



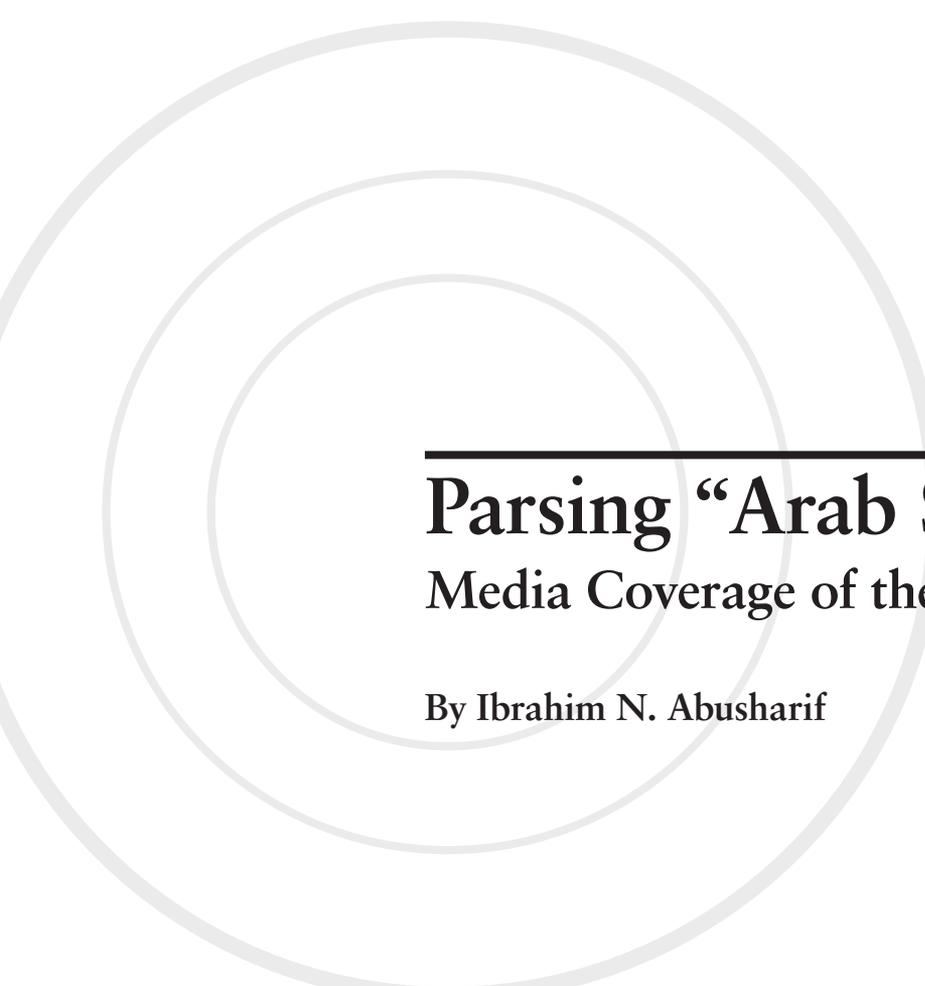
# Parsing “Arab Spring”

By Ibrahim N. Abusharif





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## Media Coverage of the Arab Revolutions

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# Foreword

**Everette E. Dennis**

*Dean and CEO,*

*Northwestern University in Qatar*

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Finding the right term to describe political and social upheaval sweeping across a whole region is a daunting challenge. For the Middle East, since the end of the first decade of the 21st century, that term has been “Arab Spring.” It is through this philological prism that media commentators, journalists and policy-makers, among others, have identified protests, revolutions, toppling of governments and other dramatic changes in and across several Arab nations, including Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria and others. “Arab Spring,” in its contemporary use, may have originated in an article by political scientist Marc Lynch in *Foreign Policy* in January 2011. No matter its origin, it was contentious almost from the start, which was inevitable since it was used to grossly generalize tumultuous events, each with distinct characteristics in different countries with divergent cultural conditions.

“Arab Spring” harkened to the dramatic upheavals elsewhere—such as the Prague Spring of 1968 or, even earlier, the European Revolutions of 1848, which were described as “The Springtime of the People.” As satisfying as some may have found the term, it was in competition with several others, including the “Arab Awakenings,” “Arab Revolts” and “Arab Revolutions,” as Ibrahim Abusharif explains in this thoughtful analysis and assessment of a seemingly simple term that has deeper meaning and masks considerable debate and profound disagreement. As Professor Abusharif tells us, the term is more than a framing device that narrows the scope of discussion and simplifies complex issues and events. It is, in fact, one with a long lineage that scholars have tracked and traced for decades, if not centuries. “Arab Spring” alludes in these circles to democratization, often linked to a yearning for political, social and economic freedom in countries long ruled by autocrats. There is in this consideration some semblance of the secular versus the religious, especially as Islamist or Islamist-leaning regimes replaced secular strongmen. What we call a thing matters, the author argues, and how it is perceived and by whom is important, too.

For those who thought they were witnessing the Middle East reenact the fall of communism and other region-wide movements, the twists and turns of the years of change since 2010 have proved disappointing. While history counsels patience, modern policymakers and media folk are often quick to make judgments, failing to think in terms of incremental change or to account for underlying tensions that could not have been worked out under autocratic rule—such tensions as ethnic and sectarian discord, as well as the tension between tradition and modernity.

Not satisfied to let the term stand for the first rumblings of change, many literal-minded commentators took issue with the fragility and possibly ephemeral nature of a phrase associated with the most hopeful season of the year. Spring, of course, stands for new beginnings, and that's what the several revolutions across the Middle East seemed to promise. But, as late as April 2013, with the Arab world beset by new and continuing troubles, columnist Thomas Friedman mockingly asserted, "I guess it's official now, the term 'Arab Spring' has to be retired. There is nothing springlike going on." Similarly, he passed by the term "Arab Awakenings," only to yearn for such markers as "Arab Decade," quarter-century or even century.

In this occasional paper, Professor Abusharif takes us on a journey traversing Western and Middle Eastern thought, theoretical debates, and practical results. Grounded in deep knowledge of the region and respect for its vast differences with common threads being mainly (but not exclusively) the Islamic faith and the Arabic language, he patiently explains and analyzes why study of the moniker "Arab Spring" matters and helps us grapple with continuity in the midst of change. He is conscious of the ideological baggage of those who see the term being driven by the West and its foreign policy objectives. That, he implies, is largely a sideshow that, while important, can divert our focus from the value of the Middle East in an historical and analytical context. While the term was largely ignored in the Arab language media initially, it has codified a news agenda in the West that is now more likely to pay attention to the Middle East as a continuing and complex story.

What Professor Abusharif does here is place the "Arab Spring" moniker in the context of framing an academic organizing theory that helps focus and organize complex and diverse activity or phenomena. This builds on a considerable tradition of growing importance in understanding journalism and public affairs and popular perception. In my own research, often in collaboration with others, I have sought terminology to capture the essence of change. This was done in a study of the first Gulf War, in which armed conflict in the Middle East region warranted explanation in terms of how media covered it by navigating complex military, diplomatic and governmental channels. Even earlier, the employment of a topology helped me define "New Journalism" by understanding its various types and applications.

One of those applications was "precision journalism," the application of social science methods in the practice of journalism. This term gave meaning to trends otherwise lost in the language of social science methodologies. Finding a framework language that captures the essence of a region is even harder, though, as I learned in studies of the media of Eastern Europe, where the only suitable term seemed to be "emerging voices." Meanwhile, a study of the media of East Asia that traversed several nations, nationalities, languages and ethnic origins found expression only in a plant that grew in all regions, the lotus flower, and thus a study describing changing media was titled, "The Unfolding Lotus."

The point here is that terms that emerge to describe transitional movements or other changes that seem to constitute a trend are always imperfect. They are not pleasing to everyone, but they do serve purpose. No satisfactory term ever emerged to describe the sweeping changes across Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union in the 1990s and beyond. There was de facto recognition

that profound change was signaled by upheaval and governmental change that ultimately went deeper across a whole society, but no good or simple name for it.

Perhaps the Arab world is fortunate to have a term that has stuck and has stimulated debate about what it means—and more important, what is happening in the society to which the moniker applies. Work on “Arab Spring” thus has considerable importance, in my opinion, and this paper rises to that challenge. It contributes importantly, I believe, to that understanding. It is a lucid treatment of a term—however inadequate and disputed the term may be—that can be a linchpin to a more coherent and nuanced perspective on the change that began in 2010 and continues unabated and unconstrained in closing months of 2013. We are pleased to introduce this work to a broader public as a stimulus for discussion and understanding.

Professor Abusharif teaches journalism at Northwestern University in Qatar, where we are following the aftermath and future developments of the “Arab Spring.” His work contributes to a shared effort to better understand the role of media in the region as we prepare a generation of journalists and other communicators to put right misunderstandings and prejudices about the Middle East, present and past.

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**Note:** Professor Abusharif's qualitative study is supported by quantitative data drawn from a bibliographic analysis conducted by Tim Miller using parameters established in discussion with Professor Abusharif. Mr. Miller is a San Francisco, California, USA-based research and media consultant.



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“Arab Spring” has become, in the last three years, a phrase to conjure with. In modern Middle East memory, there has not been a more positive-resonating phrase that’s been as broadly used and accepted in Western media to define major events in the region. Quite remarkably, the descriptor flourished in the media coverage of the region’s initial revolutions, and has endured the counter-revolutions, coups, assassinations and fierce civil strife since the original spark. As such, the phrase is significant and *different* in several ways, and its usage in the news media and the chords it has struck beg assessment. In so doing, this study of the usage of “Arab Spring” endeavors to: (1) parse out the development, promulgation, and historical roots and correlates of the term “Arab Spring” as conveyed popularly (and look briefly at the Arabic terminologies favored in the Arab press); (2) show how the term spread to other regions experiencing civil disaffections; (3) outline main arguments that detractors of the phrase have relied on in their rejection of the term; and (4) highlight and unpack a vigorous, if not emotional, debate that “Arab Spring” provoked, particularly the role of the media (new and otherwise) in “empowering” and even “causing” the uprisings. Included are the results of a bibliometric study that compared the frequency in which various descriptors appeared in major English-language news sources.



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## Introduction: The Winter of Arab Discontent

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The ongoing tumult in the Arab world, which began in earnest in the winter of 2010-11, has presented developments and circumstances for academics, commentators and policymakers to contemplate. For one, emphatic public displays of yearning for new governance—ostensibly accountable governance—were once thought to have been the provenance of Europe and other Western populations, not Arabs. It's a proposition indelicately couched in the concept of "Arab exceptionalism," which refers to a decades-long "wholesale indictment of Arab states as failing to meet any democratization standards to speak of, thus paving the way to separate them as an exception even within the developing world."<sup>1</sup> In other words, "Arabs for sociological and cultural reasons are 'immune' to democracy and democratization."<sup>2</sup>

What, then, do we make of the "stunning"<sup>3</sup> movements in the Middle East that once seemed "theoretically improbable"<sup>4</sup> and that surprised the "vast majority of academic specialists on the Arab world?"<sup>5</sup> Specifically, what framing should be applied to the furor?<sup>6</sup> And to whom should the frame amplification appeal? It is established canon that media framing of conflicts, especially foreign conflicts, "determines the way in which the public and policy-makers perceive the causes, consequences and importance of those conflicts, and where diplomatic and material resources are committed."<sup>7</sup> Media frames almost invariably have political bearing and historical lineage, and as such, they are meant to give "interpretation or definition to an event or development" for a given audience for whom the lineage and bearing are familiar.<sup>8</sup> The "spring" convention applied to the Arab unrest is drawn from historical precedents and their support terminologies that are exterior to the Arab world. How, then, has the term fared, and what controversies did it stimulate?

On the surface, the uprisings across the region share important qualities, the most significant of which involve a popular and resounding rejection of a carefully preserved "status quo and those who enforce the status quo,"<sup>9</sup> and a willingness of many to sacrifice life and property to advocate for an alternative system of governance. But Lisa Anderson<sup>10</sup> and others point out the obvious: There's been significant disparity among Arab nations in their reactions to this extraordinary show of public dissent, some of it relatively peaceful and some particularly lethal—some with ideology and some without.

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When considering the uneven record of progress associated with the various Arab revolutions and counter-revolutions, it should seem untenable (at least from our current vantage point) to place these disparate accounts under a common journalistic label. But the framing was set early and often when the peoples of Tunisia and Egypt let loose a comparably clement form of revolution-making and a stirring show of opprobrium. Taken alone (that is, separated from the brutal violence of Libya and Syria and from the intense political crises and lethal confrontations in post-Mubarak Egypt), the results did seem remarkable: Two entrenched leaders (each with a successor anointed, well-moneyed and prepared to assume power) were pressured to step down—one went into exile, the other, unthinkably, to prison.

When the so-called “Jasmine Revolution” or “Dignity Revolution”<sup>11</sup> of Tunisia in December 2010 spread to Egypt, monikers of wider import were bandied about in the Western press, which attempted to frame—or at least describe—the unrest and the symbolism it represented, using terms such as “Arab Awakening,” “Arab Revolts,” “Arab Uprisings” and “Arab Revolutions.” (These terms are for the most part rooted in the Arab historical experience, which goes as far back as the 19th-century Arab upheaval against Ottoman rule.<sup>12</sup>)

Out of the mix, however, the hopeful-sounding and ideologically packed “Arab Spring” prevailed and has managed to retain its wide usage even as the tumult has taken twists and turns that seem to confront the histrionic pitch of the “spring” motif and its overtone as a democratization movement. As it will be explored here, the terminology issues from a Western historical experience (which curiously happens to overlap in time with the Arab-Ottoman angst). Still, the current “spring” coinage spread in the media and among policy-makers so quickly and became so popular that it became a new Arab export, as it will be elaborated below.

The phrase also became and remains a point of contention, as framing debates are known to create. Suspicions and hesitations about the phraseology, for example, followed the expression from the beginning and accelerated when the post-revolution realities began to show in Tunisia, Libya and especially Egypt, the most populous and influential of all Arab countries. Nearly three years after the Tunisian revolution began, the responses have become more pointed and assorted. Joseph Massad of Columbia University wrote that the “dubbing of the uprisings in the Arab world by western governments and media as an ‘Arab Spring’ ... was not simply an arbitrary or even seasonal choice of nomenclature, but rather a US strategy of controlling their aims and goals.”<sup>13</sup> His contention, along with that of other critics of the phrase, will be examined. But the early critiques of the phrase have done little to suppress its usage, and there are reasons for this. But first, some context.

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### *Symbolism and Seasons*

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The dawning of the uproar in the Arab world handed an international audience a rather pat revolution symbol with a near-universal appeal that helped make “Arab Spring” an acceptable, if not persuasive, choice of wording. The symbolism,

embodied in one solitary act, has not gone unnoticed in innumerable published accounts that seem compelled to begin with (or include somewhere) the anecdotal starting point familiar now to most of us: a fruit vendor in Tunisia, Mohammed Bouazizi, who set himself on fire in December 2010 when he was harassed by a low-rung official. Bouazizi was quickly compared to other symbols of personal sacrifice, ranging from Czech student Jan Palach (whose 1969 self-immolation protested Communist rule in his home country)<sup>14</sup> to "the defiance of those patriots" in Boston (the real Tea Party folks) and even the peaceful work and "dignity" of Rosa Parks (per President Barack Obama in a speech given in May of 2011<sup>15</sup>). *The Independent* named Bouazizi among the ten people of 2011 "who changed the world."<sup>16</sup> A CNN editorial pondered optimistically the 26-year-old "fruit seller's legacy to the Arab people."<sup>17</sup> More recently, we are told that Edward Snowden, the former National Security Agency employee turned whistleblower and leaker, apparently was moved by Bouazizi's self-immolation. Snowden's father, in an interview with the *Washington Post*, said that his son was "troubled" by the "suicide of a Tunisian street vendor that helped trigger the Arab Spring protests." He also said, "It was the idea that a man who simply wanted to make a living, who sold fruits and vegetables to support himself and his family, felt so suppressed and humiliated by his government that he would set himself on fire."<sup>18</sup>

Though Bouazizi's deed was an act of frustration rather than a premeditated decision to incite social and political change, it became the emblem of a local movement and unrest that eventually engulfed all of Tunisia and beyond—an unrest that is far from over.

The Tunisian *intifada* (as it was called in some Arabic newspapers) was followed eagerly throughout the Arab world, thanks largely to pan-Arab satellite television channels and social media outlets. We are told that the coverage empowered hundreds of thousands in Egypt to take great risks and gather in famed Tahrir Square (a public space of symbolic value in its own right) armed with nothing more than potent slogans (embedded with weighty cultural meaning in Arabic) directed personally at President Hosni Mubarak, diminishing his stature and raising the voice of the once muted: "Go!" or, more melodically (at least in Arabic), "The people demand the fall of the regime!" This confluence of symbolism, linguistic metaphor—much of it universal—and inspiring human intrepidity offered the right fodder and context for a political narrative and its weight-bearing phraseologies.

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## The Puissance of Naming

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The pastime of naming and contemplating its hermeneutics are hardly modern preoccupations or responses to some media-inflected age. There is, in fact, an ancient (if not primordial) quality to the task. Greek philosophers were on to something when they considered the fundamental nature of naming things and the influence it wields or illusion it leaves. Robbert M. van den Berg wrote in *Proclus' Commentary on the Cratylus in Context*, “From the dialogue [in Plato’s *Cratylus*] it appears that names do not simply mirror reality, but rather reflect the interpretation of reality by the name-giver.”<sup>19</sup>

Signs of the human penchant to name “things” are ubiquitous. We give names to epochs, hurricanes, federal programs (“No Child Left Behind”), weapons systems (“Apache” helicopter, “Hellfire” missiles), and, of course, revolutions and military actions. Gregory C. Sieminsky’s oft-cited report on the “Art of Naming Operations” let readers in on the inner debate and political purposes in naming military engagements. When President George H. W. Bush was about to commit to invading Panama in 1989, for example, the mission was originally called the enigmatic “Blue Spoon.” But urgent, last-minute objections to the name finally led to “Operation Just Cause,” which offered the public a more palatable descriptor to mull over. Sieminsky said quite candidly, “[M]ajor US military operations have been nicknamed with an eye toward shaping domestic and international perceptions about the activities they describe.” The results, however, were not always decorous. Sieminsky mentioned the naming of operations in Vietnam (like the unadorned “Operation Killer”):

When President Johnson heard it, he angrily protested that it did not reflect ‘pacification emphasis.’ General William Westmoreland put it more bluntly when he speculated that ‘President Johnson ... objected ... because the connotation of violence provided a focus for carping war critics.’ To remove their focus, the division commander quickly renamed the operation White Wing.<sup>20</sup>

Lessons learned. So we have been introduced to “Desert Shield,” “Desert Storm,” “Infinite Justice” and “Enduring Freedom,” not to mention “Operation Slim Shady” and other chosen phrases for US military interventions. The NATO enforcement of the no-fly zone during the 2011 Libyan anti-Qaddafi strife was

dubbed "Operation Odyssey Dawn," a rather vague, acid-rock sounding moniker that *Wired* magazine called "Pentagon-Crafted Nonsense."<sup>21</sup>

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### *From Pitchforks to Cedars*

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The convention of naming a major event such as an uprising can carry with it the advantage of helping shape its perception and gain popular acceptance. These designations become part of public language, largely guided by the name-makers and enabled by communication and media sources that construct or define international events for an audience.<sup>22</sup> From the elegies of epic battles of the ancient past to present conflicts and movements, the clout of framing has been an important detail of influencing public responses.

While early 20th century handed us names like "Pitchfork Revolution" (Russia, 1920), more recently we've had a long list of other quaint and interesting monikers. The "Singing Revolution" (Baltics, 1989) took its cue from hundreds of thousands of Estonians who gathered to sing patriotic songs once deemed prohibited by the Soviets. The "Velvet" or "Gentle Revolution" (Czechoslovakia, 1989) was the name of a nonviolent uprising that led to the Communist Party's loss of political control and, eventually, to the split of the country into two: the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Jumping further ahead, the "Bulldozer Revolution" (Serbia, 2000), involving mass protests against president Slobodan Milosevic, took its inspiration from a protestor driving a bulldozer through the front entrance of the Parliamentary building in Belgrade. With the "Rose Revolution" (Georgia, 2003), the flower apparently became the weapon of choice when protestors demanded the resignation of Eduard Shevardnadze, who ruled Georgia for 30 years. As reported by the BBC, Shevardnadze deployed hundreds of soldiers on the streets of Tbilisi. "At that point, student demonstrators decided to give red roses to the soldiers. Many soldiers laid down their guns."<sup>23</sup> And there's been the "Orange Revolution" (Ukraine, 2004), "Tulip Revolution" (Kyrgyzstan, 2005) and "Saffron Revolution" (Burma, 2007).

In the Middle East, the "Cedar Revolution" (Lebanon, 2005) erupted in the wake of the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. Massive protests in Beirut and heavy international pressure ultimately led to the expulsion of Syrian troops from Lebanon and the dissolution of the country's pro-Syrian government. "State Department officials, who have called the fall of the government the cedar revolution—like Ukraine's orange revolution—praised the opposition's efforts," Hassan M. Fattah reported for *The New York Times*.<sup>24</sup>

Meanwhile, the "Blue Revolution" (Kuwait, 2005) sought to win the right of women to vote in parliamentary elections. The "Jasmine Revolution" (apparently used for Syria in 2005 before Tunisia of 2010) described an "uprising" over party elections within the now-endangered Syrian Baath party.<sup>25</sup> The well-known "Green Revolution" (Iran, 2009-10) inspired tens of thousands of Iranian demonstrators to gather in Tehran to dispute the results of Iran's re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. (The mass demonstrations had their own symbolic

martyr, Neda Agha-Soltan, who was killed by sniper fire during a rally and became the “face of Iran’s struggle.”<sup>26</sup>)

It should be said that nomenclature promulgated by Western sources often mirror the indigenous terminologies used in local regional media and thus translated. The closest there’s been to a seamless consonance of terminology across languages was with the Palestinian *Intifada* (1987-93 and 2000-05)—a term transliterated from the Arabic word for “uprising” and widely used by the Western media reporting on the Palestinian resistance to the Israeli occupation.

The word “intifada,” in fact, made its way into English lexical sources.<sup>27</sup> One wonders, though, why the term was not widely used in the Western press for the current upheaval in the Middle East. There are reasons for this, one of them being that the Palestinian intifada was a localized event. But more significant, for an international audience “intifada” lacks the agreeable echo of “spring.” Although “intifada” was used early on in the Arab-language press for the current unrest in the Arab world—and, as Arab journalist Rami Khouri stated, was in fact one of the monikers of choice among Arabs<sup>28</sup>—“Arab Spring” rapidly earned most-favored-phrase status in Western news media and among policy-makers, who for years had exposed the public to discussions about possible democratization in the region.

Back in February 2011, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, speaking at the Human Rights Council in Geneva, implicitly gave her approval to the terminology. “Young people in the Middle East have inspired millions around the world, and we celebrate what some are rightly calling the Arab Spring. This is a hopeful season for all humanity because the cause of human rights and human dignity belongs to us all.”<sup>29</sup>

Before examining the historical and ideological background of “spring,” it is important to note that the usage of “Arab Spring” almost invariably applies to the pan-Arab landscape of the mass protests and strife. News stories about individual nations, like Syria, Yemen, Libya or Egypt require more targeted terminologies to describe the conflict that had happened (or is happening) there. “Arab Spring,” then, is a referent to the widespread unrests and transitions that have moved through the Arab world since December 2010.

## About "Spring": History and Connotation

The usage of "spring" in association with political reform movements goes back to the mid-1800s. Ben Zimmer, language columnist for the *Boston Globe* and former "On Language" columnist for *The New York Times Magazine*, wrote that "*spring* and *springtime* have had a long history of usage to refer to optimistic periods of political transformation, and the same goes for equivalent terms in other European languages." Citing wordsmith Michael Quinion, Zimmer noted that before Prague Spring, historians called the European revolutions of 1848 "springtime of the peoples" or "spring of nations," inspired by the German *Völkerfrühling* and French *printemps des peuples*. From 1848 to 1968 to 2011, the social movements given the "spring" label have shared a hope for liberalization in the face of oppressive regimes."<sup>30</sup>

Apparently, Germans "latched onto the political metaphor of springtime first," Zimmer adds. The political philosopher Ludwig Borne applied the term *Völkerfrühling* (spring of nations) in 1818. Later the phrase was more conveniently translated into English as "the People's Spring-time." When the wave of revolution came upon Germany and other European countries in 1848, *Völkerfrühling* became the nomenclature of choice. Zimmer suggested one reason why:

These springtime labels all owe their rhetorical power to a master metaphor that transfers the qualities of seasonal change to political change. The idea of political seasons is an ancient one: think of Shakespeare's famous opening line in *Richard III*, "Now is the winter of our discontent, made glorious summer by this sun of York."

In its treatment of "spring," the venerable *Oxford English Dictionary* backs up this political trope by proffering a useful working definition: "The initial stages of a period of political liberalization, esp. in a Communist state; the first steps in a programme of political and economic reform." It cites examples, such as the spring of Russia in 1904 (also called "notorious spring"), "Polish Spring" in 1955 and 1982, and the "Seoul Spring" of 1979.

Beyond lexical considerations, academics have looked at *historical* parallels of the Arab Spring. Jonathan Steinberg, professor of modern European history

at the University of Pennsylvania, made an argument in *Foreign Affairs* that the “similarities between the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt last spring and the ones in Europe in 1848 are striking.” Steinberg stated that the political systems erected by the European monarchs in the wake of the 1815 defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte faced collapse in 1848. The chancellor of the Austrian empire, for example, “a symbol of the despised old order,” had to flee from Vienna and the wrath of an angry mob. The old order in Italy, France and the German states also collapsed. “The scene was not unlike that of Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali’s own flight from Tunis 163 years later and the wave of revolutions across the Middle East that followed.”<sup>31</sup> Steinberg ended his piece on a cautionary note: “The lesson from the ‘springtime of nations’ [of 1848] is that it is easier to overthrow the old regime than build a new one. Today, the crowds on the Arab street have no Bismarck to guide them to even limited democracy.”

Political columnist Anne Applebaum made similar observations about 19th-century Europe and the Arab Spring, but added her own caution: “Television creates the illusion of a linear narrative and gives events the semblance of a beginning, a middle and an end. Real life is never like that; 1848 wasn’t like that. It’s useful to ponder the messiness of history from time to time, because it reminds us that the present is really no different.”<sup>32</sup>

Offering more detail, Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya (research associate for Montreal-based Centre for Research on Association), wrote that class dynamics and economic despondency underlie the similarities between the springs of Europe and now the Arab world:

The French Revolution of 1848 illustrates how capital can manipulate the desires of the working class and mainstream society. It also illustrates that the capitalist class was predominately in control of the state, despite the changes in political leadership. Finally, the outcome of 1848 in France illustrates that policies are deliberately fluctuated by organized capital as a means to lull mainstream society. In this context, history could repeat itself in the Arab World.<sup>33</sup>

Still many commentators—perhaps unbeknownst to one another—found as a convenient lexical and political precedent the “Prague Spring” of the 1960s, a rather short-lived effort by Czechoslovakia to pull away from Soviet influence, which ended with a muscular Soviet military intervention. Ben Zimmer offered a typical comparison:

Of course, the “Arab spring” doesn’t actually have to correspond to dates between the vernal equinox and the summer solstice, because *spring* is understood metaphorically and not literally. The obvious model for *Arab spring* is the *Prague spring* of 1968...

The comparison is not so obvious for everyone. Robin Shepherd, in his piece “Talk of the ‘Arab Spring’ just shows the West’s ignorance,” wrote, “The ‘Arab Spring’ is named after the ‘Prague Spring’ which ended not in freedom but in the Soviet invasion. Are we really this stupid?”<sup>34</sup>

But the "Prague Spring" reference is somewhat problematic for another reason. Years before the "spring" usage under focus here had come into fashion, there were other "springs" in the Arab world from which "Arab Spring" may have received more direct inspiration. In 2003, Scott Macleod wondered out loud in *Time* magazine about the possibility of a "Baghdad Spring,"<sup>35</sup> an imagined war-induced democracy movement. As mentioned above, "Damascus Spring" of 2005 made its rounds, and the "Cairo Spring" of 2005-06 saw protesters gather en masse demanding economic reform.<sup>36</sup> Also in 2005, Jackson Diehl posited in the *Washington Post* his take on Lebanon's "Independence Uprising" (a direct translation from Arabic) as being at the "forefront of a Middle East Spring."<sup>37</sup>

It's important to note that, the current deluge aside, "Arab Spring" itself was not conceived in the winter of 2010-11. It had been applied years and, in some cases, decades before. According to a BBC report about the "US Air Raids on Libya" in 1986, Libyan radio apparently let loose a broadcast that attempted to rally citizens to resist the raids, and in the process, the broadcast made the following reference: "An Arab spring is roaring through the hearts. If the cursed machinery tried to fetter you, you have hiding places sharper of the flouting times. You can conceal in your head two tons of creative plans, two tons of well-studied plans for destruction and demolition. Let them taste the explosions morning and evening."<sup>38</sup> It's not clear what the original Arabic phrase was, but BBC's translation team used "spring."

The phrase (slightly altered) appeared in the *Mideast Mirror* of April 28, 1998, in a rather lengthy piece about the relationship between the Arab world and Iran, with the title "Springtime for Arab-Iranian relations." The piece went on to say that within "the Iranian foreign ministry they already refer to Khatami's period in office as the 'Arabs' spring' and note the huge increase in exchanges of messages and envoys with Arab states that has taken place since last August," according to Egyptian writer Fahmi Howeiidi.<sup>39</sup>

George Packer used the term back in 2003 when he wrote about a US State Department effort (dubbed the "Future of Iraq Project") to envisage a post-Saddam Iraq with the hope of some kind of democratization. Deep in his story in *The New York Times*, he cited Thomas Carothers of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, who called the effort "magical realism." Carothers predicted (quite correctly) that the war in Iraq could not remove political forces that hamper the kind of state reformations ostensibly envisioned by the proponents of the invasion. Packer then remarked, "The war, which is vastly unpopular in the Arab world, is far more likely to improve the fortunes of the Islamists, [Carothers] says, and provoke governments to tighten their grip, than to ventilate the region with an Arab spring."<sup>40</sup>

Charles Krauthammer, a conservative columnist, wrote back in March 2005 an editorial about "the Arab Spring of 2005." Krauthammer commented on a George W. Bush press conference in which the then-president apparently had a chance to claim some hand in what Krauthammer foolishly believed was the beginning of a democracy movement in the Arab world, as spurred on by the US invasion of Iraq. He said, "Nonetheless, 1848 did presage the coming of the liberal idea throughout Europe. (By 1871, it had been restored to France, for example.) It marked a turning point from which there was no going back. The Arab Spring of 2005 will be noted by history as a similar turning point for the Arab world."<sup>41</sup> It's hard not to read

Krauthammer's column as a well-worn defense of a neoconservative ideology that supports the idea that Western military power can (or should) be used to help reshape the political and economic landscape of a region, particularly the resource-rich Middle East.

Joshua Keating affirmed in *Foreign Policy* that "the term 'Arab Spring' was originally used, primarily by US conservative commentators, to refer to a short-lived flowering of Middle Eastern democracy movements in 2005."<sup>42</sup> But that "spring," for the most part, is isolated from the current usage. The former was indeed trumpeted as a "spring," but only for the benefit of the Bush administration's military strategy, in which martial might was viewed as a democratization stimulant. The current "spring" usage (now a target of suspicion by many conservatives) is more reflective of a perceived quieter approach to inviting political change in the region by the Obama administration. What we have, then, is the same phrase used separately but with a chasm of contextual meaning between them.

In his January 6, 2011, *Foreign Policy* piece entitled "Obama's Arab Spring,"<sup>43</sup> Marc Lynch wrote, "If these protests continue to spread, both inside of countries and across to other Arab countries, then we really could talk about this being Obama's 'Arab Spring,' only with the extra intensity associated with climate change." And in January 14, 2011, the *Christian Science Monitor's* editorial board asked rather glibly, "Arab spring? Or Arab winter?"<sup>44</sup> In a January 15, 2011 interview with *Der Spiegel*, Mohamed ElBaradei, the Egyptian former director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, said, "Perhaps we are currently experiencing the first signs of an 'Arab Spring' (e.g. similar to the so-called Prague Spring of political liberalization in Czechoslovakia in 1968). Our neighbors are watching Egypt, which has always played a pioneering role. I hope that my country will be one of the first in which freedom and democracy blossom."<sup>45</sup>

It's important to note here that the terminology favored in the Arabic language press was not originally "Arab Spring" (transliterated from the Arabic as *al-Rabi' al-Arabi*). Only later did the Arab-language press include *al-Rabi' al-Arabi*, translating the word from its English origins. Maytha Alhassen lamented the Arabic adaptation of the phrase: "Even esteemed Middle East and North African academics and some Arabic press (which has directly translated it from its English form '*al-rabi' al-'arabi*'), have disappointingly re-appropriated the term." So the Arab press uses the term, but alongside other more indigenous descriptors. Dislike for "Arab Spring" (in Arabic) is in part because the Arabs themselves did not originally refer to the uprisings in their countries as a "spring." Their main phrase of choice was "Arab Revolutions," or *al-Thawrat al-'Arabiya*.

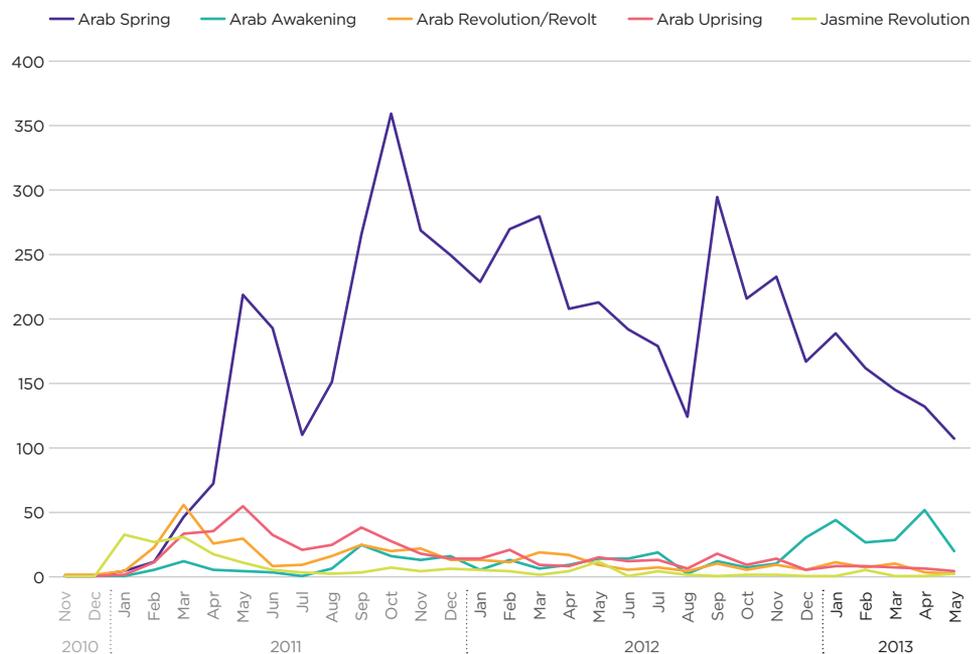
As for the Arabic word for "spring" (*rabi'*), it has similar metaphorical implications as the word in English does: notions of rebirth, renewal, growth and lightness on the heart. It's not a stretch, then, to apply the term in Arabic as a metaphor for political renewal. In other words, the political trope survives the translation. Whether or not it reflects accurately how the Arabs view their context is another matter. Basic archival searches of the international Arabic language newspapers show that both terms (which translate as "Arab Spring" and "Arab Revolutions") are applied, but "revolution" or "revolutions" was favored. (When Morsi was overthrown by the Egyptian military in the summer of 2013, references to "Arab Spring" in the Arabic-

language press took a different turn, as anti-Morsi rhetoric cited that the coup was the “real” Arab Spring and similar iterations, while pro-Morsi advocates considered the coup to be a blow to the Arab Spring and the path to democratization.)

It’s not unusual for terminologies used by the citizens of a region to describe the unrest they are experiencing to be picked up in the Western media transliterated rather than translated. As mentioned previously, *intifada* was the term of choice for the Palestinian uprisings decades ago and was used freely in Western media. Also, the word *glasnost* made its way into the Western press with regard to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s new policy of “openness” in the late 1980s, an attempt to introduce transparency in Soviet governance. The term was often used alongside *perestroika*, that is, a “restructuring” of the Soviet government, which ultimately brought down the nation’s communist system of rule. The term *Solidarność*, referring to the Polish Solidarity Movement, also of the late 1980s, was not used so widely, but it did enter the media’s lexicon. Curiously, Noah Feldman, in 2003, proffered the question in *The New York Times* when he contemplated democracy in the Middle East, “Where is the Muslim *Solidarność*?”<sup>46</sup> Likewise, the phrases “Arab *Glasnost*” (*The Scotsman*, 2005<sup>47</sup>) and “Islam’s *Glasnost*” (John Esposito, 2002<sup>48</sup>) made their fleeting appearances years ago.

For the current unrest, the authority of framing pretty much has spoken. There will be no “*glasnost*” or “revolts” or “awakening.” For now, “spring” remains quite steadily the most reiterated signifier. It is a combination of the European “spring” experience, previous usage attempts in the Middle East, an urgent hope for democratization in the Arab world, and the response to the stirring early days of the revolution, especially in Egypt, that raised the descriptor’s profile higher than its competing monikers. As an unintended result, however, the winsome phrase moved well beyond the Arab world.

### Usage of Arab-Spring-Related Terms Nov 1, 2010–May 25, 2013



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## “Spring” Fever

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In the wake of the Arab upheaval, the “spring” descriptor became the moniker of choice for many popular movements around the world. It’s safe to assume that the adoption of the phrase—used liberally by both the news media and protesters themselves—would not have been so tempting had the name of choice for the Arab unrest been more noisome, as in “revolution,” “uprising,” “revolt” or “*intifada*.”

All speculation aside, the “spring” motif and its political implications made their impressions well beyond the region. About China, *Bloomberg BusinessWeek* reported, in a piece entitled “Leaders in Beijing Feared Arab Spring Could Infect China,” that “Shortly after a Tunisian fruit vendor set himself on fire in 2010, some senior Chinese leaders began asking if the rebellions that followed throughout the Arab world could ignite similar uprisings in China, according to US diplomatic and intelligence reports.”<sup>49</sup> Jonathan Polack dissected the China-Arab Spring tension in some detail. He wrote that the “Communist Party leadership sees highly unsettling parallels between the Arab Spring and pressures for political change within China.”<sup>50</sup>

Barry Neild, in *Global Post*, wrote, “Beijing is currently stepping up action nationwide against dissent that it fears may develop into a ‘Jasmine revolution’ echoing the Arab Spring.”<sup>51</sup> James Fallows wrote in *The Atlantic*, “Something big is happening in China, and it started soon after the onset of the ‘Arab Spring’ demonstrations and regime changes first in Tunisia and then in Egypt: the most serious and widespread wave of repression since the Tiananmen Square crackdowns 22 years ago.”<sup>52</sup> Apparently, the Chinese leadership was keen to watch closely the reaction of Muslim communities in China’s Xinjiang, Qinghai, Gansu and Ningxia provinces, according to the current-affairs magazine covering the Asia-Pacific region, *The Diplomat*, in an article “Chinese Muslims and Arab Spring.”<sup>53</sup>

As for troubled Myanmar (or Burma), David I. Steinberg explored in *Asia Times* the connection between the Arab Spring and the democracy movement in the Southeast Asian country. He commented that the “Myanmar military understood the lessons from the Middle East: if the leadership refuses to reform, society may force change. It may not be the revolution that some have desired, but it does bring the possibility of positive change in Myanmar.”<sup>54</sup> In a similar light, Thomas Carothers asked, “Has the Arab Spring impacted the developments in Burma?”

While pointing out differences between the Arab Spring and Burma’s tensions, Carothers reported that one “does hear in the country that the Arab Spring rattled the Burmese generals and also fueled the softliners’ determination to move ahead with reforms in an attempt to head off a potential explosion from below.”<sup>55</sup>

The Arab Spring effect or impact, as it has been called,<sup>56</sup> has moved into Europe as well. Uri Friedman posted in *The Atlantic*, “As protests against Spain’s economic crisis swell in Madrid’s Puerta del Sol plaza this week ahead of local elections, observers are posing a question: Has the Arab Spring come to Spain?”<sup>57</sup> An *Asia Times* headline boldly and sensationally touted, “The Arab spring conquers Iberia.”<sup>58</sup>

The tense and clamorous demonstrations in many cities in Turkey (most notably in Istanbul’s famed Taksim Gezi park) in May and June of 2013 sparked a spirited debate whether to call the strife “Turkish Spring.” Richard Seymour, writing for *The Guardian*, advocated that the Istanbul park protests will “sow the seeds of a Turkish spring.”<sup>59</sup> Likewise, the temptation to attach the spring descriptor to Brazil’s urban unrest in June 2013 was too overwhelming for both advocacy and mainstream media outlets. ABC News, for example, conveniently offered its online readers a primer of Brazil’s massive protests (“Brazilian Spring: An Explainer”).<sup>60</sup>

When Pope Benedict XVI announced his rather stunning resignation early in 2013, Hans Kung wrote in *The New York Times*, “The Arab Spring has shaken a whole series of autocratic regimes. With the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI, might not something like that be possible in the Roman Catholic Church as well—a Vatican Spring?”<sup>61</sup>

Closer to home, many have drawn associations between the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States and the Arab Spring (the “Occupy” brand powerful in its own right). Mitchell Hartman, of American Public Media’s “Marketplace,” explored the question, “Did the Arab Spring spark the ‘Occupy’ movement?” Hartman said, “Still, Occupiers tell me it was watching the Arab rebellions on YouTube that got them off their couches and computers, and into the streets.”<sup>62</sup>

Anne-Marie Slaughter, political scientist at Princeton University, came to a comparable conclusion. In *The New York Times*, she wrote,

But from the very beginning the movement has attracted extensive coverage from Al Jazeera and other Middle Eastern news outlets and Twitter users—probably because they recognize the forces that are reshaping politics across their region. Indeed, the twin drivers of America’s nascent protest movement against the financial sector are injustice and invisibility, the very grievances that drove the Arab Spring.<sup>63</sup>

Douglas Rushkoff wrote on CNN.com, “Think Occupy Wall St. is a phase? You don’t get it”:

Like the spokesmen for Arab dictators feigning bewilderment over protesters’ demands, mainstream television news reporters finally training

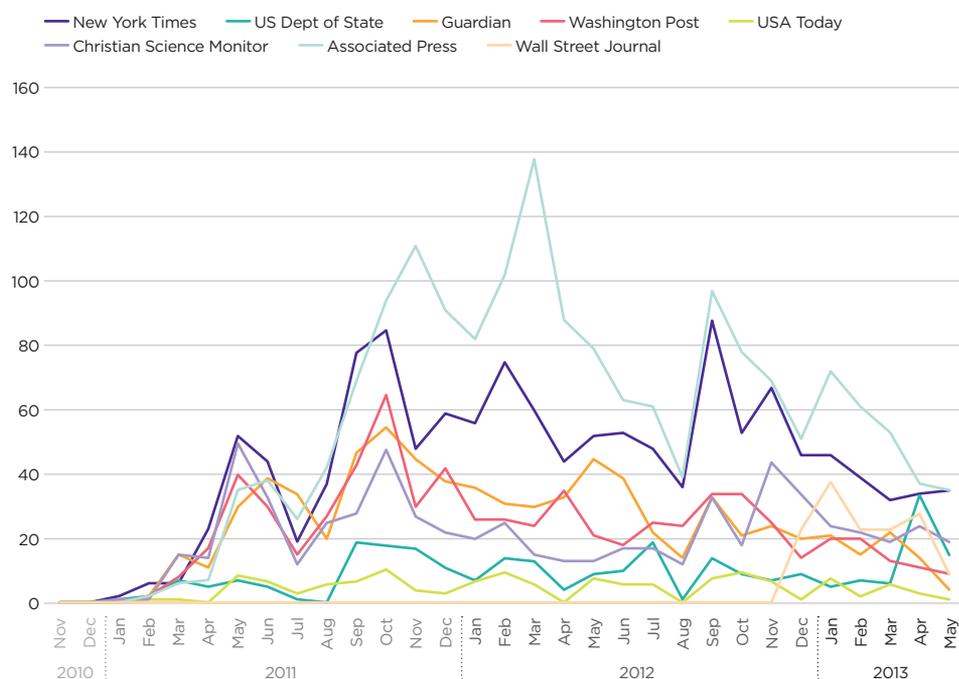
their attention on the growing Occupy Wall Street protest movement seem determined to cast it as the random, silly blather of an ungrateful and lazy generation of weirdos.<sup>64</sup>

In what seems to be an act of reciprocity, if not camaraderie, Arab protestors were quite aware of the Occupy movements. Demonstrators in Tahrir Square had advice for their American compatriots. The *Global Post* reported that some “stalwarts of the Arab Spring” offered tips to Occupy demonstrators about how to keep up the pressure. One Egyptian protestor had this advice: “Whenever you occupy a place and are sitting in one spot for many hours, and not getting a response from the government, you have to keep yourself entertained,” not to mention well-fed with plenty of snacks.<sup>65</sup>

More parochially, news organizations were quick to notice the resemblance between the Arab Spring and the labor union protests in Wisconsin early in 2011. “The democratic uprisings in the Middle East are an obvious example, as were the recent protests in Spain. We saw strikes in Wisconsin in the United States supported by Egyptian demonstrators.”<sup>66</sup> Brian Williams, host of NBC’s *Nightly News*, trumpeted that from “the Mideast to the American Midwest tonight, people are rising up.”<sup>67</sup> Diane Sawyer of ABC News had something similar to say: “One [state] lawmaker looked out at the crowds gathered in the Wisconsin capital today and said it’s like Cairo moved to Madison.”<sup>68</sup>

South of Wisconsin, when Chicago public-school teachers went on strike in the fall of 2012, Stacy Davis Gates, the political director of the Chicago Teachers Union, spoke on Al Sharpton’s radio show and proffered that “this is sort of like

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an Arab Spring here in Chicago right now."<sup>69</sup> And with regard to the mighty and animated national debate about immigration, an editorial in *The New York Times* called the push to reform immigration laws in the United States as some kind of "Immigration Spring."<sup>70</sup>

Back to the Middle East. The Israeli response to the Arab Spring movements was at best cautious, but only with regard to geopolitical concerns about the shape of some new Arab governance. Daniel L. Byman, for example, outlined the reasons for the "frosty response" of the Israelis to the Arab Spring.<sup>71</sup>

This frosty reception, however, did not stop the "spring" descriptor from creeping into Israeli life and streets. The on-and-off Israeli protests against high cost of housing, which began in the summer of 2011, was often directly likened to the "Arab Spring": "Has the Arab Spring arrived in Israel" (*Global Post*<sup>72</sup> and Al Jazeera English<sup>73</sup>); "Israel's Arab Spring?" (Huffington Post<sup>74</sup>) "After the Arab Spring, Israel Gets Its Own Protest Movement" (*Atlantic Monthly*<sup>75</sup>); "'Israeli awakening' follows model of 'Arab spring'" (MSNBC<sup>76</sup>). Steven Cook, for the Council on Foreign Relations, wondered, "Tahrir in Tel Aviv?":

In case you haven't heard, the Middle Eastern uprisings have made their way to Israel. Over last weekend some pundits (including a few from the region) declared that the example of Arab people power had encouraged Israelis to go out and demonstrate against tyranny. Midan Tahrir comes to Kikar Rabin sort of thing.<sup>77</sup>

Cook reported that Israeli protesters carried banners that quite extraordinarily read, "Walk like an Egyptian," and others that demanded Israeli politicians to "*Irbal*" (or "Leave") actually written in Arabic, just as Egyptians had done in Cairo for Mubarak. The unexpected term "Israeli Spring" made its rounds in *The Economist*,<sup>78</sup> *Foreign Policy*,<sup>79</sup> *The Nation*,<sup>80</sup> *The Atlantic Monthly*,<sup>81</sup> *The Jerusalem Post*<sup>82</sup> and others. The word "spring" would not have been attached to the Israeli protest movement had it not been for the Arab Spring movements and moniker. Daniel Bertrand Monk and Daniel Levine wrote in *Foreign Policy* that the comparison between the movements among the Arabs and their Israeli counterparts is hardly coincidental:

When young Israeli professionals erected a tent city on Tel Aviv's Rothschild Boulevard in protest against the Netanyahu government's indifference to an affordable-housing crisis in Israel, they self-consciously modeled their efforts on the popular revolutions commonly (if not uncontroversially) referred to as "the Arab Spring." Handmade signs reading "Rothschild, Corner of Tahrir" invited passersby to compare this "Israeli Spring" to the events in Cairo.<sup>83</sup>

Rafael D. Frankel, in *The Atlantic*, wrote, "By virtue of the sheer numbers and anger at the status quo, the protest in some ways resembles those of the Arab Spring. In their more honest moments, Israelis, like Miral Lividinski, admit that the courage of their Arab neighbors was an 'inspiration.'"<sup>84</sup> Naftali Kaminski, in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, wrote a piece with the

unlikely heading, “How Israel’s democracy might be revitalized from the Arab Spring.”<sup>85</sup> A torrent of other comparisons hit the summer of 2011. Such as:

- Russia Today: “On July 25, 30,000 people marched through Tel-Aviv demanding a decrease in housing prices. Some of them were carrying banners reading ‘Mubarak. Assad. Netanyahu.’”<sup>86</sup>
- Online magazine +972: Independent reporting and commentary from Israel and Palestine: “The iconic stage background image at the first major social justice demonstration in Tel Aviv, on July 23, was of Tahrir Square, with the headline in Hebrew: ‘This is the beginning of a social revolution.’ ... Tahrir was unabashedly celebrated as a source of inspiration.”<sup>87</sup>
- Huffington Post: “And just as is the case for each Arab country, Israel-watchers are now wondering if Israel’s government will fall.”<sup>88</sup>

Besides the street protests, there’s been a singular act that mirrored the narrative of the starting point of the Arab Spring. A 57-year-old Israeli protester, Moshe Silman, set himself on fire during a July 15, 2012 rally in Tel Aviv, marking the one-year anniversary of the Israeli protest movement. Stating the obvious, the *New York Daily News* noted, “Outside of Israel, the most famous recent case of self-immolation took place in Tunisia, where fruit-seller Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire in December 2010, helping set off the country’s uprising—and with it, the Arab Spring.”<sup>89</sup> Silman died days after the incident. *The New York Times* (and many other news organizations) could not resist pointing out the likeness: “Many have compared Mr. Silman to the fruit vendor in Tunisia whose self-immolation in January 2011 [sic] touched off the Arab Spring uprisings that have changed the geopolitics of the entire Middle East.”<sup>90</sup>

The nature of political cross-inspiration (a movement in one part of the world empowering citizens of another to do the same) seems predicated on comparable frustrations and angst. As far as a descriptor goes, the “spring” of the Arab experience became ripe for distribution. The notions of renewal, rebirth and salubrious replenishment implicit in “spring” made it much more palatable. There’s little doubt that the “Arab Spring,” as currently envisaged, had struck an international chord. Immanuel Wallerstein, a professor of sociology at Yale University, commented on the Arab Spring effect beyond the Arab world:

Indeed, on the contrary, the current [of a global movement] is gaining force around the world—from Hong Kong to Athens to Madrid to Santiago to Johannesburg to New York. This is not solely the result of the Arab Spring, since the seeds and even the revolts elsewhere predated December 2010. But the fact that it has occurred so dramatically in the Arab world, once thought relatively unresponsive to such a current, has added considerable momentum to the growing world movement.<sup>91</sup>

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## Objections to “Arab Spring”

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If speed and ubiquity are reliable guides, then it would seem that “Arab Spring” was welcomed without much resistance. This, of course, is untrue. The companionable phrase elicited robust objections in the press and the academy. Two main streams carried the disapprovals along, each one guided by a well-worn suspicion. The popular objections to the “Arab Spring” terminology are constructed around a couple of key arguments: 1) The fear of “Islamists” assuming more political authority, which we are led to believe supposedly assumes that democracy movements would be severely hampered. As such, “Arab Spring,” in the minds of these detractors, is simply too cheerful of a term to apply to a revolution that may usher in “Islamist” rule; and 2) “Arab Spring” is an attempt to frame the Arab revolts according to Western optimistic (utilitarian?) hopes for the region, following an old Orientalist pattern, with disregard for the real nature of the uprisings and its various parts and motivations.

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### *Fear of “Islamists” and “Islamism”*

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One popular complaint aimed at “Arab Spring” (with or without the quote marks) centers on the fear that the unrest in the Arab world will enable “Islamists” to game the transitions in order to take power they were never capable of seizing while under the rule of despots now out of power—an effect that is hardly “spring”-like. The authority they can potentially commandeer could even be enabled through an electoral process set in place by a democracy movement, as has been shown to have happened in Algeria, when elections in December of 1991 resulted in victory for the Islamic Salvation Front (known by the French acronym FIS). However, in January 1992, the Algerian election results were cancelled and a bloody civil war ensued. Also, in Gaza, the 2006 elections resulted in Hamas’s ascent to power, thus effectively leaving two political systems in the Palestinian territories: one in the West Bank and one in Gaza.

In the wake of the Arab Spring so far, the Islamist Nahda Party of Tunisia has won considerable representation in the country’s parliamentary elections, and Egypt’s

newly elected president, Mohamed Morsi, has a known Muslim Brotherhood pedigree. Both election results added fuel to the fear that opportunists will game the tumult for some political advantage.

Not all observers of the Middle East value the prescience in the objection. Rather, the “Islamism” juggernaut is usually referenced in a mercilessly decontextualized form, especially in popular journalism. The mere mention of the term, coupled with the narrative generated by the vague “war on terror,” inspires an unparsed sense of threat and implies precisely what Islamist movements are not, never have been, and never will be: alike.

Nonetheless, the fear-Islamists contention has proliferated. *The Economist*, *Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, Huffington Post, *Euronews* and a plethora of other news outlets, books and blogs have published articles that sound the Islamist alarm, some with counterpoints and some without.<sup>92</sup> For example, foreign affairs editor at the *Guardian*, Peter Beaumont, in his piece, “Political Islam poised to dominate the new world bequeathed by Arab spring,” introduces a balanced look at Islamist takeover theories by giving voice to a variety of views on the subject.<sup>93</sup>

At times, commentators espousing their opposition to “Arab Spring” were seemingly driven by an ideology of their own. Michael Totten, in the online journal *World Affairs*, offered one such template.<sup>94</sup> In his piece, part of a series called “Arab Spring or Islamist Winter?” Totten cautioned readers about the possibility that the unrest will lead to another authoritarian state, an Islamist despotism. Then he said that Tunisia “might be okay.” Part of his proof is: “Most Tunisian women in the cities eschew the headscarf and dress like Europeans. Alcohol is widely available and consumed more by locals than tourists.” While this may be true, it lacked serious analysis and historical insight. He offered more of the same: “The capital Tunis is visibly less Islamicized—and by an enormous margin—than any Arab city in the world aside from Beirut, which is almost half Christian.” His judgment about a safe Muslim space seemed predicated on the idea that the less Muslim, or Islamic, a Muslim country appears, the better its future bodes. Second, what Totten failed to mention is that the headscarf for decades was, in fact, banned in Tunisia, particularly under the rule of President Habib Bourgiba (1957-87). Then the ban was loosened by Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, only to be tightened again. What this means in practical terms is that a Tunisian woman who *chooses* to wear a headscarf is limited as to where she may be employed, which school she can attend, what public space she may enter, and other restrictions that are, in fact, an anathema to the idea of democratic reform. So what Totten is applauding is the remnant of tyranny and not the promise of democratic reform or a citizen’s right to choice. Totten recovered, however: “Even if the Arab Spring ends badly everywhere—though I’m not saying it will—there’s still an upside for those who take the long view. The Middle East desperately needs shaking up. The status quo is miserable for the millions who suffocate beneath it and dangerous for those abroad wounded and killed by what it exports.”

Taking a close and critical look at “Islamist” or “Islamism” terminology is better suited for a separate and more elaborate treatment. But for now, it’s important to know—given the popularity of fear-Islamism arguments against “Arab Spring”—

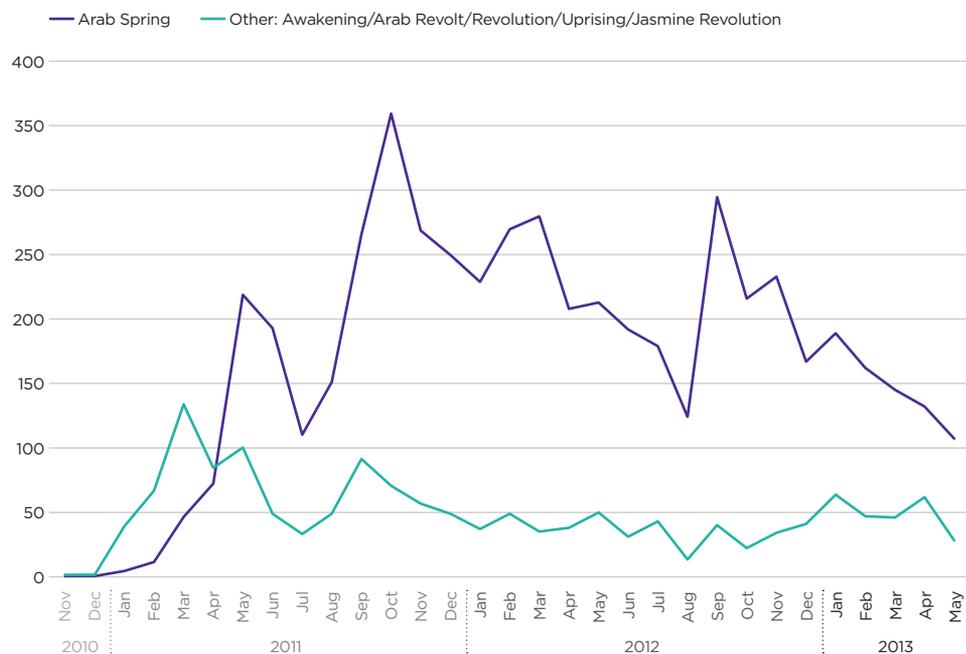
that Islamism is hardly a homogenous phenomenon, though one would never guess it by reading popular and even academic accounts. Maha Azzam, fellow at the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Chatham House, wrote:

The issue of Islamism has been a prominent feature of the politics of the Middle East and a major international security concern for over three decades. In general, Islamism is a term that has been used to describe two very different trends: first, the non-violent quest for an Islamic-friendly society based on the ‘principles of Islam,’ which can involve a more liberal application of Islamic teachings and tradition or a more strict interpretation. Second, Islamism is also associated with violent extremism, most notably that of Al Qaeda in the promotion of terrorism ... However, it is important to note that the Arab Spring has further demonstrated the marginalisation of Al Qaeda’s ideological and political appeal, although it still represents a global terrorist threat.<sup>95</sup>

Recently, Lindsay Benstead and colleagues, in *Foreign Affairs*, proffered research that suggested, “International observers are increasingly cynical about the prospects of democracy, arguing that the Arab Spring has turned into an Islamist winter. This bleak prognosis is based on an incomplete understanding of the complex issues at hand and unrealistic expectations of a rapid, smooth transition.”<sup>96</sup>

Taking a more candid approach, the Brookings Institute’s Shadi Hamid, writing also in *Foreign Affairs*, said in 2011, “If truly democratic governments form in their wake [of the Arab Spring], they are likely to include significant representation of mainstream Islamist groups. Like it or not, the United States will have to learn to live with political Islam.”<sup>97</sup> If prescience is to be found

### Use of Arab Spring vs Other Terms Nov 1, 2010–May 25, 2013



in this debate, then it is in Hamid's point. One of the first official acts of US Secretary of State John Kerry was to visit President Mohamed Morsi and commit significant financial aid to Egypt. (It's not exactly clear how Morsi's removal from power and arrest in the summer of 2013 will affect the aid.)

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### *Neo-Imperialism?*

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The other line of dissatisfaction with "Arab Spring" is not a countervailing argument per se; rather, its objections are moved in part by a post-colonialism dialect. Several authors (journalists, activists and/or academics) have serious misgivings about the "Arab Spring" moniker and its ideological referent on neo-imperialistic grounds, and some do not mince words. For one, Marion Dixon, of Cornell University, saw an "imperial reach" in hijacking an Arab narrative by way of terminology and "internationally legitimated knowledge production" (essentially creating a narrow band of experts that monopolize the account), thus promoting an "invisible" neo-liberal agenda. At the center of this effort, according to Dixon, are Western governments defining the Arab Spring in their image:

This effort of claiming and co-opting is funneled squarely to prop up the neoliberal agenda that has brought to the region much of what the movements have risen to reject—a revolving door between wealthy businessmen and ruling party members, monopolistic and oligopolistic economies, rising food and housing prices, slashed wages ... and protections for workers and farmers, dropping standards of living with weakened public welfare programmes, heightened restriction of rights and liberties ('reign of terror'—to name a few resulting societal ills.<sup>98</sup>

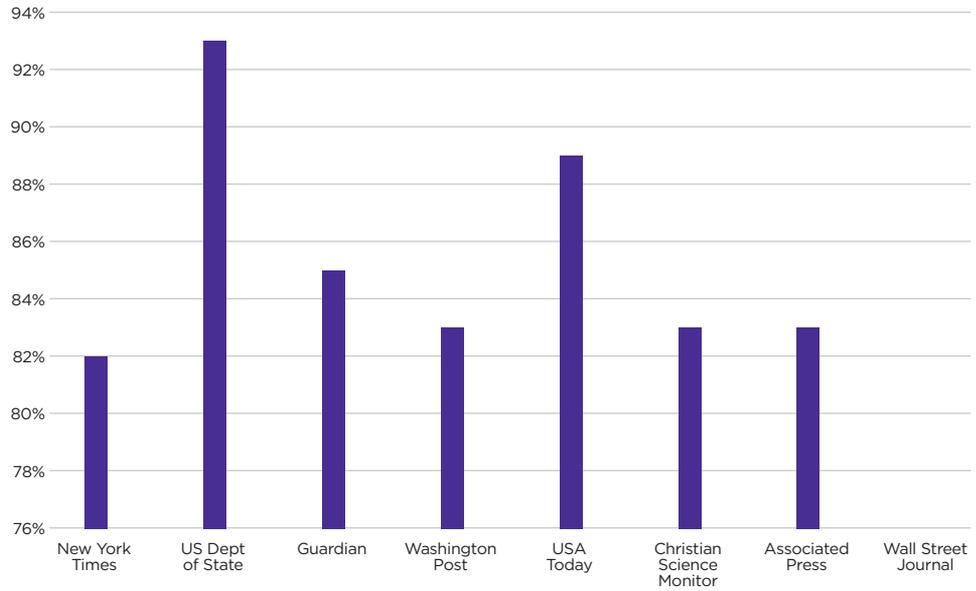
As mentioned above, Joseph Massad, professor of modern Arab politics and intellectual history at Columbia University, saw the neoliberal-sounding "Arab Spring" as a misnomer of a movement that, in fact, is a *rejection* of a neo-liberal agenda.

[T]he uprisings in the Arab world have been protesting the effects of neoliberalism which increased impoverishment of the poor and middle classes and the disappearance of the social net that protected some of them in previous decades, censorship, and control of the media, the unpopular alliances with Israel by the regimes as well as US sponsorship and training of these repressive Arab dictatorships in most Arab countries, and lack of official solidarity with the Palestinian struggle, and the continued lack of accountability and representativity.<sup>99</sup>

Massad advanced his contention by drawing attention to the great disparity between the Prague Spring and the current "spring" experience in the Middle East. The Czech experience involved an invitation to liberalism and disconnection from the Soviet orbit. The Arab uprisings, on the other hand, sought (perhaps as a subtext) a reconnection "with other Arabs and ending the isolationism of country-specific nationalisms that the dictators promoted and which separated Arabs from one another in their struggles for democracy."

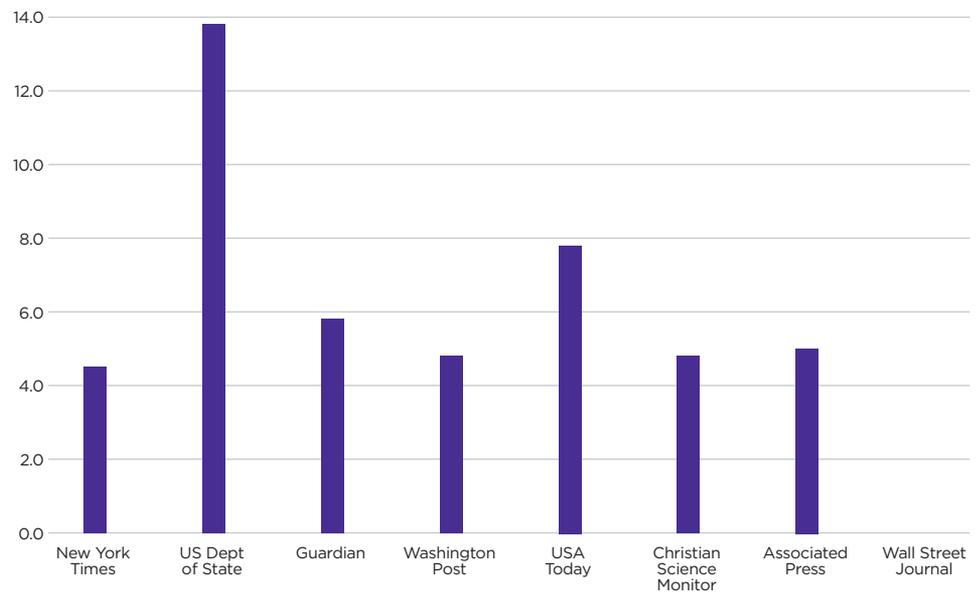
**Ratio: Percentage use of "Positive Terms" vs Others\***  
**Nov 1, 2010–May 25, 2013**

\*Terms 'Arab Spring' or 'Arab Awakening' as a total of all terms used (vs 'Arab Revolt/Revolution/Uprising or Jasmine Revolution')



**Ratio: Use of "Positive Terms" vs Others\***  
**Nov 1, 2010–May 25, 2013**

\*Ratio of use of terms 'Arab Spring' or 'Arab Awakening' to terms 'Arab Revolt/Revolution/Uprising or Jasmine Revolution'



Marc Lynch lamented the growth of previous neo-liberal reform in Egypt. He wrote in *Foreign Policy*:

The previous decade saw neoliberal economic reforms [in Egypt] that privatized industries to the benefit of a small number of well-connected elites and produced impressive rates of GDP growth. But, as ruthlessly dissected by Arab economists like Egypt's Galal Amin, the chasm between the rich and poor grew and few meaningful jobs awaited a massive youth bulge. For many leftist activists, the uprisings were a direct rejection of this neoliberalism—and those ideas and the technocrats who advanced them have likely been driven from power for the foreseeable future.<sup>100</sup>

The popular and often thoughtful online journal *Jadaliyya* ran a point-counterpoint argument about the perceived imperial intrusion implicit in the framing of “Arab Spring.” Rabab El-Mahdi, an assistant professor of political science at the American University in Cairo, in her piece “Orientalising the Egyptian Uprising,” contended that the Western framing of the Egyptian uprisings is not very different than the “fundamental pillars” of the past Orientalist casting of Arabs as a kind of “othering;” that is, casting Arabs as essentially “different.”<sup>101</sup>

Well-known Arab journalist Rami Khouri, director of the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut, banished the phrase “Arab Spring” from his personal lexicon. In the Lebanese newspaper *Daily Star*, Rami's dislike of the term is unmasked in an article bluntly entitled “Drop the Orientalist term ‘Arab Spring.’” He rather emphatically “banished” the phrase from his own writing and urged other journalists follow suit.

[T]his term is not used at all by those brave men and women who have been on the streets demonstrating and dying for seven months now. Every time I run into a Tunisian, Egyptian, Libyan, Syrian, Bahraini or Yemeni, I ask them how they refer to their own political actions. Their answer is an almost universal, “Revolution” (or *thawra*, in Arabic). And when they refer to the collective activities of Arabs across the region, they often use the plural “revolutions” (or *thawrat*).<sup>102</sup>

Khouri also complained of a passive quality in the meaning of “spring.” The terms that Arabs used “epitomize activism, will, empowerment, determination and agency,” while the “spring” convention fails to capture “the intensity and depth of the courage that ordinary men and women summon” when confronting state security services.<sup>103</sup> Maytha Alhassen, fellow in American studies and ethnicity at the University of Southern California, writing in the Huffington Post, agreed that “Arab Spring” does not convey the “revolution” part of the unrest in the Arab world. She added:

What many who fail to investigate the majority of Arab people's more popular nomenclature, as will be discussed, miss by using an empty phrase like “Arab Spring” is that these movements are more than just a “democratic blooming”—they are what democracy is predicated on, a revolutionary demand for recognizing their right to human dignity.”<sup>104</sup>

We should mention, as well, an interesting discomfort with "Arab Spring" based on the perspective of global activism. From this perch, the Arab unrest is viewed as potentially igniting a more worldwide response to globalism and a rejection of transnational corporate hegemony—a possibility unsupported by the parochial-sounding "Arab" spring. J. A. Myerson, an independent journalist involved in the media and labor outreach committees at Occupy Wall Street, offered a scathing and ideologically laced critique of "Arab Spring." The label, according to Myerson, hampers the potential of a "global protests' solidarity." He insisted "Arab Spring" is not only inaccurate, but is "also counterrevolutionary." He then said:

Recently, as "the streets of Madrid and Barcelona filled again," the press' stubbornness on the naming point resulted in stupid headlines like The Atlantic Wire's "Has the Arab Spring Come to Spain?" and *Asia Times'* "The Arab Spring conquers Iberia." Who, in 1968, could have published the headline, "The Prague Spring Reaches Tokyo," and not been looked at askance by observers of world affairs? Obviously "The Arab Spring" doesn't cover the scope of what it sets to describe ... A broader signifier is in order.<sup>105</sup>

Echoing Myerson's hope, Koenraad Bogaert (researcher at the Middle East and North Africa Research Group) wrote:

The global dimension of the Arab Spring has nothing to do with some kind of "Arab awakening." The Arab people weren't asleep at all during the past decade... In fact, we should see it the other way around. Arab protesters have awakened OWS [Occupy Wall Street movement] and the *indignados*. They restarted what the anti-globalization movement couldn't carry through. As such, what started in Tunisia has now created space on a global scale to question and contest neoliberal hegemony.<sup>106</sup>

The unease with "Arab Spring" is tethered to worries about some political aftermath. Those who fear Islamism warn that extremism will emerge through the sponsorship of democratic electoral processes, and others are apprehensive about the possible insertion of certain economic paradigms of the West that will empower in the Middle East a new and bloated corporate class that can be as throttling as despotism. In either scenario, there's little doubt about the presence of political overtones embedded in "spring." Stephen R. Grand wrote in "Democratization 101: Historical Lessons for the Arab Spring,"

More than anything else, the Arab Spring has been about a yearning for democracy. A number of Arab states have succeeded in taking a first step toward democratization, either by overthrowing an autocratic regime or by forcing it to start to change. But democratization is not easy, and it is not quick. To glimpse where the politics of the Middle East may travel, the best guide is the experience of other regions of the world that have gone down the path of democratic reform.

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Senior fellow at Brookings Bruce Jones, however, reminds readers of an inconsistency. In his essay “The International Order and the Emerging Powers Implications of the Arab Awakening,” Jones wrote:

Western commentators who termed this an “Arab Spring” invoked the move of Eastern Europe’s former Soviet satellites into the Western fold, politically and institutionally; but there, the United States and the West had been allied to the protesters for decades and had stood in firm opposition to the regimes. Across the Arab world, by contrast, the West—the United States most of all—is tainted by its close association with the region’s autocratic regimes. At the same time, America’s reaction to events in Cairo created a deep chill in US relations with Gulf states, further constraining American influence.<sup>107</sup>

The “big think” of the Arab Spring—as Marc Lynch described it—on the ground and detached from theory is a contested matter. Does it pose a threat? Is it the demise of Arab exceptionalism? Is it another thread of neo-imperialist thought and the “othering” of the Arab people? Lynch wrote, “There is no single Arab idea about what has happened. To many young activists, it is a revolution that will not stop until it has swept away every remnant of the old order. To worried elites, it represents a protest movement to be met with limited economic and political reforms. Some see a great Islamic Awakening, while others argue for an emerging cosmopolitan, secular, democratic generation of engaged citizens.”<sup>108</sup>

These are interesting propositions and rebuttals. But there’s another facet to the “spring” phenomenon that requires a look, and it pivots on the perceived role—whether exaggerated or substantiated—of the media in the revolutions. It seems pretty straightforward, but as it turns out, the complexity and the heat of the debate transcend terminology.

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## Revolution 2.0

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One of the surreal aspects of the mass gatherings in Cairo's Tahrir Square early in 2011 was the fact that besides holding banners demanding the fall of Mubarak, demonstrators carried signs that acknowledged and offered explicit thanks to media corporations, namely Al Jazeera, Twitter and Facebook. Examining the role of news media (especially broadcast) in popular revolts is an expected and valuable academic pursuit. In his book *The Whole World Is Watching*, media scholar Todd Gitlin observed that the American media coverage of the 1960s urban unrest influenced recruitment to the protest movements. He also wrote that by "the second half of the decade, activists, counter-activists and politicians of varying stripes seemed to have grown aware that events were in a sense doubled, cursed or enchanted by auras of media representation."<sup>109</sup>

As such, with nearly every major event in the world, there are two narratives. One concerns the actual event, while the other delves into how the event was covered by news media. With the coverage of the current Arab unrest, however, there's additional complexity. The coverage not only widened the reach of important terminologies, but it also stimulated a robust and even contentious examination of the media's "role" in the unrest. The debate was particularly vigorous because, in part, the breadth and speed with which nomenclature and narratives spread have never before been so seamless and nearly unlimited. If, indeed, there's a perfect storm for the "Arab Spring" descriptor and its precarious future as a revolution and nation-building enterprise, as US Secretary of State Clinton had once observed, there's also a perfect storm for catchphrase distillation proctored by the Internet and new media. A seminal and urgent debate pivoted on two main areas: First, just how much should be attributed to media technology as an enabler of not only the framing of revolutions, but the revolutions themselves? The second aspect concerns the coverage of the Arab Spring drawing unprecedented international attention to Arab-based media.

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### *Techno-bravery?*

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The terms "Facebook Revolution" and "Twitter Revolution" were rolled out early in the revolutions, particularly with regard to Egypt. Wael Ghonim, a young

Egyptian marketing executive for Google based in Cairo, publically articulated his gushing gratitude to social media and the Internet more generally. As quoted in Huffington Post, Ghonim said:

I want to meet Mark Zuckerberg one day and thank him ... I'm talking on behalf of Egypt ... This revolution started online. This revolution started on Facebook. This revolution started ... in June 2010 when hundreds of thousands of Egyptians started collaborating content. We would post a video on Facebook that would be shared by 60,000 people on their walls within a few hours. I've always said that if you want to liberate a society, just give them the Internet.<sup>110</sup>

In a CNN interview, Ghonim went further: "If you want a free society, just give them Internet access." Naïve sounding as it may be, the notion had appeal. Before the "Arab Spring" and Ghonim's elegy, "Twitter revolution" was used during popular uprising in Moldova in the spring of 2009.<sup>111</sup> Similarly Iran's "green revolution" was coined the "Twitter Revolution," as Noam Cohen noted in *The New York Times*.<sup>112</sup> "Labeling such seemingly spontaneous antigovernment demonstrations a 'Twitter Revolution' has already become something of a cliché."<sup>113</sup>

It is undeniable that new media and satellite channels have shown the capacity to help spread the kind of information that empowers masses to gather and demonstrate. When Al Jazeera broadcasted the fall of Tunisia's Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, Egyptians saw that "even the worst tyrants could be toppled. It shattered the wall of fear. That is why hundreds of thousands of Egyptians came into the streets."<sup>114</sup>

Just how much influence should be attributed to the media? Were the conclusions about the role of new media in the unrest supported by Internet penetration rates in Egypt and usage of Facebook and Twitter? Statistics were not front and center in the debate that ensued over this matter. There was a more fundamental, even anthropological, concern about exaggerating the role of technology in human life and achievement, and a discounting of human bravery against the odds. When phrases such as "Facebook Revolution" gained traction, the response was swift.

Rabab El-Mahdi, in her piece "Orientalising the Egyptian Uprising," saw an ideological bent in the overemphasis of media technology and its role in the revolutions. She said,

In the case of Egypt, the recent uprising is constructed as a youth, non-violent revolution in which social media (especially Facebook and Twitter) are champions. The underlying message here is that these "middle-class" educated youth (read: modern) are not "terrorists," they hold the same values as "us" (the democratic West), and finally use the same tools (Facebook and Twitter) that "we" invented and use in our daily lives.<sup>115</sup>

Ulises Mejias, professor of new media at the State University of New York at Oswego, pointed out the absurdity of referring to "events in Iran, Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere as the Twitter Revolution, the Facebook Revolution, and so on. What we call things, the names we use to identify them, has incredible symbolic

power, and I, for one, refuse to associate corporate brands with struggles for human dignity.”<sup>116</sup> Similarly, Evgeny Morozof wrote in *Foreign Affairs*:

It is wrong to assess the political power of the Internet solely based on its contribution to social mobilization: We should also consider how it empowers the government via surveillance, how it disempowers citizens via entertainment, how it transforms the nature of dissent by shifting it into a more virtual realm, how it enables governments to produce better and more effective propaganda, and so forth. All of this might decrease the likelihood that the revolutionary situation like the one in Tunisia actually happens—even if the Internet might be of tremendous help in social mobilization.<sup>117</sup>

Scott McLemee, intellectual affairs columnist for *Inside Higher Ed*, gathered early responses to the idea of social media as a prime mover.<sup>118</sup> Also reporting on how social media monikers of the revolutions were received on the ground in Cairo, Nezar AlSayyad, chairman of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, wrote: “It has become fashionable to refer to the 18-day Egyptian uprising as the ‘Facebook Revolution,’ much to the dismay of the protesters who riveted the world with their bravery in Cairo’s Tahrir Square.”<sup>119</sup>

It’s doubtful that suggesting such names as the “Facebook Revolution,” “Twitter Revolution” and “Al Jazeera Revolution” involved a contemplative attempt to actually offer lasting descriptors to the uprisings. Though it was clear that the social media monikers would not overtake “Arab Spring”—neither during the ongoing period of unrest nor for the historical record—the media monikers struck a chord within the American literati. Well-known critic Frank Rich wrote in *The New York Times*:

Perhaps the most revealing window into America’s media-fed isolation from this crisis—small an example as it may seem—is the default assumption that the Egyptian uprising, like every other paroxysm in the region since the Green Revolution in Iran 18 months ago, must be powered by the twin American-born phenomena of Twitter and Facebook. Television news—at once threatened by the power of the Internet and fearful of appearing unhip—can’t get enough of this cliché.<sup>120</sup>

Rich then noted that when the Egyptian government “pulled the plug” on the Internet providers, the revolution in fact grew stronger. Rich cited Jim Clancy of CNN, who, in Rich’s inimitable style, “broke through the bloviation on Jan. 29 by noting that the biggest demonstrations to date occurred on a day when the Internet was down.” According to CNN transcripts, Clancy indeed said, “The biggest demonstrations in all of this were launched in the day when there wasn’t any Internet. There wasn’t any Twitter. There wasn’t any Facebook. All right. The social media is a great way to reflect all that, but aren’t we kidding ourselves if we say it’s directing it? Clearly, it’s not.”<sup>121</sup>

Richard Engel, NBC’s chief foreign correspondent, speaking on MSNBC in January 2011, said, “I’ve been listening to a lot of analysts and have been plugged in over this. Keep talking about Twitter and Facebook. This didn’t have anything to

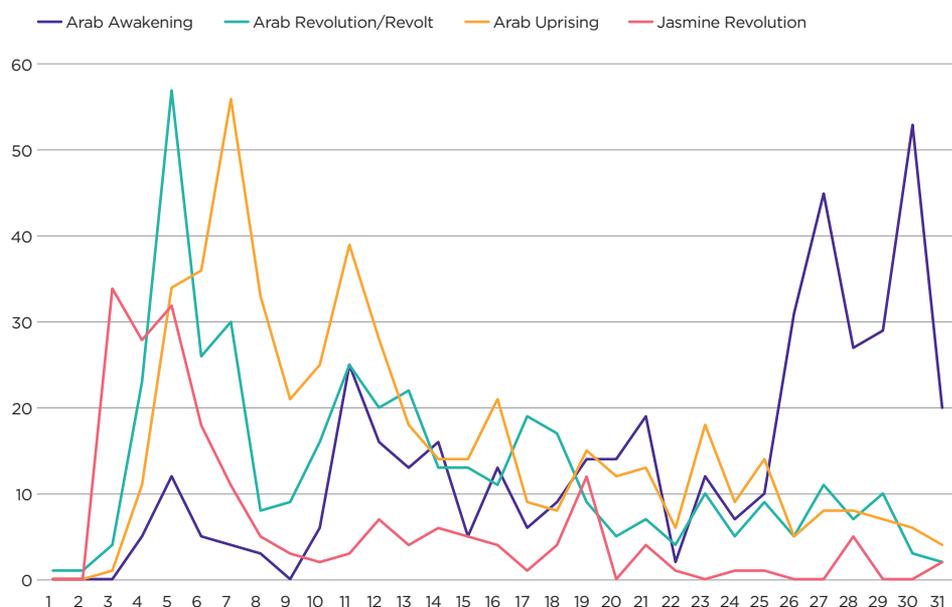
do with Twitter and Facebook. This had to do with people's dignity, people's pride. People are not able to feed their families."<sup>122</sup>

The critic who received a great deal of attention for his vociferous objections to media-monikers was the well-known author Malcolm Gladwell, who asked in the *New Yorker*, "Does Egypt Need Twitter?" His brief article protested the notion that the Arab revolts were a result of social media. He wrote:

But surely the least interesting fact about them is that some of the protesters may (or may not) have at one point or another employed some of the tools of the new media to communicate with one another. Please. People protested and brought down governments before Facebook was invented. They did it before the Internet came along. Barely anyone in East Germany in the 1980s had a *phone*—and they ended up with hundreds of thousands of people in central Leipzig and brought down a regime that we all thought would last another hundred years—and in the French Revolution the crowd in the streets spoke to one another with that strange, today largely unknown, instrument known as the human voice. People with a grievance will always find ways to communicate with each other. How they choose to do it is less interesting, in the end, than why they were driven to do it in the first place.<sup>123</sup>

Gladwell's comments were met with resistance in the blogosphere and elsewhere. Ari Melber, in *The Nation*, said that "Gladwell made many waves—and enemies—with his *New Yorker* essay doubting the power of social media in political organizing."<sup>124</sup> Gladwell received similar rebukes when he wrote a lengthy *New Yorker* article in 2010 about what he saw as an exaggerated role of social media in the Iranian unrest of 2009, known as the "Green Revolution." In his piece "Small Change: Why the revolution will not be tweeted,"<sup>125</sup> Gladwell started off with the Civil Rights Movement in Greensboro, North Carolina,

### Usage of Term, Excluding "Arab Spring" Nov 1, 2010–May 25, 2013



in 1960, when four black college students sat at the Woolworth’s in downtown Greensboro to be served lunch in a “whites only” section. The event sparked wider protest that, as we know from history, eventually contributed to civil rights advancements. Gladwell made the argument that these students did not need Twitter to start what would turn out to be a mass movement.

Gladwell underscored the farce when he cited Mark Pfeifle, a former US national-security adviser, who apparently called “for Twitter to be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.” What Gladwell objected to is the forfeiture of focus. He wrote: “Some of this grandiosity is to be expected. Innovators tend to be solipsists. They often want to cram every stray fact and experience into their new model ... But there is something else at work here, in the outsized enthusiasm for social media. Fifty years after one of the most extraordinary episodes of social upheaval in American history, we seem to have forgotten what activism is.”

Gladwell and other likeminded critics are not Luddites. Rather, they let loose their criticisms to defend the “human” essence of activism. While means of communication may help spur on a cause—a fact that does not offend media theory—it is an unconscionable to assume that *means* of communication should share center stage in the activism narrative, especially when people take enormous risks when speaking truth to power.

Arab media experts, for the most part, try not to commandeer history and suggest the coronation of technology. For one, Lawrence Pintak, dean of the Edward R. Murrow College of Communication at Washington State University, offered the “Al Jazeera Revolution.” His point, however, is not about hijacking the revolution narrative, but about highlighting the role that satellite channels had in the revolutions, particularly in Egypt, where Pintak had taught for many years. What this meant (and means), according to Pintak, is that the Arab regimes can “no longer control the message.”<sup>126</sup>

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### *Dissemination of Arab Media in the West*

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Marching in close step with the unrest itself, something had changed in the media landscape internationally, as spurred on by media coverage itself. Middle East-based journalism seized greater narrative control of the region’s indigenous concerns and conveyed them to a non-Arab global audience as never before. What this means is that Western news agencies’ domination of news judgment—making the calls as to what qualifies as important to cover in the Middle East—may seriously be challenged if Arab-based news broadcasts become more widely available in the United States. In the August of 2013, Al Jazeera finally landed a home in America’s cable television system when it launched Al Jazeera America. It’s very unlikely that Al Jazeera would have penetrated the American cable market had it not been for its coverage of the Arab Spring and the international credibility it established for itself in the process.

So the epicenter of this media revolution remains, of course, Al Jazeera—the news organization and all the hope, hype and symbolism latched on to it. In the first

few months of the Arab Spring, visits to its website increased exponentially, much of which is attributed to North American audiences. A University of Michigan study conducted by William Youmans and Katie Brown reported about a “vibrant counter-current in the American public wanting to see [Al Jazeera English] on US television screens. As AJE became a primary news source for Americans after Arab protest movements in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and other Arab countries in early 2011, demand for AJE grew.” The campaign to pressure American cable networks to offer Al Jazeera advanced in earnest, while opposition to the idea was fronted by Fox News and media advocacy groups such as Accuracy in Media, the Michigan study stated. “Additionally, political discourse about AJE, often framed within the question of cable carriage, is increasingly polarized. High-profile pundits and various organizations claim that AJE has no place on American televisions, citing allegations that AJ and AJE are anti-American and supportive of terrorists.”<sup>127</sup>

But Secretary of State Clinton, speaking before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, stirred the pot when she said in March 2011, “Viewership of Al Jazeera is going up in the United States because it’s real news. You may not agree with it, but you feel like you’re getting real news around the clock instead of a million commercials and, you know, arguments between talking heads.”

It’s a good observation, but others actually have made similar statements previously. For example, Robert Kaplan, in *The Atlantic* (October 2009), said, “The fact that Doha, Qatar’s capital, is not the headquarters of a great power liberates Al Jazeera to focus equally on the four corners of the Earth rather than on just the flash points of any imperial or post-imperial interest. Outlets such as CNN and the BBC don’t cover foreign news so much as they cover the foreign extensions of Washington’s or London’s collective obsessions.”<sup>128</sup> In September 2009, *The Walrus*, a Canadian magazine, published a profile of Al Jazeera English and its former managing director with the title: “The Most Hated Name in News: Can Al Jazeera English cure what ails North American journalism?” According to the article:

The mainstream American networks have cut their bureaus to the bone,” says [managing director of Al Jazeera English Tony] Burman. “They’re basically only in London now. Even CNN has pulled back ... and now Al Jazeera outnumbers them all.” The channel plans to open ten new bureaus in the coming year, including one in Canada. “At the risk of sounding incredibly self-serving,” Burman says, “that’s where, in the absence of alternatives, Al Jazeera English can fill a vacuum, simply because we’re going in the opposite direction.”<sup>129</sup>

As for the current unrest, the Arab Spring of 2011 was perhaps Al Jazeera’s moment “as the launch of the first Persian Gulf War became a crystallizing event for CNN,” as Howard Kurtz of the *Daily Beast* put it.<sup>130</sup> As commentators and political analysts remain hard pressed to dissect out a definite bearing and endgame of the violence and tumult in the Arab world, it could be, for now, that the most concrete achievement of the Arab Spring is an unintended consequence, namely, helping the Al Jazeera brand to be more culturally accepted in the American cable news market. In logically pursuing this argument, a case can be made that this eventually handed us Al Jazeera America.

Modern history bears witness to the fact that significant social and political movements, especially those that have international reverberations and high economic stakes, introduce nomenclature meant to recommend certain framing. These phrases are broadcast and repeated widely enough to enter the public sphere, and at some point they become “signifiers” of sorts that offer a target audience what seems to be contextual and political meaning that members of that audience can relate to.

The success of naming, then, is vested in marbling shared assumptions and familiar narratives into vocabulary that makes implicit sense to an audience that often is far removed—geographically, culturally and even sympathetically—from the named event. And given the unprecedented capacity for news and nomenclature to spread so widely and swiftly, the “Arab Spring” phrasing has become somewhat of a phenomenon. It embodies an “interpretative package”;<sup>131</sup> that is, it offers more or less immediate cultural meaning that pivots on the idea of democratization in a region that has resisted democracy. As such, the success or failure of the “Arab Spring” movement—because of its interpretive package—will be viewed as either a serious challenge to the idea of Arab exceptionalism, perhaps rendering it as “nonsense,”<sup>132</sup> or reinforce its original contention.

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## About the Author

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Ibrahim N. Abusharif is associate professor in residence in the journalism program at Northwestern University in Qatar. He received his MSJ from Northwestern University and has worked as a journalist, magazine editor, writer, publisher, translator and university professor. His articles and reviews have appeared in the *Chicago Tribune*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Dallas Morning News*, *The Millions*, *Beliefnet.com*, and other print and online publications.

His research interests include the assessment of the origins and promulgation of key journalistic framing terminologies applied to Middle Eastern affairs; intersections of digital media and religious debates of Muslim milieus; and literary journalism (or narrative nonfiction) in the Arab world. He has presented his findings on the prospects of literary journalism in the Arab world at conferences convened by the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies, of which he is a member. He recently co-wrote (with David Abrahamson of Northwestern) a chapter for the scholarly book *Global Literary Journalism: Exploring the Journalistic Imagination* (Peter Lang Publishing, 2012).



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## Appendix

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### *Methodology: Arab Spring project content analysis*

The bibliometric study of “Arab Spring” terminology is based on a straightforward content analysis methodology. The purpose was to analyze the use of various terms and phrases associated with the tumult in the Arab world among major newspapers and newswires. Researchers conducted an initial broad scan of publications to identify the terms most frequently associated with the coverage. Once we identified and refined the list of terms, we conducted a month-by-month frequency count of articles containing those phrases—the count reflecting the number of articles using each phrase once or more. The research covered the period between Nov. 1, 2010, and May 25, 2013. The first date just preceded the December 17, 2010, self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia, which is commonly seen as the start of the “Arab Spring” movement, and the last date marked the start of the data gathering.

Researchers chose a sampling of US and international newspapers and newswire archives, namely, the Associated Press, the *Christian Science Monitor*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post*. They also mined the US Department of State publication archives. Researchers examined the following phrases: “Arab spring,” “Arab awakening/s,” “Arab revolt/s,” “Arab revolution/s,” “Arab uprising/s” and “Jasmine revolution/s.”

When possible, researchers conducted the count in a full-text archival publications database. In a handful of cases, where news sources were not available in the database, researchers used the archives available at that publication’s website. To ensure the precision of the search terms, researchers used Boolean operators to specify search strings and did extensive qualitative spot checks to identify and account for any “false positives.” Researchers also used tools to minimize the number of duplicate documents searched. This bibliometric study was led by Tim Miller of San Francisco.

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## *Search Terms*

Arab pre/1 spring  
Arab pre/1 awakening\*  
(Arab pre/1 revolt!) or (Arab pre/1 revolution!)  
Arab pre/1 uprising\*  
Jasmine pre/1 revolution\*

Note: use of wild-card symbol \* limits to one character, e.g. to capture awakening(s) and wild-card symbol ! Denotes multiple characters e.g. to capture revolution(aries) etc.

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## *Sources*

WSJ / website / www.wsj.com  
Dept of State / website / http://search.state.gov/search  
All other news / Lexis/Nexis  
Reuters / TBD

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## *Sources Used In Research*

### **guardian.co.uk**

FILE-NAME: GUARDU  
COVERAGE: From December 09, 2004 through current  
COVERAGE-TYPE: Full-text  
FREQUENCY: Daily; Not published on Public Holidays in England & Wales  
UPDATE-SCHEDULE: Same day; Updates every hour  
CONTENT-SUMMARY: Access to certain freelance articles and other features within this publication (e.g. photographs, classifieds, etc.) may not be available. "Guardian Unlimited" contains unique news content generated for the Guardian Unlimited website (www.guardian.co.uk), one of the leading news portals in the UK. All content from Guardian Newspapers follows the following editorial code: "A newspaper's primary office is the gathering of news. At the peril of its soul it must see that the supply is not tainted."

Content within "Guardian Unlimited" includes:

- Breaking news
- Media
- Education
- Society
- Sports

FORMER-NAMES: Guardian Unlimited

PUBLISHER:  
Guardian Newspapers Limited  
75 Farringdon Road  
London, United Kingdom EC1M 3JY

## US Department of State Publications

<http://search.state.gov/search>

## The New York Times

FILE-NAME: NYT  
COVERAGE: From June 01, 1980 through current; the Final New York City Edition (full text); From January 1, 1969 – May 31, 1980(abstracts); Also includes The New York Times on the Web online articles; TOPNWS: most recent two weeks  
COVERAGE-TYPE: Full-text  
FREQUENCY: Daily  
UPDATE-SCHEDULE: Same day  
CONTENT-SUMMARY: Access to certain freelance articles and other features within this publication (i.e. photographs, classifieds, etc...) may not be available.

Certain freelance articles previously available have been removed by LexisNexis pursuant to the publisher's directions.

Printing "All the News That's Fit to Print," The New York Times bears the reputation of being the United States' unofficial newspaper of record. Comprehensive coverage of national, foreign, business and local news comes from The Times' extensive foreign news network and bureaus around the United States. The LEXIS-NEXIS services carry the final city edition as well as the New York Times on the Web online articles.

Monday–Saturday, the Sections of the paper are identified with letters (Section A, Section B, etc.). However, on Sunday, the Sections of the paper are numbered (1,2,3, etc.) Although the composition of the Sections of the paper are periodically changed, they are generally as follows:

### Monday–Friday

Section A – National & International news, editorials, letters to the editor and the Op-ed page  
Section B – Metropolitan area news provides the news of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut  
Section C – Business – considered the most extensive business news section of any United States daily general circulation newspaper.  
Section D – Sports  
Section E – Arts & Entertainment  
Section F – Varies each day of the week:

Monday – No Section F  
Tuesday – Science  
Wednesday – Dining In - Dining Out  
Thursday – House & Home  
Friday – No Section F  
Section G – Thursday only – Circuits

The news in any given section is not limited to that particular section, but may appear anywhere in the paper. For instance, a story on the Super Bowl champions prepared by the Sports Desk might appear on Page 1 of Section A, etc. A particular section does not necessarily contain all the articles prepared by that editorial desk.

Saturday's Times delivers the four main sections A–D.

The massive Sunday Times is known worldwide and contains the finest and most in-depth coverage of any topic. The numbered sections include the weekday topics as well as many special sections available on Sunday only, such as the Magazine, the City Weekly Desk, and the regional supplements – depending on the delivery area – for Long Island, New Jersey, Westchester (the suburban county north of New York City) and Connecticut.

Non-subscribers can view up to 10 articles per month for free.

PUBLISHER:  
The New York Times Company  
229 West 43rd Street  
New York, NY 10036

## **The Washington Post**

FILE-NAME: WPOST  
COVERAGE: From January 01, 1977 through current  
COVERAGE-TYPE: Full-text  
FREQUENCY: Daily  
UPDATE-SCHEDULE: Same day  
CONTENT-SUMMARY: Access to certain freelance articles and other features within this publication (i.e. photographs, classifieds, etc...) may not be available.

Certain freelance articles previously available have been removed by LexisNexis pursuant to the publisher's directions.

The Washington Post has an acknowledged influence far beyond the metropolitan area for which it is edited. The Post is one of the few U.S. newspapers with a serious interest in foreign news, deploying correspondents from its 16 foreign bureaus to produce in-depth articles from the world's hot spots. A special team of investigative reporters delves into government policies and operations in Washington and abroad. One of The Post's

greatest strengths is its national political coverage and tough investigative reporting of federal government and Washington metropolitan affairs. The Post led the media in probing and reporting the Watergate incident in 1972 through 1974. A daily morning paper, The Post is standard breakfast-time reading for members of Congress, diplomats, government officials, journalists, business lobbyists and lawyers in Washington.

The following sections are included in this file:

A section (Daily)

Metro (Daily)

Financial (Daily except Monday. Not used consistently by publisher after Feb 2009)

Style (Daily)

Sports (Daily)

Arts (Weekly)

Extras (Weekly community sections)

Food (Weekly)

Health (Weekly)

Home (Weekly)

Outlook (Weekly)

Real Estate (Weekly)

Travel (Weekly)

Washington Business (Weekly)

Weekend (Weekly)

Weeklies (Weekly community sections)

Sunday Source (Sunday)

Magazine

**PUBLISHER:**

The Washington Post Company

1150 Fifteenth Street, NW

Washington, DC 20071

**EXCLUSIONS:** Evans & Novak column. Jack Anderson column.

## **USA Today**

**FILE-NAME:** USATDY

**COVERAGE:** From January 03, 1989 through current

**COVERAGE-TYPE:** Full-text

**FREQUENCY:** Daily; Monday–Friday

**UPDATE-SCHEDULE:** Same day; except holidays

**CONTENT-SUMMARY:** Access to certain freelance articles and other features within this publication (i.e. photographs, classifieds, etc...) may not be available.

Certain freelance articles previously available have been removed by LexisNexis pursuant to the publisher's directions.

Documents from USA Weekend have been temporarily removed by LexisNexis at the publisher's request.

Documents from USA Today Baseball Weekly have been temporarily removed by LexisNexis at the publisher's request.

USA TODAY is the nation's most read daily newspaper with more than 6.3 million readers. USA TODAY provides outstanding coverage of issues and events from across the nation and the world. The nation's newspaper is famous around the world for its trendsetting graphics and clear, concise stories in the News, Money, Life and Sports sections. The News and Sports sections provide daily capsule reports of the top news in each of the 50 states.

USA TODAY is a trendsetter in tracking news on the following topics:

- Travel/Transportation
- Weather
- Sports
- Education
- Politics
- Environmental Issues
- Entertainment
- Personal Investing
- Advertising/Marketing
- Real Estate
- Banking and the economy

In addition, USA Today provides "Bonus Sections." More than 40 are published each year on topics such as Business Travel, the Kentucky Derby, the World Series, the Super Bowl, and Academic All-Star. These sections contain a wealth of information on a variety of topics ranging from the environment to business travel to major sporting events.

USA Weekend is a lively weekend magazine that combines the best qualities of a magazine with the immediacy of a newspaper. The weekend magazine contains features on travel, television, food and "what's next" in the latest trends.

**PUBLISHER:**

Gannett Company, Incorporated  
1000 Wilson Blvd.  
Arlington, VA 22229

**EXCLUSIONS:** NEWS Section: ear headlines, NEWSLINE, temperatures from the weather page MONEY Section: ear headlines, graphs of Dow Jones averages, Investment Trendline, and stock agate/gainers, losers, shares traded, quotations SPORTS Section: agate/preliminary game results, text of minor game coverage, TV program listings LIFE Section: Legal notices, Today's highlights, TV program listings.

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## The Christian Science Monitor

FILE-NAME: CSM

COVERAGE: From January 02, 1980 through current; In TOPNWS most recent two weeks. This source also contains online content from csmonitor.com

COVERAGE-TYPE: Full-text

FREQUENCY: Daily; Monday-Sunday

UPDATE-SCHEDULE: Within 1 day of publication

CONTENT-SUMMARY: Access to certain freelance articles and other features within this publication (i.e. photographs, classifieds, etc...) may not be available.

Widely viewed as one of the world's great newspapers, The Christian Science Monitor is perceptive, non-partisan and influential. It makes no attempt to report the surface facts of the day's news. Instead it analyzes, interprets and puts all the news it reports in perspective. Emphasis is given to spotting trends in world politics, business, industry, social and cultural life. International coverage, particularly news of developing countries, is especially strong. In addition to nationwide distribution, the Monitor is alsodistributed in some 120 foreign countries.

This source also contains online content from csmonitor.com

PUBLISHER:

The Christian Science Publishing Society  
One Norway Street  
Boston, MA 02115

EXCLUSIONS: Stories in languages other than English.

## Associated Press Online

FILE-NAME: APONL

COVERAGE: From July 08, 1997 through current; The October 30, 1999 data is not available

COVERAGE-TYPE: Full-text

FREQUENCY: Continuous feed

UPDATE-SCHEDULE: Same day

CONTENT-SUMMARY: Access to certain freelance articles and other features within this publication (i.e. photographs, classifieds, etc...) may not be available.

Associated Press Online is a news service tailored specifically for use in database or similar online environments. The service is comprised of the top national, international, Washington, financial and sports news on a given day. Stories cover various topics including Politics, Business, Wall Street, Sports, Entertainment and Weather, and are transmitted 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. stories carry profiles, as well, listing ticker symbols and

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and full company names of all publicly traded companies cited in the story as well as industry groups and state from which the story originated. At least once each hour the service includes AP Newsbriefs, a snapshot of top stories for that hour.

To search:

HEADLINE:(top stories)

FORMER NAMES: AP Online

PUBLISHER:

The Associated Press  
450 West 33rd Street  
New York, NY 10001

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Northwestern University in Qatar was founded in 2008 by parent organization Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, USA in partnership with Qatar Foundation. NU-Q draws on Northwestern University's distinguished schools of communication, journalism and liberal arts to educate students for leadership positions in the rapidly evolving global media industry. As part of its active role in the development of a 21st century knowledge-based economy in Qatar, NU-Q engages in research, thought leadership, and service relevant to Qatar, the Middle East, and the global community.



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Northwestern University in Qatar

P.O. Box 34102

Education City

Doha, Qatar

[www.qatar.northwestern.edu](http://www.qatar.northwestern.edu)