

POSC 469
The Arab Uprisings:
Authoritarian Breakdown and Democratic Transitions
Spring 2016

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Meeting Details: M&W, 5:00-6:20pm, VKC 152
Office Hours: M&W, 2:00-3:00pm, VKC 233B

Course Description and Objectives

The dearth of democracy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has long been a vexing puzzle for political scientists and area specialists alike. Towards the end of the twentieth century, the “Third Wave” of democratization swept seemingly indiscriminately across the globe—from Latin America, to sub-Saharan Africa, to Southern and Eastern Europe and continuing to South East Asia—yet bypassed the Arab World altogether.

The systematic nature of this exception to a general global trend suggested an explanation specific to the region. Some have claimed that there are barriers to democracy inherent to Muslim-majority societies while others have underscored the deleterious effects of natural resource wealth. Regardless of the varied mechanisms, the phenomenon to be explained was uniformly the stubborn resiliency of autocracy—that is, until it was suddenly not so resilient.

This course situates the phenomenon of the Arab Uprisings within the broader framework of authoritarian breakdown and democratic transitions. To accomplish this goal, we begin by first surveying the literature on democratization with a critical eye to the conceptual and empirical foundations of various theories. From there, we turn to the underlying dynamics in the MENA region, focusing in on those factors most often cited as impediments to democratic rule. Finally, we elaborate the cascade of popular protest and regime change often referred to as the “Arab Spring”—its origins, fits, starts, and falls—setting the events to date against theoretical expectations.

At the end of this semester, students should be able to 1) articulate the debates on democratization, 2) evaluate the arguments for authoritarian resilience in the MENA region, and 3) assess the recent “successful” and “failed” efforts to democratize across the Arab World, placing these outcomes in historical and theoretical context.