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Holding Back The Flood: Regimes of Censorship in the Middle East & North Africa in Comparative Perspective

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Abstract: In order to investigate the relationship between censorship and popular uprisings, I survey trends in repression of information across Iran and the Arab states of the Middle East & North Africa over several decades to see if the recent wave of popular mobilization appears to respond to changes in the degree of repression in particular countries. I argue that while the available data is inconclusive, there is little support for the idea that partial liberalization provokes revolutionary outbreaks and conversely some support for high or increasing repression of expression as a contributor to regime-challenging popular mobilization.

Keywords: censorship, media, Arab world, revolution, social movements, mobilization, Middle East, North Africa, authoritarianism

Why should freedom of speech and freedom of the press be allowed? ... [A government] would not allow opposition by lethal weapons. Ideas are much more fatal things than guns. ~ V. I. Lenin (Goldstein 2000, 1)

Reform must start with intellectual freedom and freedom of the press... The self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi started the Arab Spring. His was the ultimate and extreme form of freedom of expression. ~ George Ayittey (Halvorssen 2011)

Introduction

Governments in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have seen control of mass media as an important priority. Regimes of censorship of varying degrees of severity exist across the region, from relatively liberal Lebanon to near-totalitarian Syria.¹

¹ For the purposes of this study, I leave aside Israel and Turkey to study the less ambiguously authoritarian states of the region, the Arab states and Iran, where mass popular mobilization or the threat of it has been particularly salient in the immediate past – 2009 in Iran, late 2010 onwards in

But how effective are they?

From the ubiquity of censorship and related tools of information management in authoritarian states, one can infer that such tools produce some useful effect for such states, or at least are perceived to do so by the regimes concerned. It seems logical that the main purpose would be to limit the circulation of information and ideas that challenge the status quo, for example by questioning the legitimacy of a regime. In the language of social movement theory, censorship can limit the political opportunity structure available to possible challengers to the status quo.²

This paper asks what is the relationship, if any, between censorship and popular uprisings? I survey large-scale trends in information control systems in MENA and look for relationships between them and outbreaks of popular mobilization. I argue that repression of expression may delay mobilization, but also removes the 'safety valve' function of open debate, building political pressure that can emerge on the street. Most states experiencing regime-challenging mobilization have been among the more repressive in terms of freedom of expression. Egypt may be an exception in the region in that it did allow more of a safety valve, but saw an uprising nevertheless.

Some Reflections on Censorship

What is Censorship?

Censorship is complicated. It is usually part of a broader system of information management. It is a widespread practice. States using it tend to lie along a continuum rather than falling into simple binary categories of open (virtuous) versus closed (bad) systems.

The definition offered in Peleg is reasonable: "the systematic control of the content of communication by a government through various means" (Peleg, 1993, 4). But while it is important to conceive of censorship in terms of systems and to seek to analyze it systematically, arbitrariness can be fundamental to the successful exercise of censorship in some cases – the uncertainty of what will be permitted is itself a useful discipline on producers and distributors of information. Censorship can also refer to strong influence rather than full control, it might be extended to form and not only content, and governments are not the only censors. For the purposes of this article censorship is *a system of coercive information and communication management usually implemented by a government*.

the Arab world.

² See, e.g. Tarrow (1988) for discussion of opportunity structures.

Who Censors?

States censor. They have the means and the motives. But they are not alone. Historically, religious institutions have been a significant source of censorship, and remain so in some contexts, as do other self-appointed guardians of public morals or the public interest.

More subtly, information producers and distributors themselves often censor their own work. A censorship regime involves negotiation between producers and censors. Producers wishing their work to be distributed exercise self-censorship, adjusting to the expectations of those wielding political or economic power. Readers, too, become complicit in a regime of censorship, by adjusting their own habits of thought and understanding. Censorship institutionalizes a relationship between state power and the producers and consumers of information.

What is Censored, and How?

Any medium of communication can be subject to efforts at control, but which media, and what content, varies widely. Totalitarian states seek to control all information, since their ambition is to shape all aspects of society. Other states set priorities in their censorship regimes based upon social, political, and other interests. Some media attract greater attention from the authorities than others, regardless of content.

"Governments ... typically employ censorship to protect their power base. That is probably why books are often not as strictly controlled as the mass media. As material directed at an educated elite, a small minority in most developing countries, books are considered less dangerous to the power base of the ruling elite than daily newspapers, let alone radio or television" (Peleg, 1993a, 132).

For instance, in Britain, theatre was regulated for centuries as a mass medium. But by "the late 1960s, theatre was no longer a medium of mass entertainment" and government gave up censorship powers (Sutter, 2000, 348). In the Arab world, by contrast, theatre has remained a heavily controlled medium: "there is hardly a dramatist in the Arab world who at one time or another has not encountered difficulties in seeing his or her creations performed in front of an audience" (Anonymous, 1993, 102).

Peleg's (1993a) survey of methods of censorship, includes: banning authors or works, expulsion, imprisonment, economic steps such as expulsion from the national writers' union, control of publishing businesses, murders, executions, or disappearances. All of these have been used in MENA, with significant variation between countries. In much of the region, little has changed in terms of the tools used since Koepfel surveyed media control regimes in the late 1980s: "State control over information is enforced by a system of rewards and punishments - up to and including murder in some countries... The methods by which control is maintained and the lengths to which regimes will go to stifle troublesome

journalists vary from country to country, but in each the process has become institutionalized” (Koeppel, 1988, 2). A decade and a half later an Egyptian journalist noted "a working traditional and effective mechanism by which authorities in Arab countries use both carrots and sticks to keep journalists in line", mentioning special privileges for the profession, an “arsenal of press laws”, intimidation, harassment, criminal prosecution, imprisonment, and closure of newspapers (Gorguissian, Khouri, Nematt, Al-Mirazi, & Hudson, 2005).

Peleg points out that "governments in developing countries sometimes use general terror to create an atmosphere of fear to restrain the intellectuals", where torture and other violence or the threat of it can be a significant curb on expression. The brutal beating of Syria's leading cartoonist Ali Ferzat by regime thugs in August 2011 is an egregious, but far from isolated recent example.³

Yet although parts of the region have been deadly environments for journalists in the past couple of decades – Turkey in the early 1990s, Algeria through the 1990s, Iraq in the present decade⁴ – "to silence writers, governments do not necessarily have to resort to abduction, murder, or even exile: Milder threats and punishments can be quite effective" (Peleg, 1993a, 125). Press laws in much of the region violate international human rights instruments and, often, states' own constitutions, as Henderson notes: “many of the defamation laws in the region still contain criminal penalties, including high fines and imprisonment, and ... the threat and enforcement of these laws and policies leads to government censorship, self-censorship and sometimes imprisonment” (Henderson, 2005, n.p.).

The most direct form of control is ownership, by the state or those close to it: “In the Gulf states, although the papers are privately owned, the results are the same as if they were run by the state. Regimes maintain control in part by hand-picking editors and heads of sections; changes in management are not permitted without the knowledge of the ministry of information” (Koeppel, 1988, 9). As recently as 2008, the son-in-law of President Ben Ali of Tunisia bought a majority holding in the country’s main private news publishing group, the better to control its messages.

As well as targeting producers and the means of circulation, state information management regimes can seek to intervene at the site of reception. This is hard to measure in anything approaching a systematic way. There are, I think, two main means by which governments and others attempt to censor at the site of reception. One concerns the *means* of reception, the other the *contexts* of reception.

An example of controlling the means of reception is found in Syria and elsewhere where the regime banned satellite dishes, although apparently without making

³ See Guardian Online, Thursday 25 August 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/aug/25/syria-cartoonist-ali-ferzat-beaten>.

⁴ Committee to Protect Journalists <http://www.cpj.org/killed/>.

serious attempts to enforce the ban: Damascus' rooftops were crowded with dishes by the late 1990s and remain so. The internet has made it much harder for regimes to keep information out, but internet penetration varies widely and filtering can make access to some news sources difficult – Tunisia, Iran and others have invested heavily in attempting to restrict citizens' access to the web, although censors "often seem one step behind and reactive" (Howard, 2010, 157). The technical challenges to controlling the flow of information seem to have provoked mostly technical adaptation – developing or purchasing new means of control – rather than political adaptation, i.e. accepting that citizens will be better informed and developing more responsive politics.

Contexts of reception can be affected by propaganda. Whether simply degrading the public sphere by flooding it with absurd information, or the harder task of establishing a state-authorized vision of reality as common sense, states as *producers* of information significantly affect the environment within which information circulates. Lisa Wedeen's study of Syria's leader cult describes one important example (Wedeen, 1999). Syria's 'electronic army' and its Bahrain counterpart, pro-regime propagandists flooding social media and waging online war in other ways to counter pro-democracy activism, are more recent instances (Noman, 2011).

Aside from spectacle and propaganda, designed to persuade or browbeat the public, there are tools of distraction and substitution, as Morozov points out:

"From the government's perspective, it's far better to keep young Russians away from politics altogether, having them consume funny videos ... The most effective system of Internet control is not the one that has the most sophisticated and draconian censorship, but the one that has no need for censorship whatsoever" (Morozov, 2011, 20).

With a superabundance of information available to anyone with internet access, the key now is the attention economy. Misdirection and distraction could be the best methods of control in the age of information overload.

Why Censor?

Those who censor most likely believe it has some utility. Peleg argues that it has two main goals: "the thrust of the restrictions on freedom of expression has been twofold: to insulate the population against ideas the government regards as undesirable and dangerous, and to prevent the outside world from becoming aware of what is happening inside the country" (Peleg, 1993a, 115).

Yet we do not know enough about the *effects*. There are historical and biographical accounts of how regimes of censorship have affected individuals. And there is an interesting debate in psychology about responses to censorship – whether it provokes increased desire to experience the censored information (reactance theory) or whether people place more value in maintaining a consistent worldview,

and will therefore be less likely to seek alternative information so long as what is available fits their established preferences (balance theory) (see Hayes & Reineke, 2007). But the broader political effects of censorship are harder to judge.

As then President Hosni Mubarak said in a televised address to the people of Egypt, 28 January 2011, “These demonstrations ... wouldn’t have taken place without a broad domain of freedom of expression, freedom of press, and many other forms of freedoms that were granted to the Egyptian people by the reforms Egypt is embracing”. He seems to believe that if he’d maintained a harsh regime of censorship, he wouldn’t be facing an uprising. Mubarak’s claim suggests a hypothesis about censorship and social mobilization: heavy censorship can dampen the potential mobilization of civil society forces that could challenge regimes, and (partial) lifting of censorship may provide space for mobilization to occur. But the case of Tunisia would not seem to support the idea that such an opening is a *necessary* prerequisite for massive mobilization – there was no notable relaxation of controls under Ben Ali before late 2010.

In what follows I present a first test of the following hypothesis (the ‘Mubarak hypothesis’):

Relative easing of a censorship regime can help precipitate anti-regime popular mobilization

A pattern supporting this would show an inverse relation between repression and mobilization, with the probability of mobilization increasing as repression eased. On a first pass, events in Egypt *seem* to support it, the relative opening over the past decade helping to precipitate popular revolt. But how do things look if we consider the broader regional canvas?

The following charts (figures 1-3) provide a snapshot of the state of freedom of expression in MENA in the year before the wave of popular uprisings, using Freedom House’s *Freedom of the Press Index* (FH), Reporters Without Borders’ *Press Freedom Index* (RSF) and the Civil Liberties category scores of the Economist Intelligence Unit’s *Democracy Index* (EIU).⁵ Each chart shows relative repression on the y-axis, where the most repressive environments have the highest scores, as is the case already in the FH and RSF indexes. Since the EIU index rates countries on a 1-10 scale, where 10 is most democratic, I have converted this into an index of repression more readily comparable to the other two by multiplying by 10 and subtracting the result from 100 (e.g. Algeria’s score of 4.41 becomes 55.9, Libya’s 1.47 yields 85.3).

⁵ These indexes are all discussed in more detail below. Israel and Turkey are not included in the present study, although censorship is certainly an issue in both, because as long-established democracies (even somewhat illiberal ones) one would expect them to experience both expression and mobilization differently than would their regional neighbors. The Palestinian territories are omitted due to their not being sovereign.

Each chart also shows an Instability Index from 2011, which is composed of three scores from the Global Peace Index (drawing on EIU assessments) capturing internal political dynamics: Level of Organized Conflict, Likelihood of Violent Demonstrations, and Political Instability.⁶ The GPI scores each of these from 1 to 5. I derive my GPI 3 Instability Index by simply dividing the sum of the three by 15, yielding a score between 0.2 and 1, then multiplying by 100 for ease of plotting on the same chart.

The purpose of these charts is to demonstrate whether there is any general correlation, direct or inverse, between relatively high or low repression on the one hand, and relative instability on the other. By global standards, the whole region tends to be scored as repressive by most measures, but we are looking here for theoretically interesting variation within the regional context.

Figures 1-3: Instability and Repression of Expression in MENA

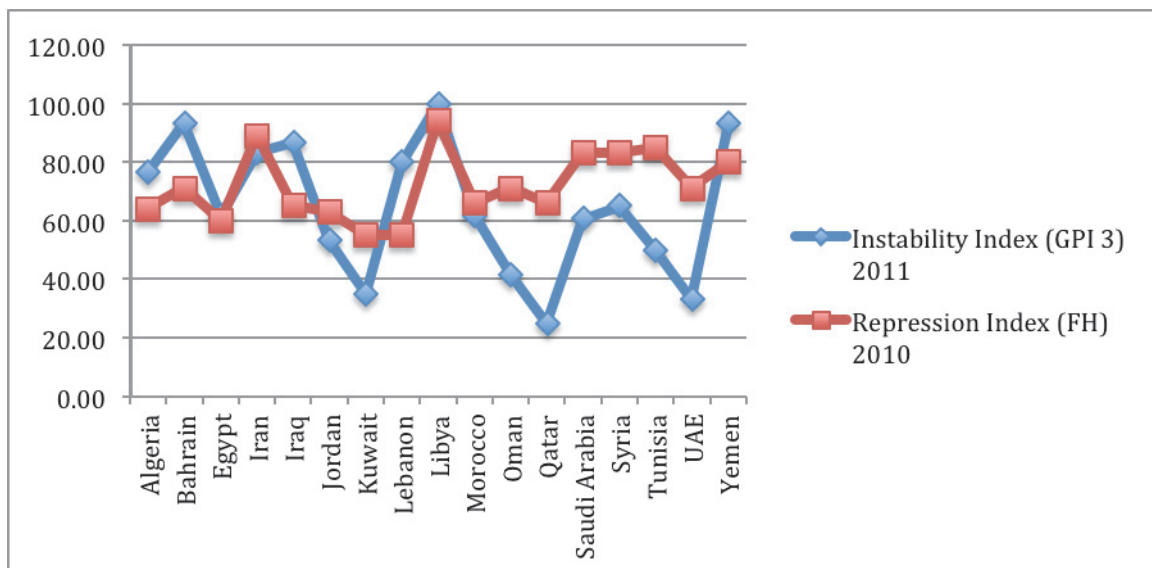


Figure 1: Score 100 = most repressive, score 0 = most free.

⁶ <http://www.visionofhumanity.org/info-center/global-peace-index-2011/>

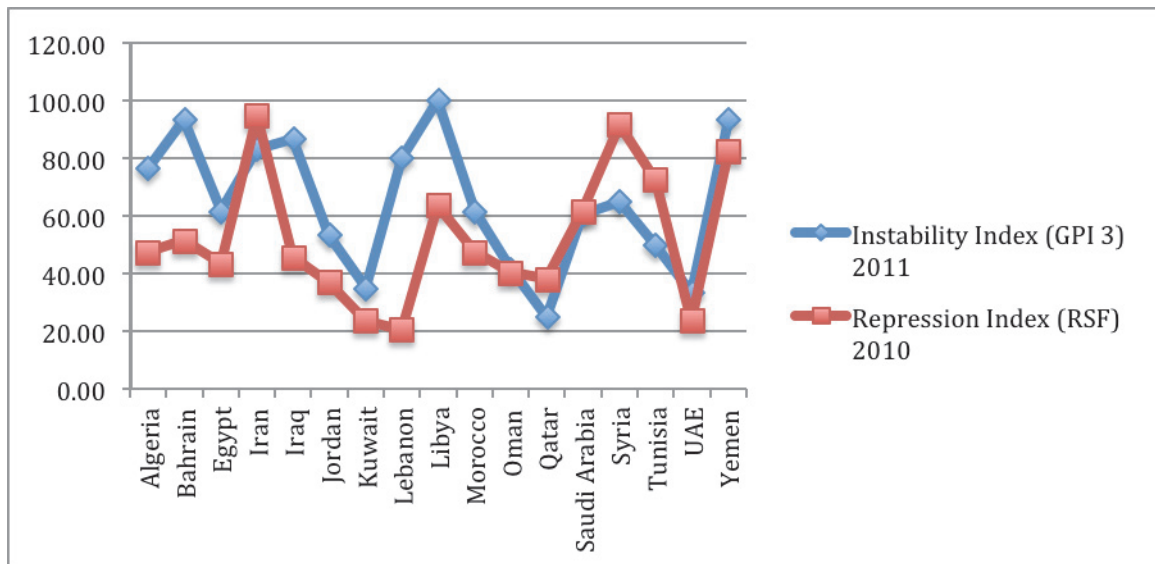


Figure 2: Score 100 = most repressive, score 0 = most free.

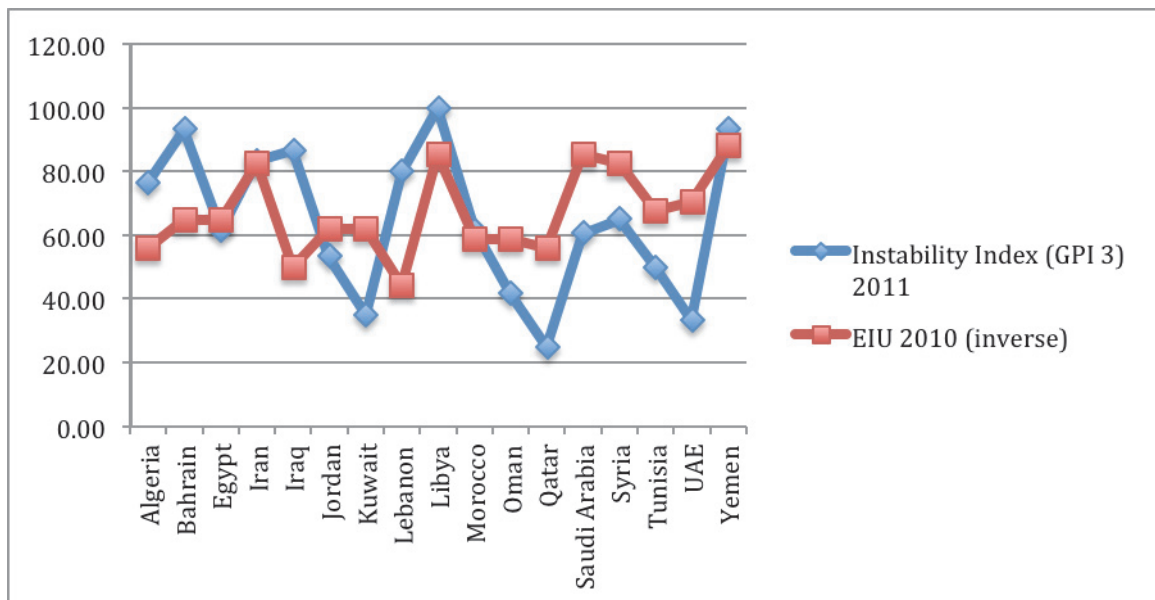


Figure 3: Score 100 = most repressive, score 0 = most free.

None of the indexes of repression in 2010 tracks *tightly* with the index of internally-driven instability in 2011, although the patterns are at least suggestive of a connection. All charts show Iraq as relatively free and relatively unstable. Lebanon shows a similar pattern across all three charts. In both cases this is most likely significantly due to external factors driving internal friction. On the other hand, repressive and stable as a combination does not appear in Chart 2 at all. The other two charts suggest only Oman, Qatar and UAE may fall into this category.

The Indexes

The longest-running index of international press freedom is that compiled by Freedom House, a U.S.-based democracy promotion non-profit organization. From 1980 to 1988 the index included separate scores for print and broadcast

media, with a three point scale of 'free,' 'partially free' and 'not free.' From 1989 to 1993 the index gave a single annual score on the three point scale. From 1994 to the present the three point scale persists, but is accompanied by scores out of 100, with 0 representing complete freedom and 100 total repression. Currently the scores are derived based on a questionnaire covering three major categories: legal environment, political environment, and economic environment. Up to 40 points are scored on political environment, 30 each on the other two. To provide points of comparison, in 2010 Denmark was assessed at 11/100, the U.S at 18, the U.K. at 19, France at 23, Russia at 81, and China at 84. The advantage of Freedom House's index is that it offers 30 years of broadly comparable data on most countries of the world. The disadvantages include the two changes in coding, in 1989 and 1994.

Another useful but more recent index is compiled by Reporters Without Borders. This runs from 2002 to the present, and also covers almost all countries. As with Freedom House's current methodology, it is based upon a standard questionnaire addressing different aspects of freedom of expression. It includes 43 questions (to Freedom House's 23) covering: physical violence; number of journalists murdered, attacked, detained or threatened; harassment and access to information; censorship and self-censorship; control of media; judicial, business and administrative pressure; and four questions on internet and new media. As with Freedom House, higher numbers indicate greater repression. But the maximum score is greater than 100: in 2009, for example, Iran scored 104. For purposes of comparison, in 2010 Denmark scored 2.5, the U.K. 6, the U.S. 6.75, France 13.38, Russia 49.9, and China 84.67.

Newer still, but potentially of particular value for future research, is the Economist Intelligence Unit's *Index of Democracy*. It offers scores in five categories, the last of which is Civil Liberties. This is based, like the other indexes, on surveying key informants around the world. Of the 17 questions on which the Civil Liberties score is based, five relate directly to media or internet freedom. The scores are out of 10, where 10 is fully functioning democracy and 0 complete repression.

These indexes all capture qualitative judgments by in-country questionnaire respondents. They lend themselves best to mid-range qualitative analysis, rather than to any statistical approach suited to large-n data analysis. We can usefully apply the set logic of qualitative comparison developed by Charles Ragin among others (Ragin, 2000). In each case, the figure given for a state in a given year can be taken to indicate membership in a set of cases – highly repressive states, for instance, or less repressive states. We can translate the scores in the three indexes into set memberships, minimally distinguishing between the less repressive (scores below 0.65 in the case of Freedom House and EIU, below 0.45 for RSF) and more repressive (scores 0.8 and up for FH and EIU, 0.7 and up for RSF).⁷

⁷ These divisions do not match how FH categorizes states globally, for instance, but are used here to distinguish among the regional group. Figures 1-3 show the range of variation for the three indexes – RSF's wider range points to the need for different interpretation of set membership in that case.

Similarly, the instability index I have derived from three of the GPI indicators broadly divides states into highly unstable states (0.8 and up), stable states (0.2-0.4), and the rest. Of particular interest, of course, are those states that have seen regime change or regime-threatening popular mobilization in the past year or so: Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, Yemen. If we make apparent the categorical qualities expressed by these numerical scores, we can generate the following table:

Table 1: Repression (2010) and Mobilization (2011)

	<u>FH</u>	<u>RSF</u>	<u>EIU</u>	<u>Instability</u>	<u>Revolutionary uprising?</u>
Algeria	<i>Less</i>		<i>Less</i>		
Bahrain			<i>Less</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Yes</i>
Egypt	<i>Less</i>	<i>Less</i>	<i>Less</i>		<i>Yes</i>
Iran	<i>More</i>	<i>More</i>	<i>More</i>	<i>High</i>	
Iraq	<i>Less</i>		<i>Less</i>	<i>High</i>	
Jordan	<i>Less</i>	<i>Less</i>	<i>Less</i>		
Kuwait	<i>Less</i>	<i>Less</i>	<i>Less</i>	<i>Low</i>	
Lebanon	<i>Less</i>	<i>Less</i>	<i>Less</i>	<i>High</i>	
Libya	<i>More</i>		<i>More</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Yes</i>
Morocco			<i>Less</i>		
Oman		<i>Less</i>	<i>Less</i>		
Qatar		<i>Less</i>	<i>Less</i>	<i>Low</i>	
Saudi	<i>More</i>		<i>More</i>		
Syria	<i>More</i>	<i>More</i>	<i>More</i>		<i>Yes</i>
Tunisia	<i>More</i>	<i>More</i>			<i>Yes</i>
UAE		<i>Less</i>	<i>More</i>	<i>Low</i>	
Yemen	<i>More</i>	<i>More</i>	<i>More</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Yes</i>

Among the noteworthy observations is that the countries that have seen revolutionary uprisings since December 2010 include the least stable, such as Yemen, as well as those judged moderately stable according to the three internal stability indicators from the Global Peace Index, but none of the most stable. Of those six countries, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen were among the most repressive in the region in terms of expression before the uprisings, with at least two indexes scoring them high on the press freedom index or low on the civil liberties index. Bahrain was only moderately repressive by regional standards (although this is still repressive on a global scale). Iran and Saudi Arabia were the only two states in the region to be counted as more repressive on at least two indexes and *not* face revolutionary uprisings. Arguably Iran's uprising came in 2009, the 'Green Revolution', and was aborted. Saudi Arabia's may be yet to come, given current unrest in the Eastern Province, or may be headed off by the ruling family's largesse. Still, these exceptions suggest we should be cautious in inferring any straightforward causal relationship between repression and mobilization on

the basis of these results.

Egypt was less repressive than the other states that saw uprisings, by these indicators. To the extent that Egypt was *relatively* liberal as regards expression before the revolution, this could be taken as tentative support for Mr Mubarak's argument that free expression enabled the uprising. However, if it is so, it is a regional outlier, since it appears that the *most* repressive environments were most likely to yield popular mobilization, and other less repressive environments have not faced regime-threatening uprisings so far.

Testing the Hypotheses against Historical Development and Trends

Historical trends may be more revealing in exploring Mr Mubarak's idea that relative opening was part of his downfall. His claim, after all, can be understood as being that the reform *process* was the problem; that opening a wider domain of expression led to the uprising. Here I attempt to establish patterns of development of the media environment in MENA states over time to see if a dynamic rather than static view of repression of expression yields different conclusions.

In 2005, Rami Khouri of the *Daily Star* newspaper (Beirut) said "A great proliferation of forms of media is taking place", meaning satellite, FM radio, internet, the offshore press. "Second, there is a lot less government control over the media, broadly speaking. A general liberalization is taking place. Liberalization means a more open, more liberal system, where more views are being expressed. Even in state-controlled media like the Egyptian, Jordanian, and Moroccan systems, as well as in offshore satellite stations not controlled directly by governments, a wider range of views is being expressed" (Gorguissian et al, 2005, 8). Marc Lynch and others have argued that the emergence of *al-Jazeera* in 1996 and its competitors since have created a new, transnational Arab public sphere (Lynch, 2006). How much of an opening has there been? Where has it taken place? And can we see any correlation between openings and mobilization?

In the brief country studies that follow, I compare media systems qualitatively with how William Rugh categorized them in a classic study of the Arab press in the 1970s and his revised analysis of 2004, as well as comparing trajectories of repression over time as measured by the three indexes.

Table 2: Rugh's Typology of the Arab Press, 1979 and 2004

	<i>Mobilization</i>	<i>Loyalist</i>	<i>Diverse</i>	<i>Transitional (2004)</i>
<i>Press Characteristics</i>				
Ownership	Agents of regime	Private	Private	Mixed
Variety among papers	Non-diverse	Non-diverse	Diverse	Diverse
Attitude toward regime	Support	Support	Pro and con	Pro and con
Style and tone	Active, contentious	Passive	Varied	Diverse
<i>Political conditions</i>				
Ruling group	Revolutionary	Traditionalist	Various	Various
Public debate	None	None	Active	Active
Public opposition	Non-existent	Non-existent	Institutionalized	Limited
<i>Countries where system prevails (1970s)</i>				
	Algeria	Bahrain	Lebanon	
	Egypt	Jordan	Morocco	
	Iraq	Qatar	Kuwait	
	Libya	Saudi Arabia		
	The Sudan	Tunisia		
	Syria	UAE		
	Yemen (PDRY)			
<i>Countries where system prevails (2003)</i>				
	Syria	Bahrain	Lebanon	Algeria
	Libya	Oman	Morocco	Egypt
	The Sudan	Palestine	Kuwait	Jordan
		Qatar	Yemen	Tunisia
		Saudi Arabia	Iraq	
		UAE		

(Source: Rugh, 1979; 2004; emphases mine)

If we compare the situation as analyzed by Rugh in 1979 to the situation in the past few years leading up to the wave of revolts, what changes would we see in the large picture? In his updated assessment published in 2004, Rugh argued that the Arab press systems continue to exist, but in a changing international and regional context politically, economically, and technologically. He maintained his three existing ideal types, but added a fourth, a mixed type combining government domination (as in the mobilization model) with a freer, critical element as might be found in the diverse model. In Table 2 I have bolded the states that, in Rugh's judgment, had moved from one system to another in the intervening quarter

century. By this reckoning, the systems in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen became less repressive over time, while Syria, Libya and Bahrain remained broadly as they were. However, the category in which Egypt and Tunisia find themselves in this table is the one categorized above all by its complexity – in terms of ownership, legal framework etc – and it is far from clear that one should consider this category as simply lying between mobilization and diverse in terms of freedom of expression.

In each country summary below I offer a brief qualitative snapshot and a re-categorization where appropriate in terms of Rugh's ideal types. The descriptions and typological analysis in what follows draw mainly on Freedom House's (FH) *Freedom of the Press 2010* report, current Reporters Without Borders (RSF) country files (<http://en.rsf.org/>) and www.pressreference.com.

I also present in each case a chart of the three indexes over time. It will be apparent that the indexes are not capturing quite the same information, since they do not always present similar patterns. Since in this part of the analysis we are interested in trends rather than absolute scores, it is worth us considering all these indexes as broadly indicative of limits on freedom of expression in our countries of interest, while remaining aware of the limitations of the data. To the extent that the indexes indicate a similar trend over time, we can be more confident that they are reflecting reasonably well some aspects, at least, of the complex realities of the media environments under discussion. In the case of the newest index, the EIU civil liberties data, since it has only been compiled since 2006, once every two years, there are only three data points available to date – not enough to establish clear trends. Nevertheless, I chart these points with a trend line in each case, while handling the results with caution in the analysis. As in figures 1-3, I have converted the data into an index of repression similar to the other two, i.e. with greater repression scoring higher, by multiplying by 10 and subtracting the result from 100, so that the most democratic states will score low and the most repressive will approach scores of 100.

Country Analyses

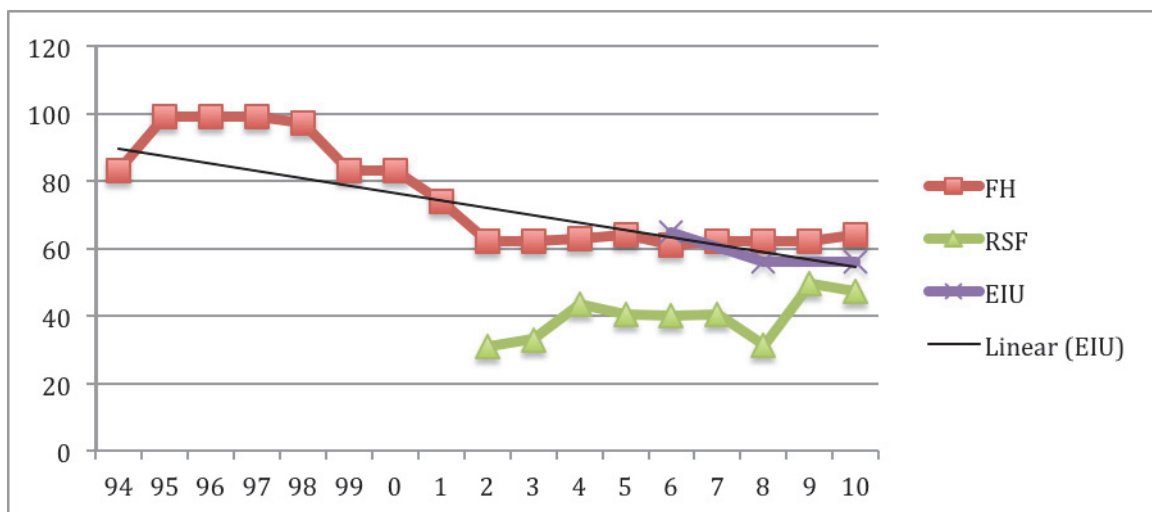
Algeria

Television and radio remain entirely state-owned, although 60% of households have satellite dishes. The printed press is large and vibrant, over 100 dailies and weeklies. But it operates under severe constraints due to government ownership of printing presses and control over advertising placement, and use of defamation and other laws to punish producers. Self-censorship is rife. Internet penetration is 13%. *Categories: mobilization broadcast media, diverse but constrained print. Less constrained than 1970s. Rugh's 2004 verdict stands: Transitional.*

Since 1980, when Freedom House began its index of Press Freedom, Algeria has been classified as ‘not free’ with a brief window of ‘partially free’ in 1990-92, cautious liberalization by the authoritarian regime before a military crackdown and civil war, including since 1992 of a state of emergency. Since 2002, FH has judged Algeria to be hovering just above the threshold for ‘partially free,’ in the low 60s.

RSF’s account of the past eight years, during which FH’s scores are more or less flat, shows upward movement from around 30 in 2002 to around 50 in 2010. EIU’s civil liberties index improves and holds steady at 4.41/10 (2006: 3.53 2008: 4.41 2010: 4.41). An inconclusive picture: Algeria is better off than it was in the 1990’s, but is holding steady at a lower level of repression or drifting toward greater repression.

Figure 4: Algeria



x-axis: year from 1994-2010, y-axis: score 100 = most repressive, score 0 = most free.

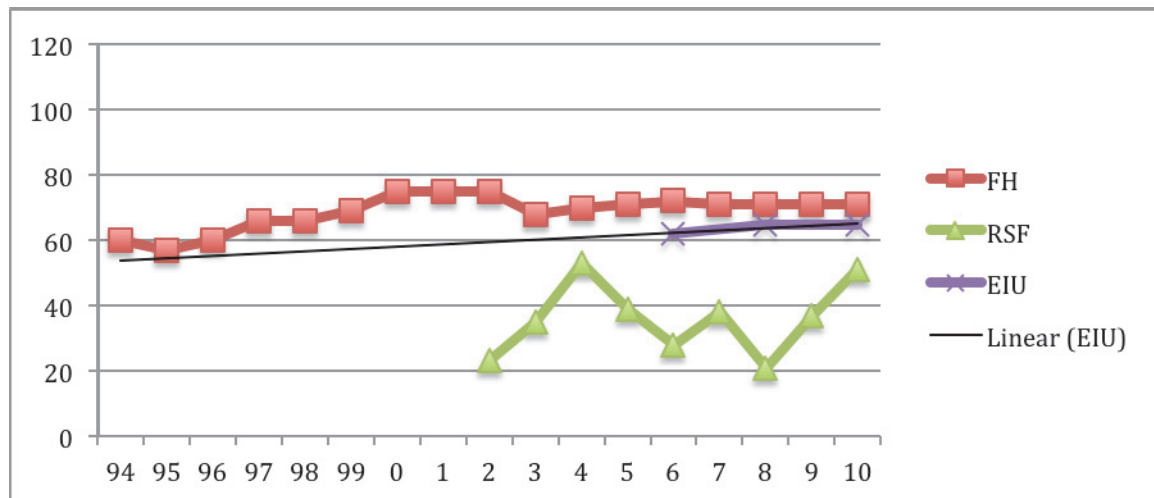
Bahrain

The state has a monopoly on broadcast media, although almost all have access to satellite television. The state exerts influence over privately-owned print media through censors at the Ministry of Culture and Information and the threat of imprisonment under the 2002 publications law or other elements of criminal law, although some remain critical despite what RSF calls “relentless political pressure.” Bahrain telecommunications company filters internet access, particularly to sites dealing with human rights or politics. *Categories: still loyalist.*

FH rated Bahrain ‘not free’ 1980-1993. Once numerical scoring began in 1994, Bahrain was rated ‘partially free’ for two years before reverting to ‘not free’ from 1997 to the present. RSF’s scores are particularly erratic for the period 2002-10, with no over-all trend discernable, but on a sharp upward swing since 2008. EIU points to a modest decline in civil liberties since 2006 (2006: 3.82 2008: 3.53

2010: 3.53). No strong over-all trend.

Figure 5: Bahrain



x-axis: year from 1994-2010, y-axis: score 100 = most repressive, score 0 = most free.

Egypt

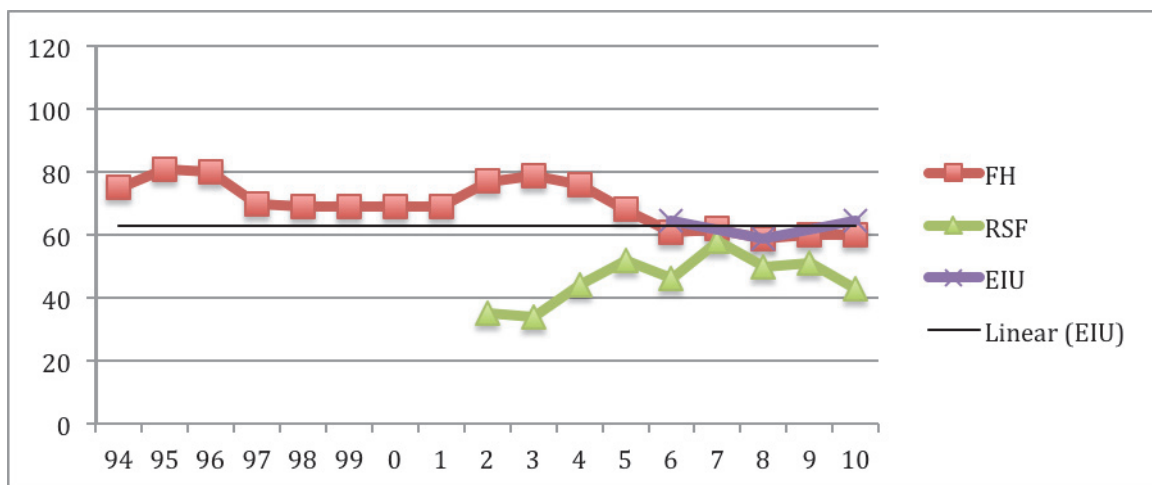
Until the revolution, all terrestrial television broadcasters remained state-owned, but private and pan-Arab stations were accessible via satellite. The radio monopoly ended in 2003, but private radio concentrated on entertainment programming. In 2005, Egyptian journalist Thomas Gorguissian noted that "The print media ... is witnessing a big boom, at least quantitatively. Dozens of newspapers, mainly of tabloid style, have appeared.... A lot of local publications are coming out, and they have good circulation. The opinion pages in the print media and especially in the so-called 'independent' newspapers are vivid and full of debate on religious and social issues" (Gorguissian et al, 2005, 7). In 2010 RSF noted that "despite a state of emergency and draconian laws, Egyptian journalists do their utmost to roll back the limits imposed on them. Privately-owned opposition newspapers and the independent press compete for readers' attention at newsstands with the official government press."⁸ The laws are many (RSF mentions 32, FH 35) and punitive, and defamation lawsuits against journalists frequent. FH notes that as well as "legal and regulatory harassment, journalists and bloggers in 2009 commonly faced physical assaults, illegal detention, abduction, and confiscation of equipment." FH argued that the more than 550 print publications disguised the government's role as owner and sponsor, not least through ownership of 99% of newspaper retail outlets and financial support of state media. The system has clearly become far more diverse than the 1970s. But media remained under severe pressure throughout the Mubarak period, and the dominant organs were still state-owned and/or significantly influenced by the government. Perhaps the best characterization of the media system is a *partially diversified mobilization* system.

⁸ RSF *World Report 2010 – Egypt*, since updated, but accessible via <http://web.archive.org/web/20110201014335/http://en.rsf.org/report-egypt.149.html>

I concur with Rugh's 2004 "*transitional*."

Egypt's trajectory according to FH is more complicated than most in MENA. From 1980-85, it was assessed as 'partially free' for print media and 'not free' for broadcast media. It was judged 'partially free' in both areas from 1986 to 1993. Once numerical scoring began in 1994 it was scored 'not free' through to 2010, with the exception of 2008 when its score dipped just below 60 to bring it into the 'partially free' category. RSF shows an increase in repression in the middle of the past decade, followed by a partial relaxation in 2010. EIU seems to show the reverse, with an *increase* in civil liberties in 2008, sliding back in 2010 to 2006 levels. EIU seems more in tune with FH here than with RSF (2006: 3.53 2008: 4.12 2010: 3.53). The trajectory seems to be more repression in the 1990s than the 1980s, some relaxation since around 2004.

Figure 6: Egypt

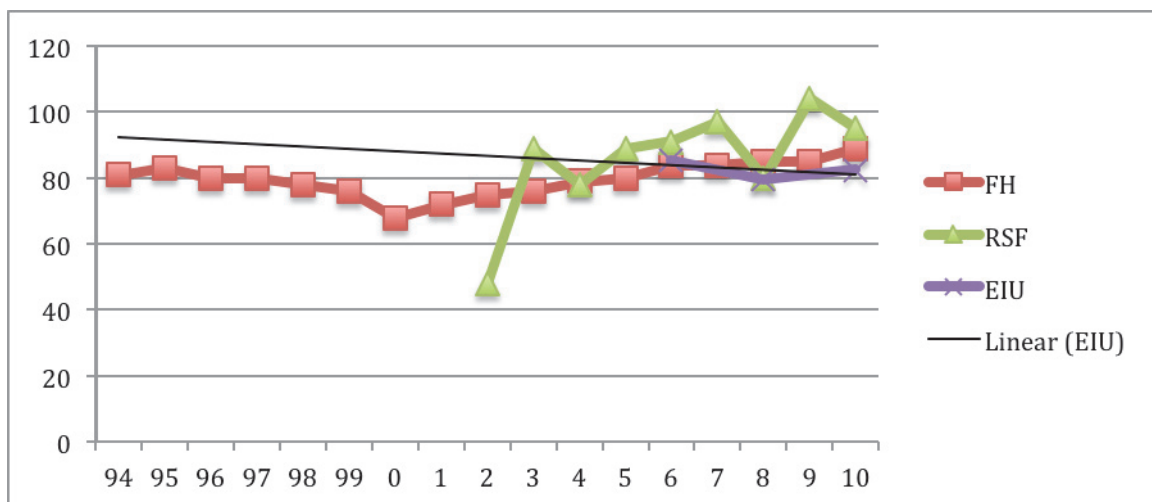


x-axis: year from 1994-2010, y-axis: score 100 = most repressive, score 0 = most free.

Iran

RSF and FH agree that Iran's system is among the most repressive in the region, particularly in 2009 in the face of widespread protests. Article 175 of the Constitution bans private broadcasting. Satellite dishes are illegal and, unlike some other countries where that is the case, are sometimes confiscated. The daily newspapers that dominate are government-owned or closely aligned with it. Post-revolutionary Iran remains a *mobilization* system.

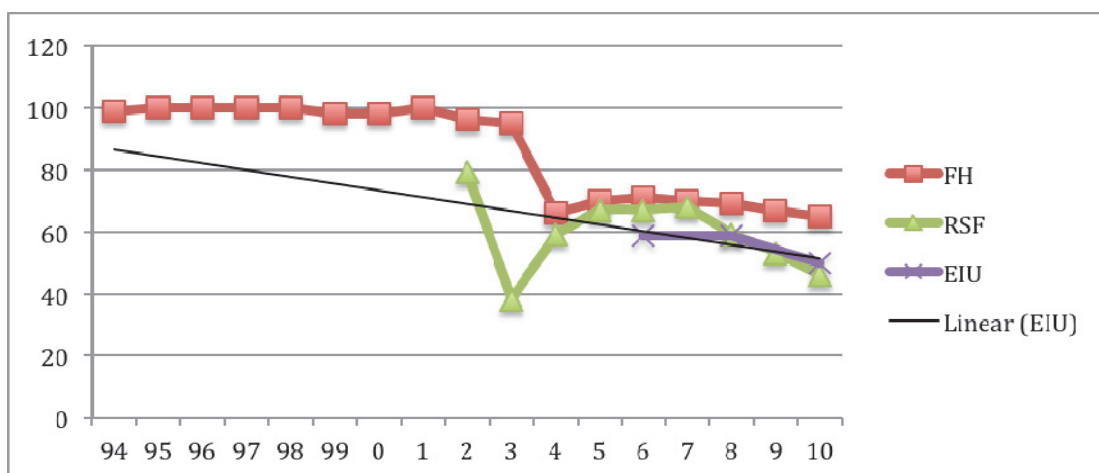
FH judged Iran to be 'partially free' in both print and broadcast media in the immediately post-revolutionary period of 1980-1, but then 'not free' through 2010. RSF shows increasing repression throughout the past decade. EIU sees slight improvement in 2008 over 2006 but then regression (2006: 1.47 2008: 2.06 2010: 1.76).

Figure 7: Iran

x-axis: year from 1994-2010, y-axis: score 100 = most repressive, score 0 = most free.

Iraq

“Hundreds of print publications and dozens of private television and radio channels operate all over the country, but most are associated with a political party, ethnic group, labor syndicate, or social organization” and suffer from limited finances.⁹ Press laws, violence and intimidation constrain journalists. Around 40% have access to satellite television. A fragile *diverse* system.

Figure 8: Iraq

x-axis: year from 1994-2010, y-axis: score 100 = most repressive, score 0 = most free.

Iraq has been ‘not free’ for as long as the index has existed. While the score came down significantly after the 2003 invasion, dropping from the high 90s to 66, it has since hovered around 70, coming down again to 65 by 2010, but never into ‘partially free’ territory. RSF shows a sharper improvement in freedoms in the past

⁹ Freedom House Freedom of the Press 2010: Iraq, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2010/iraq>.

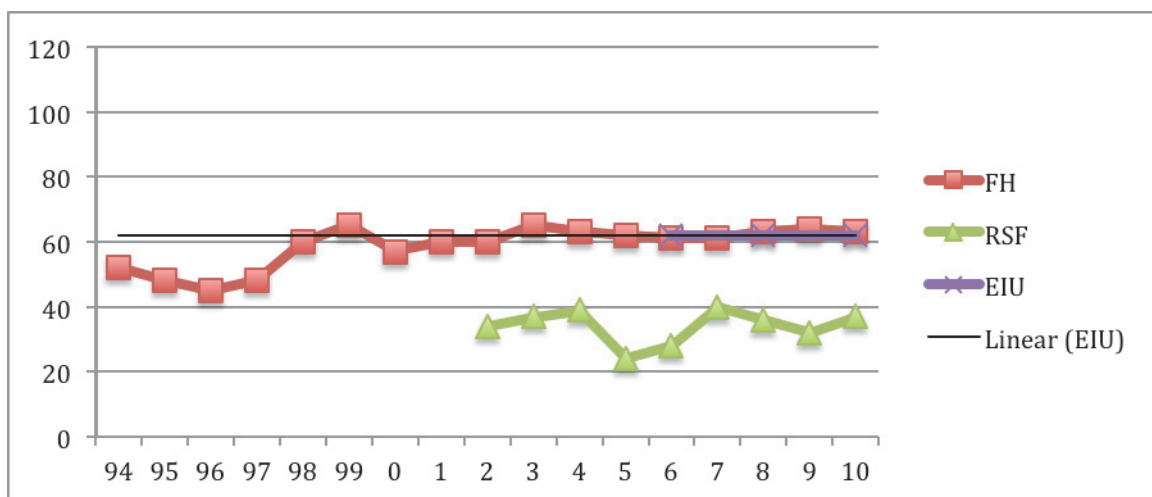
few years than does FH. EIU also shows a significant improvement in 2010 (2006: 4.12 2008: 4.12 2010: 5).

Jordan

The state maintains an effective monopoly on terrestrial television (one private station has struggled to launch), and a restrictive approach to radio licensing. The press is quite constrained by fines and other penalties. “Veneration for the monarchy, religion, but also state institutions and the men who head them are all ‘red lines’ that journalists must not cross”.¹⁰ *Loyalist*. In 2004, Rugh considered the system transitional, but the failures of media privatization initially advocated by King Abdullah suggest that this label might be optimistic.

FH rated Jordan ‘not free’ from 1980 to 1992. It was then ‘partially free’ from 1993 to 2002, except 1999. From 2003-2010 it was scored ‘not free’ with scores in the low to mid 60s. The RSF trend is unclear, but is in the direction of slightly greater repression. EIU holds steady at 3.82/10.

Figure 9: Jordan



x-axis: year from 1994-2010, y-axis: score 100 = most repressive, score 0 = most free.

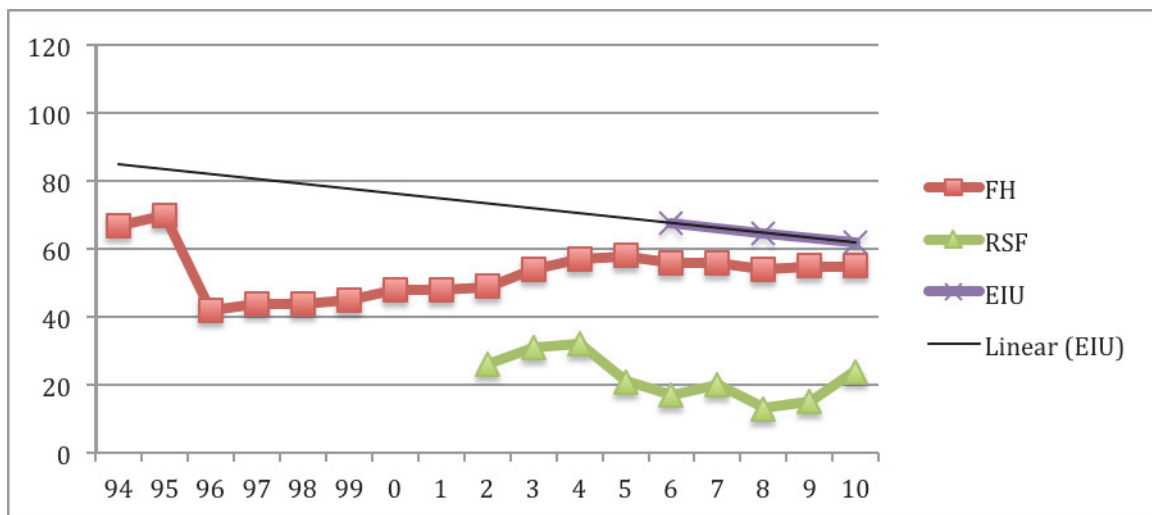
Kuwait

The state owns nine local radio stations and five television stations, but there are also 16 privately-owned television stations and satellite access, and 14 Arabic and 3 English privately-owned newspapers. There are some elements of loyalist media: both FH and RSF note self-censorship and ‘red lines.’ *Diverse*. Rugh categorized the press of the 1970s and 2004 as diverse. The present day seems broadly consistent with that, although there was a more controlled period between the 1970s and now, and things may be slipping back in a more controlled direction today.

¹⁰ RSF World Report 2010: Jordan <http://en.rsf.org/report-jordan.155.html> .

When there were separate FH scores for print and broadcast media, 1980-88, Kuwait scored ‘partially free’ on the former and ‘not free’ on the latter. Once the scores were combined, this became a ‘not free’ through 1995. From 1996 to 2010 Kuwait has been ‘partially free’ with scores rising from the mid- to high 40s in the 1990s to the mid- to high 50s in the past decade, pushing up towards the ‘not free’ boundary. RSF shows a sharp uptick in repression at the end of the decade back to (still low) 2002 levels. EIU shows steady improvement in civil liberties 2006-10, however (2006: 3.24 2008: 3.53 2010: 3.82)

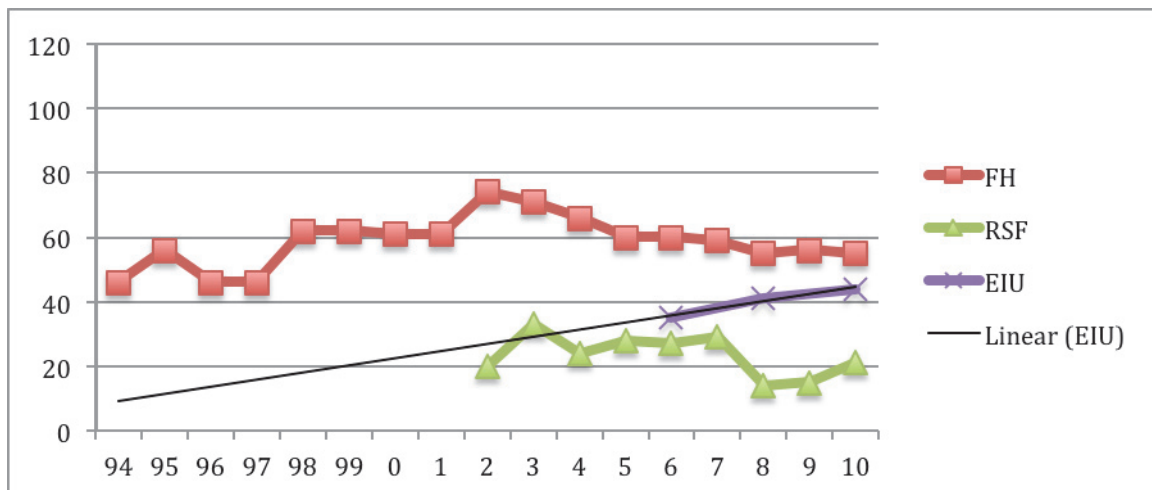
Figure 10: Kuwait



x-axis: year from 1994-2010, y-axis: score 100 = most repressive, score 0 = most free.

Lebanon

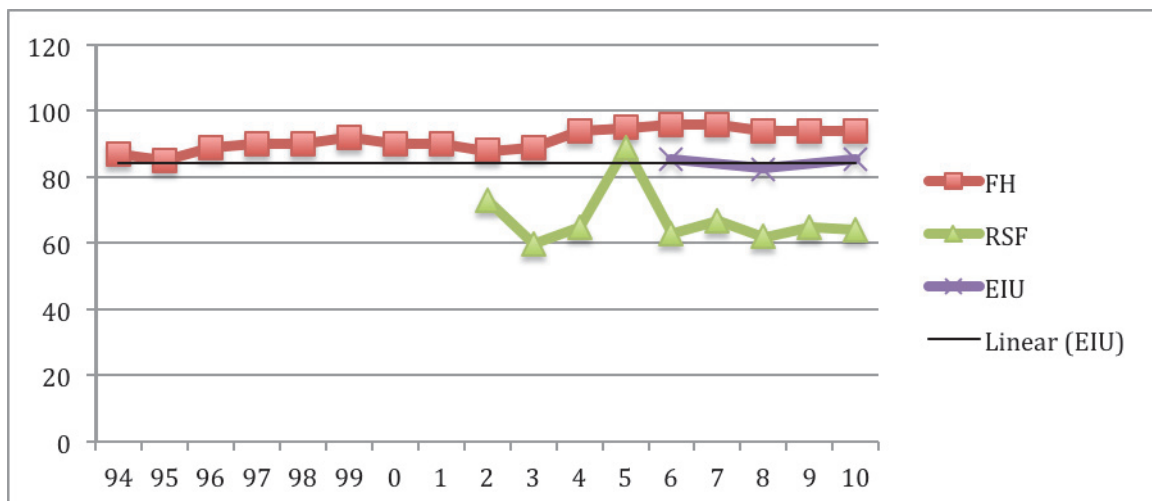
“All national daily newspapers are privately owned, as are most television and radio outlets” (FH) Lebanon remains *diverse*. Lebanon was rated ‘partially free’ for the period 1980-88, and again 1992-97 and 2005-10, with periods of ‘not free’ in between. Numerical scores leapt in 1998 and climbed from there to a peak of 74 in 2002 before declining reasonably steadily since. EIU shows deteriorating civil liberties 2006-10 (2006: 6.47 2008: 5.88 2010: 5.59). RSF shows an erratic decade.

Figure 11: Lebanon

x-axis: year from 1994-2010, y-axis: score 100 = most repressive, score 0 = most free.

Libya

“The government owns and strictly controls nearly all print and broadcast media” (FH). *Mobilization*. While not scoring as high as Iraq under Saddam Hussein, Libya has one of the most consistently repressive scores in the region. EIU and RSF also give consistently poor scores (EIU 2006: 1.47 2008: 1.76 2010: 1.47).

Figure 12: Libya

x-axis: year from 1994-2010, y-axis: score 100 = most repressive, score 0 = most free.

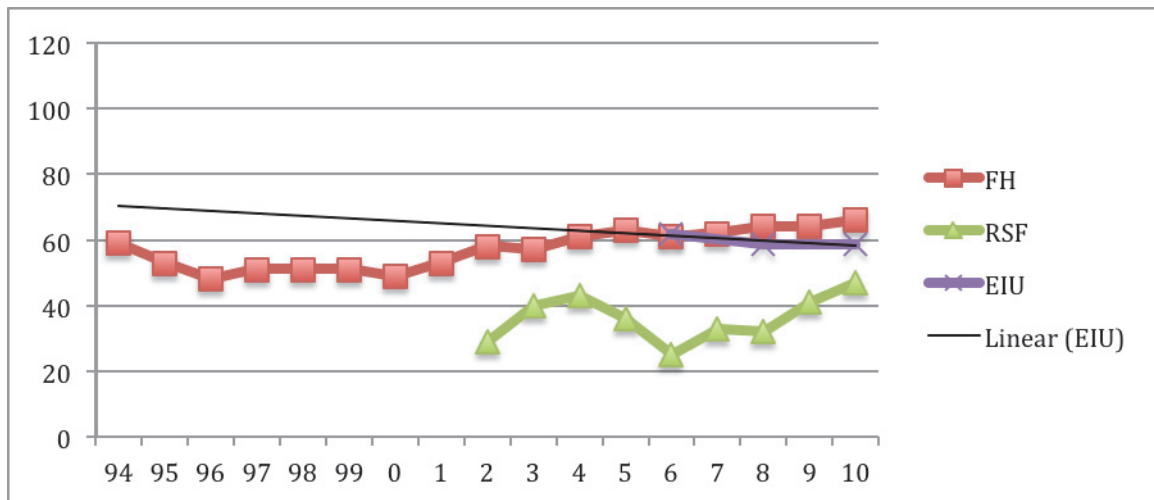
Morocco

Broadcast media are 'dominated by the state' with satellite available. FH estimates more than 70% of the press is privately owned. But constraints are significant and self-censorship rife. Rugh considered it *diverse* in the 1970s and 2004; today it probably remains so.

For the period when print and broadcast media were scored separately, Morocco

was considered 'partially free' in the former and 'not free' in the latter. From 1989 to 1991 it was 'not free' and then 'partially free' from 1991 to 2003, with numerical scores around 50 for the latter half of the 1990s, before they began to climb. From 2004 to 2010 it has been 'not free' with scores trending up from the low 60s to 66 in 2010. EIU scores 2006-10 are broadly flat (2006: 3.82 2008: 4.12 2010: 4.12); RSF joins FH in showing greater repression as the decade wore on, with a dip mid-decade.

Figure 13: Morocco

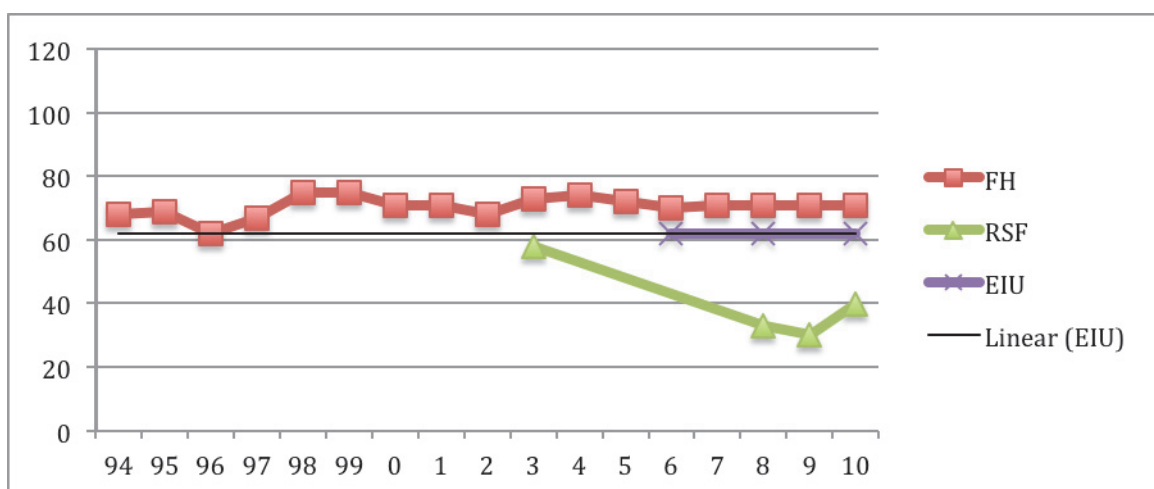


x-axis: year from 1994-2010, y-axis: score 100 = most repressive, score 0 = most free.

Oman

State monopoly on broadcasting and tight control of the printed press. *Loyalist*. On the FH index, Oman has been rated 'not free' from 1980 to 2010. EIU has Oman steady at 4.12. RSF is inconclusive.

Figure 14: Oman

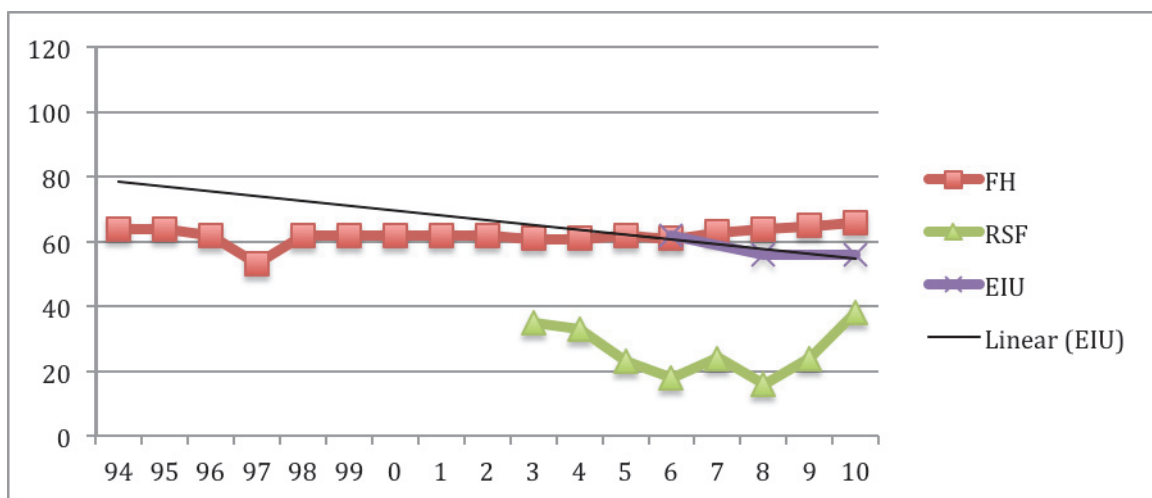


x-axis: year from 1994-2010, y-axis: score 100 = most repressive, score 0 = most free.

Qatar

Red lines are very strong and self-censorship imperative, not least due to wide government powers under the unreformed 1979 press law (RSF). Private newspapers belong to members of the royal family, as does Al Jazeera, which while arguably promoting democratization in parts of the Arab world, is constrained in its coverage of Qatar itself and certain near allies. *Loyalist*. Apart from 1997, Qatar has been consistently rated ‘not free’ with scores in the low 60s, trending upward in the latter half of the present decade. RSF shows the upward trend starting later, rising quite steeply 2008-10. EIU does not show decline in civil liberties in the same period (2006: 3.82 2008: 4.41 2010: 4.41).

Figure 15: Qatar



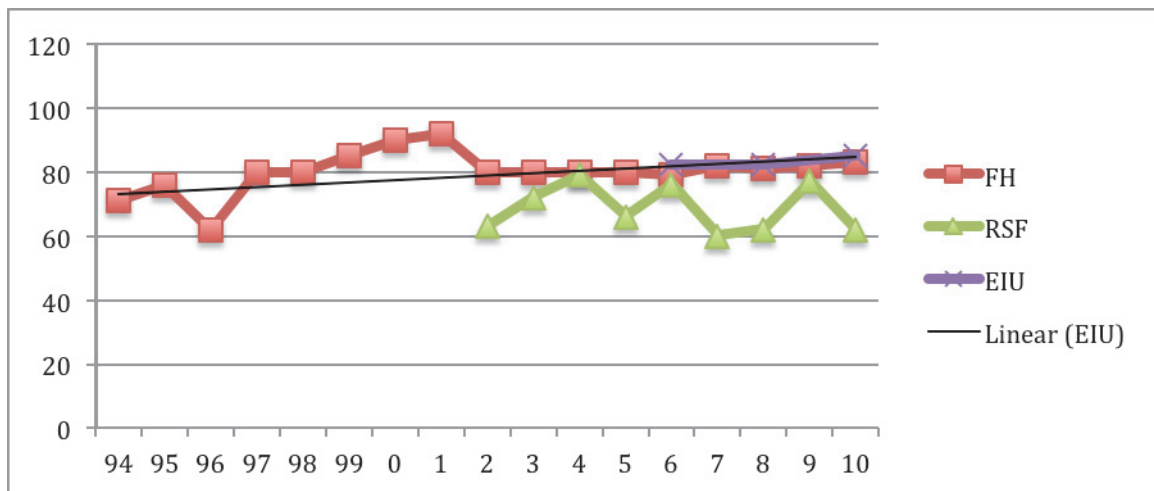
x-axis: year from 1994-2010, y-axis: score 100 = most repressive, score 0 = most free.

Saudi Arabia

“The government owns and operates all domestic broadcast media, and content is heavily censored. Most privately-owned print media are connected to the government or royal family, which exert control through means including the approval or rejection of new editors” (FH). Satellite dishes are illegal but tolerated. *Loyalist*.

In common with Iran, Iraq, Libya, and Syria, Saudi Arabia has been consistently rated ‘not free’ since 1980, although it approached the boundary of ‘partially free’ in 1996. RSF scores vary, but the Kingdom ended the decade more or less where it was in 2002. EIU shows a decline in civil liberties at the end of the decade (2006: 1.76 2008: 1.76 2010: 1.47).

Figure 16: Saudi Arabia

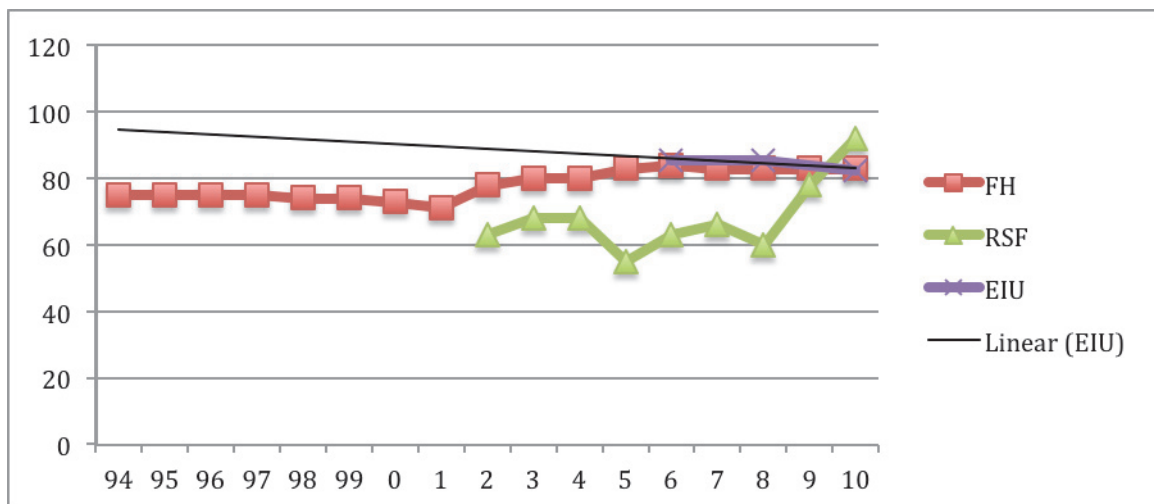


x-axis: year from 1994-2010, y-axis: score 100 = most repressive, score 0 = most free.

Syria

“The Baath party has kept total control over the media” (RSF). FH notes minor openings to non-political private media. But most critical media remains confined to the internet. *Mobilization*. Syria has always been rated ‘not free’ since 1980. The trend was reasonably flat in the 1990s, rising above 80 since 2002, when the brief ‘Damascus Spring’ of President Bashar Al Assad’s earliest days in office gave way to renewed repression of media and civil society in general. RSF concurs on the deteriorating condition, particularly since 2008. EIU shows a slight *improvement* since 2008 (2006: 1.47 2008: 1.47 2010: 1.76).

Figure 17: Syria



x-axis: year from 1994-2010, y-axis: score 100 = most repressive, score 0 = most free.

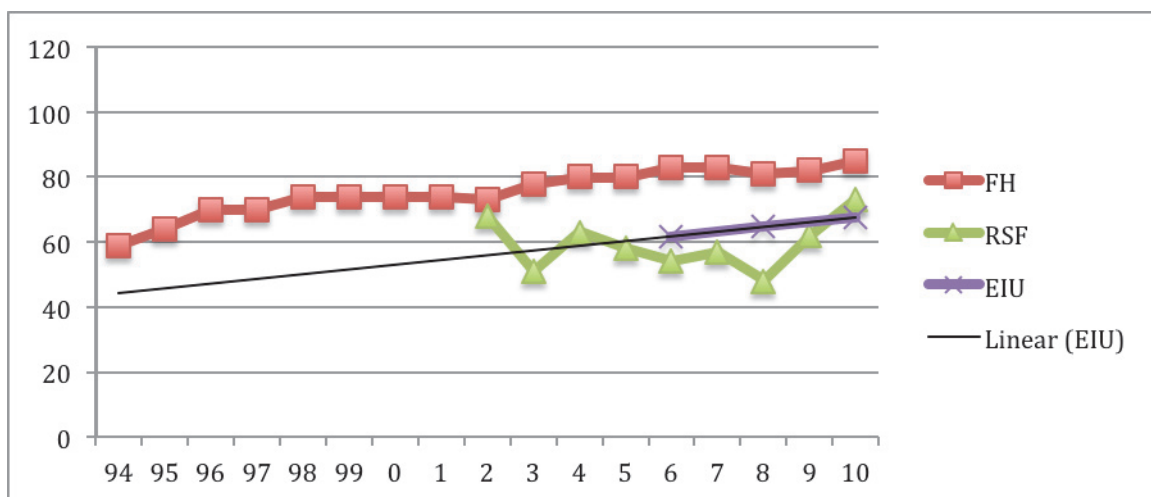
Tunisia

In early 2010 RSF reported “Virtually the entire media landscape is under the

direct control of the government or owned by those close to the president.” FH noted high internet penetration by regional standards at 34%, but “Internet cafes are state run and operate under police surveillance, and users must register their names and other personal information before accessing”: *loyalist*. Rugh (2004) argued that Tunisia was transitional, but the government’s very tight control of state-owned and private media alike suggests that any transition was aborted (until the revolution, of course).

Tunisia was rated ‘partially free’ in print and ‘not free’ in broadcast media when those were scored separately from 1980 to 1988. After a ‘not free’ 1989 it was scored ‘partially free’ 1989-1994. Since then it has been ‘not free’ with a fairly steady rise in score to 85 in 2010, the year that ended with Mohammed Bouazizi’s self-immolation in Sidi Bouzid. RSF shows more variation over the past decade, but a sharp rise 2008-10. EIU concurs, with steady deterioration in civil liberties (2006: 3.82 2008: 3.53 2010: 3.24). In the decade that Egypt was somewhat loosening controls on expression, Tunisia was tightening them.

Figure 18: Tunisia

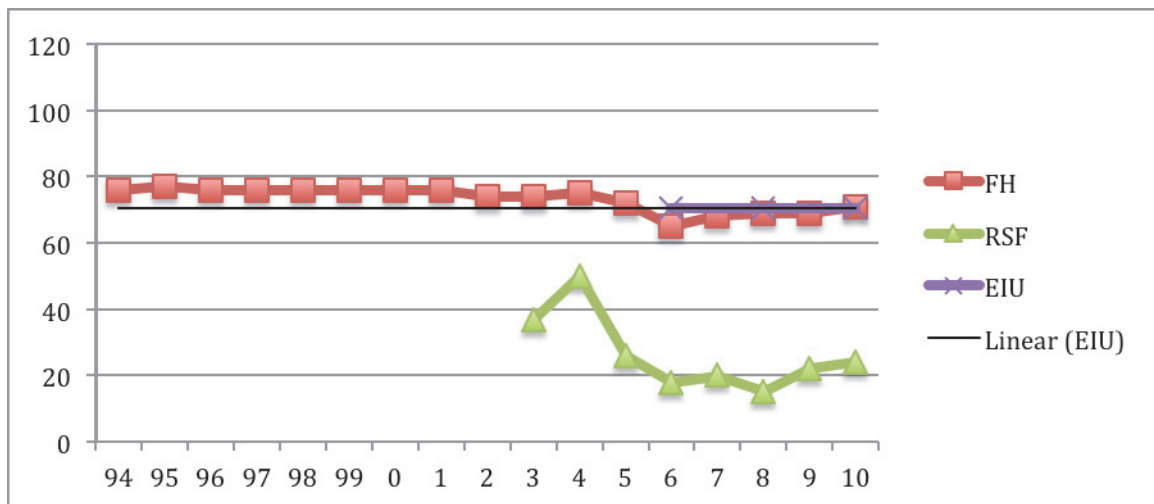


x-axis: year from 1994-2010, y-axis: score 100 = most repressive, score 0 = most free.

United Arab Emirates

Broadcast media are dominated by companies controlled by or at least invested in by the government. Print is more diverse, with six English and five Arabic dailies. High potential fines and control of distribution constrain the media – issues of publications containing criticism of the Emirates or material deemed offensive do not reach the newsstands. *Loyalist/diverse* (Rugh considered it loyalist in both 1979 and 2004). The Emirates was rated ‘partially free’ for print and ‘not free’ for broadcast 1980-88. Since 1989 it has been rated ‘not free’ with scores since 1994 mostly in the 70s. RSF scores show no clear pattern: 2010 is lower than 2003, but the 2008-10 trend is upward. EIU is steady at a low 2.94.

Figure 19: U.A.E.

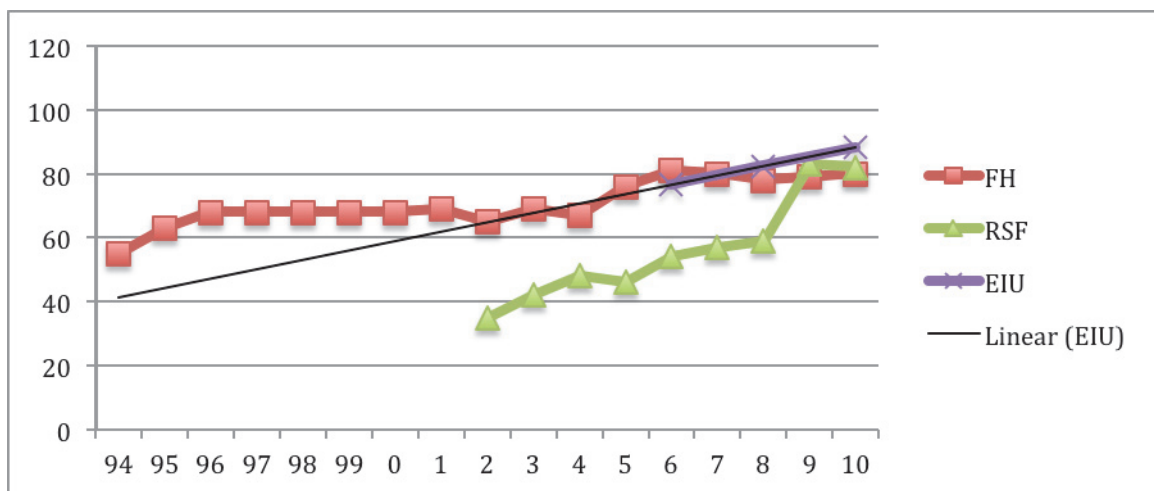


x-axis: year from 1994-2010, y-axis: score 100 = most repressive, score 0 = most free.

Yemen

Government has a monopoly on terrestrial broadcast media. Print is more diverse, although the Ministry of Information “exerts influence over the print media in part by controlling nearly all printing presses and manipulating advertising subsidies” (FH) as well as legal and other action. Internet penetration is a tiny 1.8%, with access via filtered government providers. *Mobilization*. Rugh considered it to have moved to diverse by 2004. If so, it was at best transitional by 2010. Yemen has been rated ‘not free’ since 1980 with the exception of 1994, when it was rated 55. The trend since then has been flat at 68 in the latter half of the 1990s, climbing since then with a brief dip in 2002. RSF shows a marked, steady increase in repression 2002-10. EIU concurs (2006: 2.35 2008: 1.76 2010: 1.18).

Figure 20: Yemen



x-axis: year from 1994-2010, y-axis: score 100 = most repressive, score 0 = most free.

Analysis and Conclusions

Table 3: Summary - Censorship & MENA Uprisings

	<u>Category 1979/2004/2010</u>	<u>Repression Trend</u>	<u>Instability</u>	<u>Revolutionary uprising?</u>
Algeria	<i>Mobilization → Transitional</i>	<i>Long term, less repression; shorter term, flat/slight rise</i>		
Bahrain	<i>Loyalist</i>	<i>Slight rise.</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Yes</i>
Egypt	<i>Mobilization → Transitional</i>	<i>Some relaxation in past decade compared to 1990s.</i>		<i>Yes</i>
Iran	<i>Mobilization</i>	<i>Highly repressive, getting more so.</i>	<i>High</i>	
Iraq	<i>Mobilization → Diverse</i>	<i>Becoming less repressive</i>	<i>High</i>	
Jordan	<i>Loyalist → Transitional (Rugh) → Loyalist</i>	<i>Flat</i>		
Kuwait	<i>Diverse</i>	<i>Flat or slight decline in repression</i>	<i>Low</i>	
Lebanon	<i>Diverse</i>	<i>Slightly increasing</i>	<i>High</i>	
Libya	<i>Mobilization</i>	<i>High and slight increase</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Yes</i>
Morocco	<i>Diverse</i>	<i>Slight increase</i>		
Oman	<i>Loyalist</i>	<i>Flat</i>		
Qatar	<i>Loyalist</i>	<i>Rising</i>	<i>Low</i>	
Saudi	<i>Loyalist</i>	<i>Slight rise</i>		
Syria	<i>Mobilization</i>	<i>High and slight rise</i>		<i>Yes</i>
Tunisia	<i>Loyalist → Transitional (Rugh) → Loyalist</i>	<i>Steady increase</i>		<i>Yes</i>
UAE	<i>Loyalist</i>	<i>Flat</i>	<i>Low</i>	
Yemen	<i>Mobilization → Diverse (Rugh) → Transitional</i>	<i>Steady increase</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Yes</i>

Table 3 summarizes the results of this brief survey. The Category column compares the present to 1979 and 2004 when Rugh conducted his analyses. The Repression Trend column presents the approximate combined trend of the three indexes. Clearly, where they diverge significantly in their assessments, one must be cautious. The last two columns duplicate those of Table 1.

Over the past decade Egypt's partial liberalization makes it unusual among states that have experienced major upheavals. Indeed, the majority of states in the region appear to have responded to changes in technology and the international environment by either maintaining or increasing repressive systems of information management.

To the extent that there is a relationship between repression of expression and mobilization, the trends provide some indication that high or increasing repression might increase the probability of mobilization. The mechanism could be that repressive systems by denying mediated opportunities to express frustrations (the 'safety valve' function of free expression) increase the pressure to meet face to face and act in public spaces. Habermas' original public sphere was the coffee shop, not the newspaper. Asef Bayat's 'political street' as a sphere of public action as well as discussion may be a logical outcome of unfree mass media (Bayat, 2009). However, several states of the region maintained increased repression without reaping significant anti-regime mobilization, so it does not seem to be a sufficient cause.

Does Egypt's experience argue that high or increasing repression is also not a necessary cause of mobilization? The evidence from the indexes is ambiguous. A more detailed case study is required to establish the story of expression in Egypt over the past decade and longer. But the regional data seems to fairly convincingly refute Mr Mubarak's argument. If there is any causal relationship between repression of expression and popular mobilization, it seems to be the opposite of what he claimed: high or increasing repression is more likely to provoke regime-challenging mobilization than liberalization is. To the extent that the Egyptian regime was liberalizing, it was doing the right thing to head off a revolution.

Directions for Future Research

We still do not understand enough about the effects of censorship. We can probably generalize that it has a degrading effect on the public sphere and might encourage elements of both reactance – finding alternative paths to information – and a more apathetic balancing, where producers and consumers adapt themselves to the status quo. There may be possibilities for large-n studies on social movements and revolutions that can seek to measure the importance of the degree of closure of an information environment relative to other factors in a social movement's opportunity structure. Among the difficulties will be the relative scarcity of systematically-gathered long-term data. The existing indexes go back at most 30 years. The FH index, while useful, suffers from more than one change in coding methods over that period. RSF's index is consistent, but covers a much shorter period, as does the even more recently established EIU index, which has a broader array of concerns than the other two. Anyone considering statistical analyses may have to begin by producing a brand new data set, returning to historical materials and accessing people and data previously inaccessible. Given

the nature of the subject, that may in any case produce better data than could have been produced contemporaneously.

Another way to take advantage of formerly censored societies opening up is that key actors may now be more prepared to discuss the effects of censorship at the level of individual producers, consumers, and censors. Some such material has already emerged from the former Soviet Bloc. A systematic project of interviews within a coherent theoretical framework informed by political science, media studies, and psychology could identify how a given censorship regime affects producers and consumers, as well as the media of transmission and their content. Attempting to understand such processes at the individual level could make a contribution to grasping the broader social effects of such practices.

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