Tunisia’s Jasmine Revolution & the Arab Spring: Implications for International Intervention

by Peter J. Schraeder

Peter J. Schraeder is a professor and chair of the Department of Political Science at Loyola University Chicago. He is the author or editor of ten books and is currently writing a book, Beyond the “Big Man”: Impact of Democratization on the Formulation and Implementation of African Foreign Policies.

Abstract: Tunisia’s Jasmine revolution and the Arab Spring are unfolding amidst the resurgence of five sets of debates over the proper role of the international community in democracy promotion efforts abroad, including in the Middle East and North Africa, which were once thought to be impervious to democratic change. These debates, which are explored here within the context of the Arab Spring, range from the normative question of whether the international community should be actively involved in democracy promotion efforts abroad, to what forms of intervention should constitute part of the global arsenal for those intent on seeking democracy’s spread. A final section reflects on whether international efforts will contribute to the further strengthening of the Arab Spring or a return to an Arab Winter of authoritarianism.

On January 14, 2011, Tunisia’s Jasmine Revolution overthrew the dictatorship of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali.¹ The Jasmine Revolution seems to have sparked a domino effect, as prodemocracy demonstrators continue to confront dictatorships across the Middle East and North Africa, toppling the 30-year dictatorship of Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak on February 11, 2011, and the 42-year dictatorship of Libyan leader Muammar el-Qaddafi on October 21, 2011. As arguably the most recent and perhaps final surge

¹ For a summary of the factors that led to this revolution, see Peter J. Schraeder and Hamadi Redissi, “Ben Ali’s Fall,” Journal of Democracy July 2011, pp. 5-19.

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of the “third wave”\(^2\) of democratization in a region—the Middle East and North Africa—once thought to be impervious to democratic change, the Arab Spring has further reinforced the view among scholars and practitioners that democracy is a universal value whose roots can be nurtured in all regions of the world, including the Arab world.\(^3\) Most important, the Arab Spring is unfolding against the backdrop of increasingly sharp debates within the academic and the policymaking worlds, which have gradually shifted from a Cold War focus on whether democracy constitutes the best form of governance to a modern discussion as to whether or not, and to what degree, state and nonstate actors should be actively involved in democracy promotion efforts abroad. The Arab Spring has fostered the resurgence of at least five sets of debates devoted to this topic.

**Do All Good Things Go Together?**

The first debate involves the degree to which transitions to democracy will naturally lead to the emergence of other political-military and socioeconomic “goods”: the so-called “democratic environment” already achieved by the northern industrialized democracies and presumably aspired to by prodemocracy activists in the Middle East, in which it is assumed that “all good things go together.” Among the major outcomes implicitly (and often explicitly) associated with the spread of democracy, which in turn have served as the basis of democracy promotion, are the following:

- The emergence of a more stable international system – the so-called “democratic peace” hypothesis – in which democracies do not go to war with one another;
- Greater levels of domestic political stability in which potential and existing conflicts are resolved peacefully;
- The emergence of a more prosperous international system, due to the greater proclivity of democracies to engage in free trade;
- Rising levels of national economic growth, often measured in terms of rising Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita or Gross National Product (GNP) per capita;
- The promotion of social development, typically measured in terms of a decline in social inequalities based on caste, ethnicity, race, religion, or gender; and,


• Greater protection for human rights such that individuals and groups at the bare minimum are able to lead lives free from state coercion or persecution.

The empirical evidence linking the spread of democracy with these various outcomes of the democratic environment is far from conclusive, and in some cases, suggests outcomes contrary to the expectations of democracy promoters. The democratic peace hypothesis is often characterized in the scholarly literature as the closest one can get to an iron-clad law in international relations theory. Although this hypothesis for the most part holds when one focuses on the most coercive form of intervention (the launching of direct military intervention by one democracy against another), it is empirically less sound as one more broadly explores the spectrum of interventionist tools available to democratic states. The historical record demonstrates, for example, that during the Cold War, the United States launched a wide number of covert interventions to overthrow democratically elected governments, including the Iranian regime of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953.

The often overly optimistic expectations that international democracy promoters associate with the other dimensions of the democratic environment are also tempered by the historical record. As concerns the ability of democracies to quell domestic violence, extensive research has demonstrated that both consolidated democracies and extreme dictatorships exhibit low levels of domestic violence, the former due to peaceful avenues of conflict resolution and the latter due to strong state control, with the greatest level of internal conflict often found in countries making the transition from one form of governance to another. In the economic realm, research does suggest a greater proclivity for democracies to engage in free trade, thereby potentially contributing to a more prosperous international system, but it refutes the claim that democracies do better than non-democracies in ensuring

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Rising levels of national economic growth.7 Whether democracies do a better job of protecting human rights depends on how those rights are defined; when human rights are defined in terms of their civil and political components, including the right to free speech and the ability to vote in free and fair elections, democracies reign supreme, but they come up short when dealing with social and economic rights, including access to adequate housing, medical care and economic security.8 Democracies typically have not fared well in reducing social inequalities, and in some cases, such as the transitions to democracy in Eastern Europe in which female representation in national legislatures has actually declined, democracies have actually fared worse than their authoritarian predecessors.9 In short, policymakers within the northern industrialized democracies would be well advised to engage in democracy promotion only if democracy is perceived to be a noble good in and of itself, rather than as a means to some other end.

Tunisia’s transitional democracy provides an evolving laboratory for exploring the degree to which democracy naturally leads to the emergence of other political-military and socioeconomic “goods.” The country’s transitional and temporary Constituent Assembly, elected in October 2011 and tasked with writing a new constitution and governing the country until presidential and legislative elections can be held in Spring 2013, emerged against the backdrop of a dramatic opening within the political realm, where once-silenced individuals can now openly criticize the government without fear of retribution. Although there is much debate among women’s groups over whether the current government led by Ennahda, a moderate Islamic party, will lead to the deterioration of women’s rights that (despite the period’s other faults) were enshrined during the Bourguiba era and strengthened under Ben Ali, the new Constituent Assembly boasts an impressive number of female members: 49 out of 217, or 24 percent of the total seats are held by women. The new democratic environment has nonetheless witnessed a rise in violence, most prominently by salafist groups that were severely repressed during the Bourguiba and Ben Ali eras. This has recently resulted in government crackdowns, including the imposition of a curfew in eight of the country’s 24 governorships from June 13-15, 2012, a period in which over a thousand salafists were reportedly arrested.10

8 Zehra F. Arat, Democracy and Human Rights in Developing Countries (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1991).
According to Yamina Thabet, president of the Association Tunisienne pour le Soutien des Minorités (ATSM—Tunisian Association for the Support of Minorities), the new democratic environment has also unleashed popular threats and/or acts of violence against national minorities, such as the two-thousand-strong Jewish community principally located on the Island of Djerba and in Tunis, the country’s more than 30,000-strong Christian community, linguistic minorities (such as the more than 100,000 speakers of the traditional Berber language), and the Tunisian gay and lesbian community.11

Still, the greatest challenge remains the persistent weakness of the Tunisian economy. Tunisians from Sidi Bouzid and other towns in central, western, and southern Tunisia that historically have been ignored by Tunis are increasingly critical of the government’s inability to provide jobs and resources, many of them noting that little if anything has changed on the economic front since the January 2011 revolution. This has contributed to a continuing volatile mix, as increasingly active but disempowered civil society groups launch demonstrations, blocking roads and in some cases inciting violence, in the governorships outside of Tunis and the richer eastern coastal regions of Sousse and Monastir. As noted by a citizen of Sidi Bouzid: “What good is democracy where I can say anything I want, but I cannot get anything that I need, most importantly a job; my family cannot eat words.”

The Internal-External Debate

The second debate revolves around the relative importance of domestic versus international factors in ensuring democracy's spread. The traditional consensus concerning what can be termed the “internal-external” debate is that domestic factors are decisive.12 Such analyses at best neglect the importance of international factors and in the extreme argue that they play little no role whatsoever. It should, therefore, come as no surprise that the majority of the scholarly literature devoted to understanding the third wave of democratization in general (as well as how that scholarship related to the Arab Spring in particular) has emphasized a variety of domestic factors, including most notably the classic role of the military (i.e., does it refuse to follow the orders of the dictator, as in Tunisia’s case, or does it embrace...
the dictator’s orders, as in Syria’s case), and the more recent role of social media such as Facebook and Twitter in democracy promotion.

With the benefit of more than a quarter-century of hindsight, however, scholars are re-examining the neglected international dimension of democracy promotion. Philippe C. Schmitter, a noted scholar from the “transitions” literature who emphasizes the overriding importance of the internal dimension of democratization, constitutes part of this body of scholarship. “Perhaps, it is time to reconsider the impact of the international context upon regime change,” explains Schmitter. “Without seeking to elevate it to the status of prime mover, could it not be more significant than was originally thought?” Schmitter’s reassessment is characteristic of retrospective analyses of the third wave of democratization that underscore the difference between the initial transitions that took place in Southern Europe and Latin America beginning in 1974 but prior to the Cold War’s end in 1989, and those of the post-1989 era that took place in Eastern Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa, most recently are engulfing the Middle East and North Africa. According to this viewpoint, the post-Cold War transitions on average may have been more influenced by international phenomena. In the end, however, external factors remain secondary in such analyses.

The most comprehensive reassessment of the internal-external debate is provided by Laurence Whitehead, who points to several sets of international dynamics to argue that it can be “seriously misleading” to treat the international dimension of democracy promotion as “generally secondary in importance.” The most basic dynamic at work is the simple process of “contagion”: the extensive and unintentional spread of an idea within a given geographical region, due to the socio-economic, political-military or cultural similarities and channels which link its member states. The spread of the Arab Spring, beginning with Tunisia’s Jasmine revolution, offers a textbook example of this process. The widening of protests throughout the Middle East and North Africa clearly has been facilitated by the existence of a common religion (Islam), language (Arabic) and culture (Arab).

17 Whitehead, The International Dimensions, p. 23.
The case of Tunisia’s Jasmine revolution, in which domestic factors were decisive in ensuring revolutionary success, demonstrates the importance of understanding the international context within which the Arab Spring is unfolding. In the case of the United States, statements by President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, including a mention of the Tunisian revolution in Obama’s State of the Union Address, ensured that the United States was on the “right side of history.” The U.S. Ambassador to Tunis, Gordon Gray, is also credited with informing Ben Ali that he had to relinquish power and that he could not count on exile in the United States. In sharp contrast, the French government of Nicolas Sarkozy cannot claim to have been on the right side of history. Michele Alliot-Marie, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, not only vacationed in Tunisia between Christmas and New Year’s Eve in 2010 while demonstrations were intensifying, she even flew there on the private jet of a Tunisian businessman tied to the Ben Ali regime. Even worse, two days before Ben Ali fled the country and more than two weeks after the Tunisian police started using live ammunition against the protesters, Alliot-Marie offered to send French police to help the Tunisian police “restore calm,” because the French were skilled in “security situations of this type.”

Alliot-Marie became one of the first international casualties of the Tunisian revolution when she was forced to resign as a result of her actions in Tunisia.

Wikileaks played a potent international role with its November 2010 publication of a variety of U.S. State Department diplomatic cables, especially those written by Robert F. Godec, U.S. Ambassador to Tunisia during 2007-09. In his cables, Godec provided detailed accounts of the authoritarianism of the Ben Ali regime and the corruption within the ruling Ben Ali/Trabelsi family. Particularly notorious in this regard was the president’s brother in law, Belhassen Trabelsi, often referred to as the “Godfather,” who, according to the U.S. Embassy in Tunis, illegally assumed control over an array of companies, including “an airline, several hotels, one of Tunisia’s two private radio stations, car assembly plants, Ford distribution, a real estate development company, and the list goes on.”

Ironically enough, both the U.S. and the Tunisian governments sought to censor the appearance of the Wikileaks cables, but for different reasons: Washington wanted to avoid diplomatic embarrassment, whereas the Ben Ali regime sought to avoid fueling anti-regime sentiment. Tunisian bloggers avoided the censorship of both

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governments, creating an alternative “TuniLeaks” site visited by thousands of Tunisians. The Wikileaks cables clearly provided fuel to the Tunisian revolution. “It was one thing to hear rumors about the extensive corruption of the Ben Ali regime,” explained Syrine Ayadi, a Tunis-based lawyer. “It was quite another to actually see a great amount of details in print, written by the U.S. ambassador, which everyone was talking about.”

The Normative Debate

A third debate fostered by the Arab Spring revolves around the normative question of whether the international community should be actively involved in democracy promotion efforts. According to its strongest proponents, democracy promotion should serve as the guiding foreign policy principle of the northern industrialized democracies in all regions of the world, including the Middle East. Some even argue that “exporting democracy” will allow the northern industrial democracies to “fulfill their destinies” within the international system. Yet even more sanguine observers, who recognize that it is neither likely nor desirable that democracy promotion will override other foreign policy goals, caution that it should serve as a foreign policy priority of the northern industrialized democracies. The normative opposition to democracy promotion is equally varied. Arguments range from the isolationist perspective that the northern industrialized democracies should focus on their own affairs, including recognition that other foreign priorities (e.g., economic self-interest and national security) should predominate, to the belief that the ability to influence the democratic character of other countries is limited. Others are more concerned with the negative consequences of democracy promotion programs, regardless of how well intentioned their proponents may be. A corollary to this argument is that democracy promotion serves as a rhetorical veneer for the pursuit of economic self-interest on the part of the international system's most economically powerful countries, which also happen to be democracies. Some add a cultural dimension to this debate, denouncing democracy promotion as the

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22 It is important to note, however, that rhetoric does not always match reality as concerns U.S. support for democracy promotion in the Middle East. See for example, Jason Brownlee, Democracy Prevention: The Politics of the U.S.-Egyptian Alliance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). See also Brownlee, Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).


attempted Westernization of the Middle East (and beyond), and in the extreme arguing that it serves as a form of neo-colonialism.

The advocates of democracy promotion clearly have the edge in the normative debate. In its broadest sense, policymakers within the northern industrialized democracies perceive democracy promotion as a normative good that is worth pursuing. It is precisely for this reason that beginning in the 1990s and continuing into the twenty-first century the world has witnessed the emergence of a virtual “democracy promotion industry,” the hallmark of which has been the willingness of the northern industrialized democracies to channel vast quantities of aid aimed at democracy assistance to the developing world. It has been estimated that Washington devoted more than a half-billion dollars annually, throughout the 1990s, to some form of democracy promotion.27

An equally important component of the democracy promotion industry has been the growing involvement of a wide array of intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The United Nations and its affiliated organs have progressively sought to codify democratic values and expand opportunities for democratic government throughout the world. As a result, international law has undergone a gradual transformation in favor of recognizing democracy as an “entitlement” to be both defended and promoted.28 At the local level, a wide array of quasi-governmental political foundations and think tanks within the northern industrialized democracies set the democracy promotion agendas of their respective governments and serve as important conduits for official government aid.29 Two of the most prominent such organizations in the United States are the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI). These politically based foundations and think tanks are, of course, but one component of a larger network of NGOs that seeks to link the civil societies of the northern industrialized democracies with those of the developing world.30

Debate over Tools of Intervention

The emergence of what essentially constitutes a global consensus in favor of democracy promotion has ushered in a fourth debate related to the Arab Spring:
What forms of intervention should constitute part of the global arsenal in seeking democracy’s spread? To answer this question, one can explore a “spectrum of violence” in which a variety of interventionist tools have been employed in democracy’s name. The most prominent of these, listed in order from the least to most coercive, are as follows:

- The pursuit of classic diplomacy, such as a leader's use of the executive office as a “bully pulpit” for promoting democratic values abroad, as witnessed by President Obama’s inclusion of a statement of support for the Arab Spring in his January 2011 State of the Union Address;
- The provision of foreign aid to fund activities such as sending observer teams to oversee elections, as was the case with Tunisia's October 23, 2011 elections for the Constituent Assembly, which is responsible for writing a new Constitution;
- The attachment of political conditionalities to foreign policy relationships, as in the case of the Obama Administration’s placing pressure on the Mubarak regime by noting that the United States might have to reconsider its “foreign assistance posture” (i.e., its provision of more than $2 billion in annual aid) if the regime did not take concrete actions in the areas of social, economic and political reform;
- The adoption of economic sanctions to punish the undemocratic acts of authoritarian regimes and promote transitions to democracy, as in the case of the Obama Administration, the European Union and the Arab League, which have imposed economic sanctions against the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad for unleashing deadly force against prodemocracy demonstrators;
- The pursuit of covert intervention against authoritarian regimes, including assassination plots, coups d’état, propaganda and psychological warfare, the latter of which was employed against the Qaddafi regime;
- The use of paramilitary intervention in which the funding of a guerrilla insurgency seeks to overthrow an authoritarian regime through the use of proxy force, as witnessed by the Obama administration’s recognition and support of Libya’s Transitional National Council (TNC), which initially established its capital in Benghazi; and,
- The use of military intervention to directly overthrow an authoritarian regime and install a democratic regime in its place, as in the case of UN Security Council Resolution 1973 that permitted the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to undertake a military campaign against the Qaddafi regime.

The least coercive end of the interventionist spectrum not surprisingly includes the least controversial and most widely adopted forms of international democracy promotion: the pursuit of classic diplomacy and the provision of foreign aid.
Foreign aid, in particular, has emerged as the “most common and often most significant tool” in international democracy promotion. As one proceeds along the interventionist spectrum, however, questions increasingly arise as to whether specific interventionist tools are both proper and effective in implementing democratic norms. Many who question whether democracy should or can be “forced upon” another country not surprisingly criticize the middle tier of the interventionist spectrum, in which political conditionalities and economic sanctions are imposed on another country in the name of democratic values. This middle tier nonetheless enjoys widespread support, particularly within the policymaking establishments of the northern industrialized democracies, as a useful “middle road” between the two ends of the interventionist spectrum. The most coercive end of the spectrum, which includes the use of covert, paramilitary, and military force, not surprisingly generates the greatest level of concern among many supporters of democracy promotion. For these individuals, the critical question is whether the end justifies the means. That is, they ask if it is both acceptable and proper to impose democracy at the points of bayonets. For many, the answer is no, as, in their opinion, the use of force is simply antithetical to the democratic ideal.

The case of Libya constituted somewhat of an exception, in that the military operation was initially designed to protect the Libyan population against the atrocities committed by the Qaddafi regime. Critics nonetheless note that at the bare minimum, the Libyan military operation went beyond civilian protection to true regime change promotion, with some assuming that France and other powers, including the United States, were intent on promoting regime change through military force all along. The implications of this shift manifested themselves in an October 2011 UN Security Council vote, in which China and Russia, unhappy with what they perceived as NATO’s overstepping its UN-sanctioned role in Libya (which they had not opposed), objected to more aggressive actions against the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad, which has intensified its attacks against civilian prodemocracy activists. The net result has been an extremely weak UN Monitoring Group in Syria. Russia has continued to wield its veto threat in the UN Security Council to prevent the use of more aggressive actions that would go beyond the confines of the current UN Monitoring Group.

Debate over Guidelines for Democracy Promotion

A final debate raised by the Arab Spring focuses on what should constitute the proper guidelines for democracy promotion. Several questions are important in this regard. Are unilateral interventions more effective, or should attempts be made to foster multilateral initiatives? Although for the last quarter of the twentieth

century, the vast majority of democracy promotion efforts were unilateral interventions, more recent scholarship has underscored the promise associated with multilateral efforts. How important is the degree of support for such actions within the general population of the target country? If such support is lacking, how justified is foreign action regardless of the undemocratic nature of the regime in question? What about the regional dimension? That is, should democracy promotion policies be pursued in the absence of support among the regional neighbors of the target country? Finally, what should be the roles of international law and support for democracy promotion efforts within the wider international community? In short, the challenge for the international community revolves around determining the circumstances in which intervention will be both legitimate and effective, an increasingly difficult task as one moves to the more coercive end of the interventionist spectrum.

The historical record as codified within a wide-ranging literature on intervention demonstrates that scholars and practitioners are wise to keep at least three sets of guidelines in mind as they ponder any interventionist practices in the name of democracy promotion to be undertaken as part of the Arab Spring:

- **Determine the degree of popular support within the target country.** Foreign efforts stand a greater chance of success if the overwhelming majority of the target population embraces them. The efficacy of such efforts declines in situations marked by minority support, and is particularly compromised when an undemocratic leadership for whatever reason enjoys majority support.

- **Seek majority support within the region and the international system.** Foreign efforts also stand a greater chance of success if the majority of countries within the region and the international system embrace them. Such support not only signals sensitivity to often specific regional concerns as well as important international norms, but in its ideal form (i.e., unanimous support) also suggests the existence of a well-crafted coalition of regional and international forces that transcends ideological, ethnic and religious differences.

- **Construct policy within the framework of international law.** Although international law prohibiting intervention may be ignored with relative impunity by countries pursuing self-interested policies, there is no denying its importance as a legitimizing factor, particularly in terms of creating international coalitions.

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32 For example, see Bruce M. Russett and John Oneal, *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000).

Although the combination of these guidelines cannot guarantee a successful interventionist episode, they at least enhance the possibility for success and ensure that any democracy promotion effort will enjoy a high degree of legitimacy.

If we apply these guidelines to the international community’s response to burgeoning civil conflict in Libya during 2011, for example, it becomes clear why the international community’s use of military force was both legitimate and successful: the majority of the Libyan people desired an end to the Qaddafi regime and its replacement with a more inclusive form of governance; the use of military force enjoyed overwhelming support both regionally in the Middle East and North Africa (the Arab League, as well as two of Libya’s immediate neighbors, Egypt and Tunisia, supported military action) and throughout the international system (including the UN Security Council and NATO); and, according to accepted precepts of international law, the Qaddafi regime was in violation of numerous international conventions and treaties. In short, the key to success of the anti-Qaddafi military effort, which should be taken seriously by advocates of democracy promotion, was the creation and gradual strengthening of a popularly supported multilateral coalition that was crafted under the auspices of international law. In sharp contrast, the lack of such a consensus continues to obstruct an effective international response to the Bashar al-Assad regime’s atrocities against its own people.

Promoting Arab Spring or Arab Winter?

The activities of prodemocracy activists in the Middle East and North Africa have ushered in a period of change that raises important questions as to the role of the international community in promoting transitions to democracy, and whether these activities will contribute to the further strengthening of the “Arab Spring” or a return to an “Arab Winter” of authoritarianism. In this regard, the future success of prodemocracy activists will be potentially constrained by several domestic and international realities, most notably what happens when the normative goal of democracy promotion clashes with other more self-interested foreign policy interests of powers outside the region. Throughout the Cold War and post-Cold War eras, several northern industrialized democracies were and remain willing to adopt a realpolitik approach to international politics that at times compromises democratic values in favor of national security interests, (e.g., the initial French support for the Ben Ali regime even as protests mounted in December 2010). One

34 See, for example, Eva Bellin, “Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring.” Comparative Politics, 2012 pp. 127-49. See also “FP Expert Survey: The Arab Spring,” Foreign Policy, June 16, 2012, which provides the views of 34 Middle East studies experts.
simple fact, however, provides the basis for optimism: each wave of global democratization in the last 200 years has contributed to the further strengthening of the international democratic context within which democracy promotion policies at the nation-state level are pursued. As a result, the international democratic environment at the beginning of the twenty-first century is much more nurturing and protective of democratic practices than was the case at the beginning of either the nineteenth or twentieth centuries. If history is our guide, the Arab Spring will, with time, likely to lead to an “Arab Summer,” in which democratic processes and institutions are consolidated throughout the region.