finally, as *The Economist* notes of uprising organizers, “They show political sophistication by talking of a ‘civil’ democracy, not a ‘secular’ one. To many Muslims, secular means godless and wayward” (“The Squeeze on Assad,” 2011, para. 8).

As the movement grows, the Assad regime is starting to discover that it can no longer count on the usual suspects as allies. Since coming to power, the Assads who are from the minority Alawite Muslim sect have secured their power base by protecting the wealth of the rich and mostly Sunni merchants. However, the Assads have been compared with the mafia because of their shakedowns of lucrative businesses. Many businessmen are not only tired of this practice but have also come to the realization that ethnic conflict scaremongering is bad for business because it gives the appearance of instability. Therefore, some of Syria’s wealthy business owners have made overtures toward the protestors, including donating blood and paying protestor’s expenses. Even some Christians have begun joining Muslims during the Friday protest (“The Squeeze on Assad,” 2011). Whether it is a case of various different groups following their moral compasses or hedging their bets, the point is that the pool of people whom Assad can rely on shrinks by the day. That is with one notable exception.

Due to the violence used by the security forces, their future appears strongly linked with Assad’s. As of July 2011, the police and the army are responsible for the deaths of approximately 1,500 people during the uprisings. In Egypt and Tunisia, the army maintained neutrality and eventually sided with protestors. This scenario seems unlikely to occur in the near future in Syria (“The Squeeze on Assad,” 2011).

The relationship between security force brutality and society appears reciprocal and cyclical. The more outspoken protestors become, the more brutality security forces employ. This, in turn, causes the protestors to react violently, which results in security forces continually escalating the force used on protestors. The security forces are perpetrating often extreme acts of violence to control the situation, but perhaps to greater extent because their personal futures are at stake. Should there be a regime change, it is very likely that members of the police and army would be held accountable for acts committed under the Assad regime.

Although Syria has 400,000 troops in its army, only 50,000 are trusted, trained, and equipped to deal with the protest throughout the country (“The Squeeze on Assad,” 2011). “So far, the regime has been lucky in that the uprisings have been sequential, moving from one place to the next. If the protesters rose up at once, the regime could lose control. That is beginning to happen” (“The Squeeze on Assad,” 2011, para. 25).

In the past, a real paradox is that many who are ideologically inclined to support more political freedom, such as the middle class, have not done so because they fear that religious extremists may come to power, which could result in the curtailing of personal liberties. However, many are now starting to realize that having a voice in the uprising may be in their best interest should it appear that there will be a regime change.

Fears of an ultraconservative Islamic government coming to power are likely unfounded. Estimates are that, at the

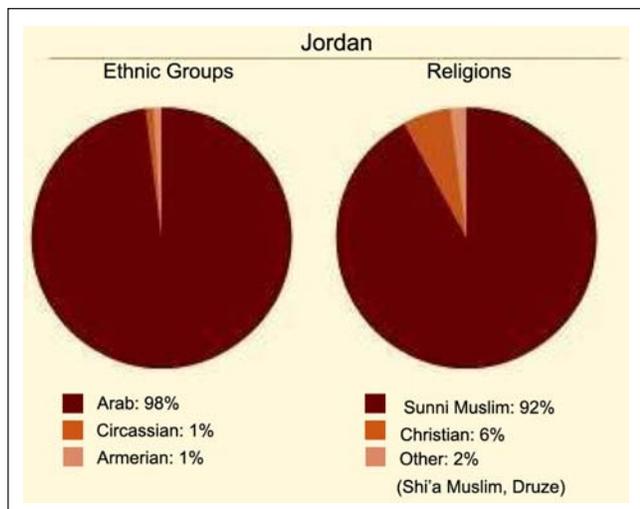


Figure 2. Jordan

most, radicals make up approximately 15% of the population (“The Squeeze on Assad,” 2011>).

Ramadan may prove to be a breaking point for the security forces. If and when this happens, uprising organizers should look to make alliances with key members of the army, particularly leaders of the 350,000 who are not considered absolute loyalists to the Assad regime, although all should be welcome. This may be the route to forcible regime change. Alternatively, continued pressure from protestors may force Assad to make some changes to government. However, one should not expect substantive reform, rather only enough movement to preserve the precarious balance that will set the stage for other uprisings in the future.

Jordan

Like Syria and Egypt, Jordan lacks oil wealth and therefore is suffering from similar economic-related problems as its neighbors. There is a large unemployed youth population, and there is no reason to believe that the country’s near economic future offers any recovery. Conflict among the country’s two main religious groups, Sunni Muslims and Christians, is nonexistent.

At 98% of the population, Arabs make up the predominant ethnic group with Circassians and Armenians each comprising 1% (WGBH Educational Foundation, 2002).

Figure 2 depicts the religious and ethical makeup of Jordan (WGBH Educational Foundation, 2002).

The tension within Jordan is among the internal Arab Sunni Muslim community. Key government posts and the majority of the security forces comprise Jordanians of Bedouin descent sometimes known as *East Bankers*, which is a reference to the east bank of the Jordan River. They are viewed as the traditional core of trans-Jordanian society. Jordanians with Palestinian roots are known as *West Bankers*.

West Bankers have gained steady influence over the years because they run some of the most successful businesses in the country (Sullivan, 2011b).

The population of West Bankers has increased dramatically over the past half century due to Palestinians fleeing the West Bank because of conflict with Israel. East Bankers and West Bankers now comprise roughly an equal share of the overall population of Jordan. Many West Bankers perceive that they are equally represented within the government, and East Bankers are concerned that their influence will decline with the continued growth of the West Banker population (Sullivan, 2011b).

King Abdullah II ascended to the throne of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in 1999 with the death of his father King Hussein. King Abdullah’s mother is British born. Hussein was adored by the populace, having cultivated a rugged image based on his love of motorcycles and jets coupled with his legacy of making peace with Israel (Sullivan, 2011b).

The King is married to Queen Rania. Queen Rania who is of Palestinian heritage plays an active role in politics domestically and abroad. She is known to be a strong advocate of women’s rights and supports changing Jordanian law to allow women who are married to foreigners to pass on Jordanian citizenship to their children. Her support of this law is controversial because it is viewed as an effort to further tilt the demographic balance in favor of the Jordanians of Palestinian origin (Staff, 2011).

Moreover, Sullivan observes that there is “grumbling discontent over Queen Rania, whose beauty and fashion sense make her popular in the West, but who is seen with suspicion in conservative Bedouin circles” (Sullivan, 2011b, para. 13). Notably, 36 leaders from conservative East Bank tribes signed a petition in February urging the King to end the Queen’s role in politics (Staff, 2011). The controversy surrounding Queen Rania makes it evident that the male-dominated Bedouin society is increasingly feeling marginalized. However, Sullivan reports the following regarding King Abdullah II:

In Jordan, the king does face increasing criticism, but even the angriest political protesters seldom hold him responsible for their country’s troubles. His family dynasty, the Hashemites, rose to power centuries ago as the protectors of the Muslim holy city of Mecca. That, combined with the elaborate system of patronage aimed at powerful local leaders, has earned them immense loyalty among the Bedouin tribes who make up the traditional core of Jordanian society. (Sullivan, 2011b, para. 7)

Despite the controversy regarding the queen and the economic hardships that the country faces, King Abdullah is still generally popular. There is pressure on the Jordan’s King Abdullah II to enact more democratic reform and to root out

corruption, but, thus far, the government of Jordan, unlike other regimes, has managed to avoid provoking the violent anger of the populace. This is largely because of the tremendous amount of personal and political capital of the Hashemite family and because of the relative professionalism of Jordan's security forces.

Although the secret police are feared in Jordan, they do not comprise a constant menacing intimidation as in Syria (Sullivan, 2011b). Despite sustaining injuries, the police in Jordan have been known to shake hands with protestors and hand out bottled water. Since the protests began, there have been two confirmed deaths of protestors, which occurred in March when security forces intervened between two opposing groups (Black, 2011). Despite the hundreds of reported injuries and the 2 deaths, it is difficult to imagine that law enforcement in the United States would handle these incidents with significantly different results. Moreover, when contrasted to the previously referenced 1,500-person death toll in Syria, one can appreciate the comparative restraint used by the Jordanian police.

Just as one would expect in the United States, there have been allegations that Jordanian police have used excessive force. Four Jordanian Police Officers have been detained and are under investigation for allegedly beating journalists during a protest ("Jordan Detains 4 Policemen for Beating Protesters," 2011). Considering allegations of misconduct by police is a further example of how Jordan differs from some of the other regimes in the region.

"There is no political blood in this country, and we are harvesting the benefits of that," said Mohammad Al-Momani, a professor of political science at Yarmouk University. "People criticize the government, they criticize the regime. But at the end of the day, there's no sense of needing revenge" (Sullivan, 2011b, para. 22).

Jordan is an absolute monarchy. Despite having legislative elections, King Abdullah II is in ultimate control of the government. He appoints governmental ministers and can dismiss any of them, including the prime minister, at will. The King presides over an autocratic government. Labels such as dictator, tyrant, or despot are routinely used to describe leaders of such regimes. However, none of those negative connotations accurately reflect the majority sentiment of the people of Jordan to King Abdullah II.

It is the central irony of modern Jordan: The man with the most political power is still widely seen as being above the political fray. So, although the protestors want large-scale reform—more power shifted from the palace to parliament, an end to government corruption, inflation brought under control—few want an end to Hashemite rule (Sullivan, 2011b, p. 10).

King Abdullah II would do well to continue his pace of democratic reform, perhaps even providing goals and timelines to the public, guaranteeing the people a greater representative role in national government. Corruption at all

levels must be aggressively pursued and greater transparency introduced to government. Security forces need to continue to show restraint and professionalism. If Jordan pursues this agenda, then the popular Hashemite family should continue to rule Jordan for years to come.

Conclusion

So what is next for the region? The oil-rich Gulf states should be able to continue to spread the wealth, thus buying their way out of serious change via increasing salaries and subsidies. Those without the luxury of oil money are going to face tough times. There is no turnkey solution. Rather, each state and its people will have to endure the growing pains to see, first, if reform is worth the costs and, second, what will the reform look like? There are many steps in between a dictatorship and full-blown Western style democracy.

It was not a question of *if*, but a question of *when*. The economic downturn, high unemployment, waning state influence on the populace, and the corrupt self-indulgent arrogance of shaky governments set the stage making the Arab Spring a certainty rather than an *if*. The *when* was covered as tribes and other interest groups came into conflict with the state more when the Internet usage and satellite television became readily accessible to nearly all of the Middle East. Not only were regimes no longer able to manipulate messages as easily, but technology also allowed seemingly separate groups to organize and achieve unity of purpose. The sum of these reasons means that Mr. Bouazizi's dramatic action in Tunisia, although very significant, was purely the catalyst for seemingly inevitable events.

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