



[Authoritarian Leaders in the Middle East Continue Their Campaign to Bury the Arab Spring](#)

The ongoing efforts by many authoritarian leaders to erase the history of the Arab Spring and undermine democracy in the Middle East is a growing concern. Tunisia, the birthplace of the Arab Spring, managed to transition to democracy, albeit has recently shifted back towards authoritarianism, while Syria remains entrenched in a brutal civil war and authoritarian rule under President Bashar al-Assad. The success of Tunisia's democratic transition can be attributed to factors such as the presence of civil society groups, a free press, and a willingness to compromise among political factions. In contrast, Syria's descent into violence and authoritarianism is due to a combination of factors, including the brutal crackdown on peaceful protests, the intervention of foreign powers, and the failure of the international community to intervene effectively.

The increasing cooperation between regimes to maintain their power is a cause for concern. Assad's dictatorship is benefiting from a steady process of normalization with its Arab neighbors after years of isolation brought on by the horrifying acts of terror Assad unleashed on his nation during a decade-long civil war. With Assad securely in charge and the fighting at a low ebb, nations like Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates have already begun to patch things up with Assad's government. Saudi Arabia made a significant statement by indicating that it was prepared to do the same, with the Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan al-Saud visiting Damascus, the first high-ranking official from Riyadh to travel there since the uprising in Syria descended into all-out war.

Tunisia, however, was seen as unique. It was one of the first nations to sever ties with Assad, a tyrant who personified the region's entrenched if deteriorating, authoritarian system. It was at the forefront of the Arab Spring. But the increasingly dictatorial president of Tunisia, Kais Saied, has abruptly put an end to a decade of democratic consolidation. The detention of opposition figure Rachid Ghannouchi this week is just an example of the growing authoritarianism in Tunisia. Ghannouchi had spent decades in exile and years in prison before the 2011 Arab Spring rebellion. After returning to the country, he became a divisive figure. However, he continued to represent the prospect of political plurality in Tunisia, which was unusual for a region more accustomed to the suppression of such aspirations.

Now, Saied's Tunisia seems on the brink of the bad old order, the latest iteration of what Nadim Houry, executive director of the Paris-based Arab Reform Initiative, described as an "authoritarian restoration" that got underway in the years after the Arab Spring. Houry stated that Saied is pushing through a "striking process of detransition" from democracy.

There was hope that there would be a repeat of the democratization of Tunisia, as protests against the government erupted across the Arab world in 2019, from Algeria to Sudan to Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. They were propelled by rage against the failed, incompetent political leaders, the pervasive corruption, and the sluggish economy. Because of the protests, the leaders of states or governments in various

nations have resigned. There "was hope that they would move toward more inclusive democracies," according to Houry. That didn't take place.

Various Arab states, especially Gulf monarchies in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have helped sponsor the anti-democratic backlash. One such strategy that is often employed is the eraser of the history of the Arab Spring. It's a sign both of enduring interests — a fear of instability and spillover threats to their monopolies on power at home — as well as the shifting geopolitical sands of the region. Recent Saudi and Emirati move to bury the hatchet with Iran paved the way for the current moves to bring Assad, a close ally of Tehran, out from the cold. "That Saudi Arabia would be spearheading efforts to return Syria to the Arab fold would have once seemed unthinkable," wrote journalist Sarah Dadouch. The reality is that the authoritarian leaders in the Middle East are not just erasing the history of the Arab Spring, but they are also actively collaborating to maintain their power. The Gulf monarchies, especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, are playing a significant role in sponsoring the anti-democratic backlash.

The international community must continue to pay attention to the ongoing efforts of authoritarian leaders in the Middle East to undermine democracy and human rights. The success of Tunisia in transitioning to democracy, while not perfect, provided an example of what is possible with the presence of civil society groups, a free press, and a willingness to compromise among political factions. On the other hand, the ongoing civil war and authoritarian rule in Syria is a stark reminder of the consequences of brutal crackdowns on peaceful protests, foreign intervention, and the failure of the international community to intervene effectively. Therefore, the international community must continue to support democratic movements and human rights in the Middle East and North Africa. This includes providing aid and assistance to civil society groups, promoting free and independent media, and holding authoritarian leaders accountable for their actions. It also means putting pressure on countries that support anti-democratic regimes to change their behavior.

The ongoing efforts by authoritarian leaders to erase the history of the Arab Spring and maintain their power through collaboration pose a significant threat to democracy and human rights in the Middle East. The success of Tunisia in transitioning to democracy provides hope that change is possible, but it also highlights the challenges that must be overcome. The international community must continue to pay attention to these issues and provide support to democratic movements in the region to ensure that the aspirations of the Arab Spring are not forgotten.