



Civil Resistance Against Authoritarian and Religious Radicalism



Despotic Robustness and Social Movement Incapacitation in the Middle East



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Email: hq@WorldAntiExtremism.org

Partners



About the Author

Fereydoon Rahmani is a full-time faculty member, Undergraduate Program Director, and an Associate Professor of sociology at the Department of Equity Studies of York University in Toronto, Canada. He has been working at diverse universities and international research organizations in Europe, as well as in the Middle East. He has taught at universities in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, including Salahaddin, Duhok, Koya, Lebanese-French University, and Jihan University, and served as Chair of the Sociology Department at Duhok University until 2014.



Fereydoon Rahmani

Fereydoon Rahmani has done his BA in social research at the University of Tehran (1987), MA in sociology at the University of Vienna (1995), and PhD in sociology and urban development at the University of Vienna (1999)

Rahmani's research explores Critical Human Rights and the Middle East, Social Exclusion, Justice, War, Violence, Ethnicity, Social Policy, and Quality of Life. His early research focus was topics related to social demography, regional planning & urbanization, social movements, peace, and reconciliation. Rahmani coined the term "Rooftop Societies" for Middle Eastern countries, which postulates the existence of extensive socio-cultural and political incongruity. His most recent book titled "Rooftop Societies: The Middle East Paradox" is his latest sociological analysis of the Middle East, which has been translated into Farsi and soon in other languages.

Professor Rahmani is currently working on a book titled "Disappearance of Agency at the Age of War", while leading projects on the Quality of Life of refugees and internally displaced communities in Iraq and Syria.

Abstract

Across a century of recurrent uprisings, from the Iranian Constitutionalists to 1979 Iran, the Arab uprisings, Iraq (2003), Libya (2011), and Syria (December 2024), the Middle East demonstrates sustained mobilizational capacity alongside limited institutional transformation. This study seeks to explain this paradox by examining a durable authoritarian system supported by four key mechanisms: First, cohesive, rent-insulated coercive apparatuses that maintain regime security; second, managed pluralism, channeling political participation without granting genuine power; third digital surveillance, increasing protest diffusion while precisely targeting movement leaders; and forth leadership decapitation, which removes intermediaries and erodes organizational memory. Additional reinforcement comes from sacralised sovereignty and patriarchal moral economies, recasting dissent as moral disorder. Openings mainly arise when three conditions coincide: fracturing or overstretch of security forces, decline in foreign sponsorship and international appeasement, and disruptive exogenous shocks such as war or civil conflict that weaken fear equilibria, enabling mass mobilization. The Kurdish cases in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran illustrate that durable gains depend on the overlap of such openings with internal cohesion, institution-building, and sustained external support. Thus, this argument reorients focus from discrete events to underlying mechanisms: the key task is to dismantle the coercive–ideological nexus and transform temporary opportunities into enduring organizations, procedures, and laws.

Discussion

Since the late Ottoman era, the Middle East has moved in rhythms of revolt and recovery. Crowds have filled streets; associations, unions, and student or ethnic minority groups have stitched people together; and insurgent repertoires such as strikes, boycotts, and neighborhood committees have traveled from one generation to the next. Early constitutional and anti-imperial struggles, including the 1905–1911 Iranian Constitutional Revolution, gave way to Kurdish national uprisings that challenged not only specific regimes but also the Sykes–Picot order that split historical Kurdistan among Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran. The pattern continued through the Algerian War of Independence, the 1979 Iranian Revolution, and the 2011 Arab uprisings (Gelvin, 2016; McDowall, 2004; Natali, 2010). These were not isolated flare-ups. They reflect a long, learned repertoire organization met by repression, adaptation followed by diffusion, under shifting imperial, postcolonial, and authoritarian powers (Beinin & Vairel, 2011; Gelvin, 2016). That lineage explains today's paradox: mobilization is common, but converting courage into durable institutions remains difficult, not because of destiny or culture, but because every wave must rebuild its organizations in the teeth of systems designed to break them.



Demonstrators in Cairo's Tahrir Square on 8 February 2011

Despite some of the world's most entrenched authoritarian systems (governments with concentrated, unchecked power), the Middle East has not been politically quiet. Over the last century, and especially in the past two decades, the region has witnessed repeated cycles of mass mobilization, from nationwide demonstrations to anti-regime uprisings and, in some arenas, armed and paramilitary resistance (military-style groups supporting the regime or acting independently). The puzzle, then, is not why people mobilize but why surges of courage so often become short-lived episodes. Comparative research in authoritarianism (the study of non-democratic regimes) and social movements, alongside scholarship on gender/sexuality and minority politics, points to a consistent answer: coercive cohesion (unity among security forces), managed pluralism, patronage finance (state-provided economic rewards to loyal groups), and digital repression (government use of technology to restrict opposition) raise the cost of organization, fragment coalitions, and keep conversion channels (parties, unions, professional associations—organized groups meant to represent interests) weak or captured. These features turn visibility into volatility and volatility into exhaustion, preventing durable institutional gains (Bellin, 2004; Levitsky & Way, 2010). In this setting, authoritarian durability (regime persistence) is less about cultural exceptionalism (unique regional traditions) than institutional design. Security institutions with a strong corporate identity (a shared sense of belonging among personnel) and reliable financing make repression (use of force to suppress protest) credible and relatively inexpensive. When rents or parastatal revenues (state-owned enterprise income) insulate such apparatuses, incumbents can repress or contain dissent while minimizing elite defections (key regime supporters switching sides) (Bellin, 2004). At the same time, managed pluralism (elections, courts, media that function procedurally but are substantively encaged) channels participation without power and disables intermediaries capable of bargaining for change (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Digital platforms speed coordination yet give states sharper tools to surveil, choke off, and target leaders, shortening mobilizations, reducing lifespan, and heightening personal risk.

Socio-political movements in the Middle East are often highly visible but rarely consolidate into durable organizations or policy change. Explanations diverge. Exceptionalists (those who argue the region is fundamentally different) claim that cultural and communal formations (social groupings based on shared identity or values) channel mobilization into moral communities and personalized authority rather than programmatic parties (ideologically driven political groups), resulting in episodic, identity-centered protests (Kedourie, 1994; Lewis, 1990; Sharabi, 1988; Salamé, 1994). Anti-exceptionalist accounts foreground general mechanisms: authoritarian durability rests on cohesive, rent-insulated coercive apparatuses that constrain contention (active public protest and challenge to authority) (Bellin, 2004).

Mass uprisings can erupt when shifting expectations spark information cascades (rapid spread of new behavioral norms) that rapidly recalibrate perceived risks and opportunities (Kurzman, 2004). Meanwhile, ideology (system of beliefs justifying power) and affect (emotional experiences influencing compliance) sustain everyday compliance until fractures in elite cohesion create openings for defection and mobilization (Wedeen, 2019). A conditional reading says movements can succeed, but they do better when several factors converge: coercive institutions face fiscal or organizational strain; some elites defect and bridge to cross-class coalitions; organizers, often with diaspora help (support from people of the same origin living abroad) turn street protests into representative bodies; and “information shocks” (unexpected events that spread new information) aid coordination (Bellin 2004; Kurzman 2004). Tunisia’s 2011 ouster of Ben Ali fits this pattern, though lasting consolidation depends on post-transition bargaining and a developed party system (Angrist 2013; Roccu 2019). Rentier income (state revenue from natural resources) lets regimes sidestep representation and fund repression, deepening their hold (Beblawi & Luciani 1987). Sanctions work only when they cut patronage lifelines (flows of state resources to loyalists) without destroying opposition bases; otherwise, they shift costs onto organizers. In hybrid regimes (systems mixing authoritarian and democratic elements), elections and courts coordinate elites and contain society, sidelining unions, associations, and professional bodies that might turn anger into leverage. The result is durability at the top and exhaustion at the base—high salience (prominence), weak institutionalization, and repeated “relearning” under repression (Tarrow 2011; Tilly 2003).

Iran’s 2022–2023 Woman-Life-Freedom uprising exemplifies both promise and constraint. Women and youth recast everyday defiance into universal claims linking bodily autonomy to dignity, cutting across class and community. Decentralized repertoires diffused rapidly and reset national narratives, while rights groups’ documentation built evidence and networks for future openings. The state responded with intensified penalties, mass arrests, and lethal force; human-rights investigations report systematic violations and continuing impunity (Amnesty International, 2023). Without elite splits, organizational safe havens, or sustained cross-sector coordination, especially legally protected strikes or professional stoppages, contention remained episodic. State-approved substitutes (associations, Islamic labor councils, umbrella charities) absorbed resources while policing members; vague laws on assembly, national security, and online activity created legal tripwires; selective arrests raised leadership costs; and information controls, including throttling, severed links that could have scaled local protests.

Authoritarian rule in the Middle East is most resilient within its established structures, where coercion transforms acts of bravery into short-lived episodes. Movements gain leverage when their claims extend beyond these confines. Through external venues such as courts, parliaments, or liberal jurisdictions, suppressed groups can rebuild capacity and exert pressure via transnational networks. In exile, activists convert collective memory into infrastructure, including archives, documentation hubs, and liaison networks, and infrastructure into strategy, such as legal actions, targeted sanctions files, export control alerts, and accreditation campaigns. Each crackdown displaces expertise to the diaspora; each external achievement diminishes regime resources, procurement avenues, and protective narratives. The practical outcome is to prioritize institutionalization over episodic action: by standardizing documentation, legal and policy initiatives, and cross-field coalitions that connect human rights with areas such as aviation safety, anti-money laundering, export licensing, and professional ethics, movements can enhance coherence and sustainability. Results hinge on shifts in coercive capacity, elite fragmentation, organizational endurance (including diaspora networks), and information flow. Where cohesion weakens and organizations persist despite repression, dissent can succeed; otherwise, even large-scale mobilizations become contained or reversed. Addressing these dynamics in rentier, low-association environments remains central to both scholarly explanation and practical advocacy, underscoring the need to convert moments of bravery into procedures, precedents, and durable norms.

Kurdish political and social mobilization long predates post–World War II state formation. From the early modern era through the nineteenth century, principalities such as Botan, Bitlis, and Ardalan exercised negotiated sovereignty on the Ottoman–Safavid frontier via tribal confederations and religious authority (van Bruinessen, 1992). Nineteenth-century centralization, most notably the Tanzimat, eroded these arrangements and catalyzed uprisings like Bedir Khan Beg’s revolt (1840s) and Sheikh Ubeydullah’s rebellion (1880–1881), which already combined cross-border linkages with claims to communal self-rule (Olson, 1989; McDowall, 2004). The First World War shattered imperial frameworks: the Treaty of Sèvres (1920) briefly entertained Kurdish autonomy, but Lausanne (1923) reasserted the territorial exclusivity of new states, as Britain and France awkwardly prioritized consolidating mandates, building Iraq, and accommodating a resurgent Turkey over Kurdish self-determination. Interwar decades witnessed serial revolts such as Sheikh Said (1925), Ararat (1930), and Dersim (1937–1938) in Turkey; Simko Shikak (1918–1922) and the Republic of Mahabad (1946) in Iran; and recurrent Barzani insurgencies in Iraq, alongside everyday survival, migration, and associational life (Klein, 2011; McDowall, 2004; Eagleton, 1963). In Syria, state-building produced distinct modalities of exclusion (statelessness and the “Arab Belt”) that shaped later mobilization (Tejel, 2009).

Across these settings, a consistent pattern emerges where Kurdish gains are persistent yet structurally constrained, and durable advances typically coincide with exogenous shocks or patrons; domestic uprisings alone meet robust repression and legal–territorial closure (McDowall, 2004; Natali, 2010). Iraq illustrates the mechanism clearly, where the 1991 no-fly zone enabled de facto self-rule; after 2003, U.S. protection, federal constitutionalism, and anti-ISIS cooperation entrenched the Kurdistan Region, while oil corridors to Turkey externalized leverage (Stansfield, 2016; Natali, 2010). The 2017 independence referendum exposed the ceiling of agency without regional buy-in, as Baghdad retook disputed areas (International Crisis Group, 2018). In Syria, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) or Rojava expanded under U.S. partnership against ISIS but contracted following Turkish invasions in Afrin (2018) and 2019 Operation Peace Spring (orchestrated by Turkish Armed Forces, Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army, and Ba'athist Syrian Arab Armed Forces), demonstrating how governance durability tracks the patron's posture (Lead Inspector General, 2017–2025). In Turkey, the PKK's resilience and periodic electoral gains have not produced structural change in the absence of a sustained external protector; legal openings remain reversible (Human Rights Watch, 2019). In Iran, the rise and collapse under Soviet cover set a template, and recent border-security deals further constrained armed mobilization (Eagleton, 1963; International Crisis Group, 2023). Recurring mechanisms like airpower and sanctuary that invert coercive asymmetries, great-power bargains that redraw feasible options, resource diplomacy that externalizes risk, and legal-normative work (e.g., Anfal documentation) that accumulates long-term bargaining power, show that external factors are necessary but insufficient. Enduring advances occur only when exogenous openings meet intra-Kurdish cohesion and institution-building (Human Rights Watch, 1993; McDowall, 2004; Natali, 2010).

Eliminating or terrorizing political leaders, public intellectuals, lawyers, union heads, journalists, and community organizers systematically undercuts the very capacities that make collective action coherent and democratization possible in the Middle East. Movements fail merely because many people are aggrieved; they succeed when brokers translate diffuse discontent into coordinated strategies, negotiate across social cleavages, and signal credibility to onlookers and adversaries. Targeted assassinations, show trials, travel bans, smear campaigns, and carceral harassment sever these connective tissues. Authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, such as Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, have systematically used assassination, mass imprisonment, and so-called “rule-by-law” to decapitate oppositional leadership and raise the costs of collective action beyond the threshold needed for democratic change.

The killings of Kurdish leaders Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou (Vienna, 1989) and Sadegh Sharafkandi (Berlin, 1992), Iraq's Anfal campaign and the chemical attack on Halabja (1988), the assassination of Syrian Kurdish politician Mashaal Tammo (2011), and Turkey's prolonged incarceration and heavy sentencing of figures such as Selahattin Demirtaş exemplify a strategy that removes credible brokers, erodes tacit movement knowledge, and monopolizes public narratives. Without tough, experienced, and trusted political leadership or interlocutors, a strategy that brokers across cleavages is imminent for socio-political emancipation to collapse. The vacuum is filled by either naïve, inexperienced successors or radicals who lead to an emancipatory political campaign resulting in failure or further misery. In consequence, mobilization recurs without transition: repression produces either authoritarian restoration or stalemate, unless leadership redundancy, legal protections, and broad, issue-based coalitions are rebuilt.



Halabja massacre: Part of the Anfal campaign of the Iraqi-Kurdish conflict

Under Iran's current order, endurance is by design. Institutions that seem plural are engineered to coordinate elites and contain society. The earlier opening under Mohammad Mossadegh (1951–1953), marked by oil nationalization, lively parliamentary contestation, and expanded press and political party activism, ended in August 1953 with the Anglo-American coup (Operation Ajax). The military operation restored the Shah's prerogatives, strengthened coercive institutions, and implemented harsh assimilation policies. Its legacies of securitized governance and anti-interventionist grievance still contour today's terrain. A multilayered security apparatus now makes repression reliable and inexpensive, parastatal revenues and external channels finance patronage and cushion shocks of dissent. With systematized and calibrated censorship, criminalized assembly, and a storyline casting dissent as disorder, mass courage gains moral visibility but rarely hardens into organizations that outlast the crackdown.

Outside that terrain, the calculus changes. In liberal settings, exiles can do what repression blocks. They facilitate associations, preserve archives, turn testimony into evidence, secure pro-bono counsel, and build ties to legislators, universities, unions, and standards bodies. Documentation and remembrance work, such as ceremonies, multilingual records, or organized archives, becomes infrastructure. That infrastructure then turns into strategy, which could include court filings, targeted sanctions files, export-control briefs, shareholder and accreditation campaigns, and submissions to regulators. The Ukrainian flight downing mobilization shows how grief can translate into court findings, regulatory attention, and sustained policy without centering any single case. Authoritarian regimes are strongest inside their own borders, where they can use force, control institutions, and shield resources. But their power is limited to that territory. When activists work through independent, international channels, they can rebuild organizations and send pressure back home. This pressure can include blocking access to technology, exposing hidden assets, raising red flags for banks and accrediting bodies, restricting travel for implicated elites, and creating reputational costs in finance and transport sectors. Every crackdown at home pushes skills and credibility into the diaspora. Every success abroad tightens the regime's access to money, supplies, and favorable narratives.

A recurring dilemma of Middle Eastern politics is the resilience of authoritarian rule despite repeated waves of mobilization and dissent. One may ask why political openings in the Middle East so often vanish after dramatic peaks. A durable answer lies in how sacralised sovereignty, curated "tradition," and everyday patriarchy interlock to translate domination into duty and recast dissent as disorder. Together, these orders supply rulers with moral alibis, fragment horizontal trust, and shrink the social spaces where opposition can endure.

Authoritarian persistence in the Middle East is best understood as the co-production of three mutually reinforcing orders: sacralised sovereignty, neo-patrimonial statecraft, and patriarchal moral economies. First, modern state sovereignty has been articulated through claims of divine guardianship, allowing incumbents to translate regime defense into the defense of faith and communal order, thereby raising the normative cost of dissent and narrowing the scope for plural bargaining (Hallaq, 2013; Feldman, 2008). Second, authority flows through kinship, clients, and notables as much as through impersonal legality; resources and legal protection are dispensed as favors, while cohesive security apparatuses repress reliably when called upon (Wedeen, 1999; Bellin, 2004). Third, patriarchy operates as a governance technology: honor, guardianship, and respectability outsource elements of policing to everyday life, disciplining potential joiners at home, school, mosque, and workplace (Kandiyoti, 1988). These intertwined layers weaken the basics of successful mobilization, stable organizations, safe spaces, and persuasive narratives. Sacred idioms undermine pluralism; patronage erodes horizontal trust; and patriarchal norms narrow recruitment and shelter. As a result, protests often surge and then stall at the institution-building stage, while incumbents combine targeted coercion, moral panics, and selective distribution to outlast challengers (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). This is not cultural determinism, but it explains why turning moral courage into inclusive, accountable institutions is so difficult.

Revolutions in the Middle East don't succeed because crowds are large; they succeed when the ground under the rulers truly shifts. War strains treasuries and exposes blunders. Civil war stretches security forces thin and opens cracks in the chain of command. The quiet withdrawal of foreign backing signals to military or security commanders and governors that the future may no longer belong to the people they serve. In those moments, insiders start to hedge, and when social movements are well-spread or organized enough to turn hesitation into neutrality or defection, regimes that once seemed immovable can fall (Bellin, 2004). That alchemy depends also on people as much as on structures. It also relies on physicians who keep clinics open during strikes, lawyers who draft amnesties that nervous officers can trust, union organizers who can call a boycott and keep it disciplined, and local leaders who can turn fear into steadiness. Nonviolent discipline also matters because it lowers the moral and personal cost for soldiers to stand aside. It signals that the morning after won't descend into chaos, and that the state in which many of them built careers can survive even if the regime cannot (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011).

Iran's 1979 revolution captures the pattern, as Western support wobbled, officers read the signs, and a broad, steady movement persuaded them that neutrality was safer than a last stand. Today, Iran's clerical regime has outlasted repeated waves of protest largely because external sponsorship and the appeasement of regional and international actors have offset domestic pressures, while a recalibrated coercive apparatus contains dissent. Iraq in 2003 shows the riskier route, where an outside force toppled the regime quickly, but shattered the very institutions needed to hold a new order together. Libya's 2011 uprising achieved a fall but inherited a tangle of militias without a common spine. Syria after 2011 is the stark reminder that civil war alone doesn't break a regime, especially when its core units stay loyal, and its patrons, like Iran, Russia, and China, remain close. That balance finally unraveled in early December 2024, when those lifelines frayed and a rapid opposition surge ended the Assad family's fifty-four-year dominance, sending Bashar al-Assad into exile.

So, the real craft of social movements is to prepare before the opening, act wisely during it, and protect ordinary life after it. Preparation means building coalitions that cut across class, region, and sect; drafting credible guarantees for rank-and-file security forces and civil servants; and talking quietly with neighbors and patrons so they can live with a transition. Action means pressing firmly at the system's weak joints, which is enough to widen cracks and collapse the whole system. War, civil war, and the loss of international sponsorship are not victories in themselves. They are openings, which create opportunities for the masses to unite and prepare for a greater uprising. Movements win when they turn those openings or opportunities into elite fractures without destroying the public and civic institutions that make everyday life possible. That is the human measure of change: not just that a ruler leaves, but that people wake up the next morning to a country that still works and a future that finally feels open.

Conclusion

Seen across a century of contention, from the Iranian Constitutionalists to Kurdish uprisings, 1979 Iran, the Arab uprisings, Iraq (2003), Libya (2011), and Syria (as of December 2024), the central obstacle to durable democratization in the Middle East is a resilient authoritarian order fused to strict Islamic political legitimation. Cohesive security organs, rent-insulated budgets, and “managed pluralism” turn repression into routine governance, while sacralised sovereignty frames dissent as sacrilege and disorder. Digital platforms accelerate mobilization but also supercharge surveillance; elite-targeted repression, such as assassinations, mass imprisonment, and rule-by-law, decapitates the very brokers who translate courage into organization. The result is a recurring pattern: high-visibility protest, rapid diffusion, and then exhaustion, with unions, professional associations, and parties kept weak or captured. Openings emerge when three shields erode simultaneously. First, the coercive bloc must fracture or overextend so that the personal cost of protest falls and neutralism or defection becomes thinkable. Second, foreign lifelines and international appeasement must recede when patrons withhold money, materiel, and diplomatic cover; rulers lose the impunity that sustains resolve. Third, exogenous shocks like external war or civil war can upend fear equilibria and widen the space for mass intervention, as seen in regime collapse under invasion (Iraq, 2003), breakdown amid militarized crisis (Libya, 2011), moments of rapid opposition surge (Syria, Dec. 2024), and cascading defections (Iran, 1979). Yet shocks are openings, not outcomes: without organizational continuity, cross-class coalitions, and credible guarantees to rank-and-file security forces, collapse yields a vacuum, not constitutionalism.

Treat movement work like building institutions across time: before an opening, grow backup leaders, safe organizations, and cross-sector coalitions with clear documentation and legal strategies (at home and in the diaspora); during an opening, use disciplined nonviolence to press weak points, offer credible amnesties and role security to bureaucrats and rank-and-file forces, and broker elite bridges that turn hesitation into defections; after an opening, lock in gains by forming representative bodies, keeping everyday services running, and turning moral wins into procedures, precedents, and laws. In short, authoritarianism lasts when coercion and sacralised ideology are fused and externally cushioned; it falters when security cohesion cracks, foreign backing recedes, and prepared movements convert openings into negotiated, durable orders.

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