Middle East Upheavals and Democratic Transition of Arab Countries

LIU Zhongmin①
(Middle East Studies Institute, Shanghai International Studies University)

Abstract: Prior to the Middle East upheavals, democratic transitions in Arab countries could be roughly divided into three stages, namely, the early constitutional reform, the third wave of democratization and democratic reforms under the impact of the end of the Cold War, and during the democratization process under pressure from the US “Greater Middle East” initiative in the new century. The Middle East upheavals are part of political and social movements that involve the whole Arab world. They have not only some common features, but also huge differences; the long-standing problems in Arab countries in the political, economic and social areas are the fundamental causes of Middle East upheavals. However, in addition to this, they are also affected by the US “Greater Middle East” initiative and other external factors. Democratic reforms and transitions undoubtedly constitute an important part of the Middle East upheavals. Arab countries are currently carrying out democratic reforms, but meanwhile they are also facing many challenges. The core elements that affect the progress of democratic transitions include three factors: Islam, military

① Dr. LIU Zhongmin, professor of the Middle East Studies Institute, Shanghai International Studies University. This study is part of the “Islamic Factors in Contemporary International Relations of the Middle East Studies” project in 2008 supported by the MOE Project of Key Research Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences in Universities (08JJDGJW256), and Shanghai Philosophy and Social Science project “Theory and Case Study of Chinese Diplomacy” (2010BGJ002 ) in 2010. It is also supported by the Shanghai Project of First Class Disciplines: Political Science.
intervention and geopolitical factors. With respect to the relationship between Islam and democratic transition, the conflicts between religious and secular forces will continue to have an impact on the democratic transition of the Arab countries. On the other hand, moderate Islamic forces will explore democratization with Islamic characteristics. The relationship between Islam and democracy will be developing in diversified ways, and consecutively adjusting and remodeling. In terms of relationship between military intervention and the democratic transition, there will be a long way to eliminate the impact of military intervention in Arab countries, and a long process from the starting of democracy to democratic consolidation, and eventually to democratic functioning. This also depends on the normalization of relations between religious and secular forces after a long period of interaction and accommodation. On the relationship between geopolitics and democratic transition, complicated internal religious, sectarian and ethnic conflicts, contradictions among Arab countries, ideological competition and regional leadership competition, as well as the military intervention and exports of democracy from Western powers, have exacerbated the turbulence in the Arab democratic transition.

Key Words: Middle East Upheavals; Arab Countries; Democratization Transition; Islam; Geopolitics; Military Intervention

For political science studies, democratic transition of the Arab countries is a very difficult topic. One important reason is that there barely is a successful democratic transition in Arab countries for research. As a result, non-democratic issues dominate in the study of Arab countries and their democratic transition. This has led to the theories of “Arab Exceptionalism” (Stepan, A. & Robertson, B., 2004: 140-146; Harik, I., 2006: 664-684), “Middle East Exceptionalism” (Salamé, G., 1994: 23; Bromley, S., 1997: 323), and “Islam Exceptionalism” (Lewis, B., 2002; 2003; Kramer, M., 2001; Pipes, D.,
The outbreak of the Middle East upheavals at the end of 2010 (the so called “Arab Spring”) was once referred to as “the fourth wave of democratization” by Western countries. However, with the conflicts between religious and secular powers, military intervention, the issue of sectarian and ethnic conflicts, and the proliferation of religious extremism—those problems have been haunting during the democratization of the Middle East, the West once again turned to disappointment, claiming that the “Arab Spring” had turned into “Arab winter”, “Spring of Islam”, or “Islamic awakening”. They exclaimed, “The enormous political influence of Islam in the Middle East has exceeded any historical period after the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire” (The Economist, 2011: December 10). Compared to their peers, democratization of Arab countries lags behind other regions. Nevertheless, its democratization process is also slowly moving forward. The objective attitude should be that we recognize the achievement of transformation from dictatorship, authoritarian towards democracy in Arab countries, and meanwhile, we should have a correct understanding of many problems that exist in the process of democratic transition. This is the fundamental academic standpoint of this study.

The political systems of the Arab countries vary. They basically can be divided into two types: republic and monarchy. The predecessors of Republic Arab countries had the experiences of semi-democratization in the late colonial period, but none of them succeeded. In the subsequent process of decolonization, they established authoritarian republics after the revolution led by the military. Examples of these countries are Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Iraq, and Syria and so on. These countries have suffered most from the upheavals since the end of 2010. Egypt has become a typical representative of Arab republics in democratic transition, as it suffered from a serious confrontation between the secular and the religious forces, as well as its associated military intervention. The Arab monarchies can be divided into two categories as well: the first is the
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Gulf monarchic countries (including the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia). They have deep-rooted traditional legitimacy in the combination of politics and religion as well as the noble families rule, which unusually slow down the democratic process; the second are countries such as Jordan and Morocco. The two countries have characteristics of constitutional monarchy, and their democratization process go more smoothly than the absolute monarchies. They have parliamentary elections, and the king usually stabilizes public discontent by replacing the Cabinet. In the Arab monarchies, despite the democratization process is still slow, this type of countries, namely the “Rentier states” which are shaped by traditional legitimacy and petrodollars are far better than the republican countries in terms of political stability (Sunik, A. & Bank, A. & Richter, T., 2013). Therefore, this paper will mainly focus on the two types of countries above, and analyze key issues in the Arab countries’ democratic transition and analyze trends in democratic transition based on the upheavals in the Middle East.

I. The Process of Democratization in the Middle East Prior to the Upheavals

Before the upheavals in the Middle East at the end of 2010, the democratic transition of the Arab countries can be divided into three stages:

(I) Failure of an early constitutional reform and the establishment of authoritarian regime

Historically, Egypt was an early experimental field of constitutionalization among Arab countries. The Advisory Council and the Commission of Consultation Cepresentatives in 1829 and 1866, respectively, were an early prototype of the Egyptian Parliament (Wang, L., 2006: 11). Although these institutions did not have any real power, they still “had a certain impact on development of constitutionalism in Egypt” (Vatikiotis, P., 1991: 127). Subsequently,
the Basic Law, promulgated in 1882, established a parliamentary cabinet system, but soon fell into failure due to the interference of the United Kingdom and the Ottoman Empire. Egypt obtained national independence in 1922, and had the promulgation of the Constitution in 1923. The first parliamentary election was held in 1924. From then to the Nasser Revolution in 1952, in the nearly 20 years, a multiparty system and parliamentary elections became the main features of Egypt’s political life, however, because of the interference of Britain, Parliament and the King’s autocratic ruling, activities of parliament were repeatedly sabotaged. In addition, frequent change of the cabinet had led to the result that “Egyptian politics was composed of a number of factions and political volatility. Democratic elections merely existed in formality, and the constitutional system was trapped in mire. The constitutional efforts were eventually being replaced by Nasser’s military regime” (Wang, L., 2006: 11). Since then, Egypt has entered a period that Arab nationalism dominated Egyptian politics, Nasser “ruled based on his personal charm and Caesar autocratic style” (Vatikiotis, P., 1991: 425), the Parliament completely became the “dog” of the president, “Cabinet members only played a role of the audience, and Nasser was the only speaker” (Hopwood, D., 1989: 103). Political developments in Egypt had an effect of example in the Arab world in two important aspects:

First, there was a sharp contradiction between the Arab secular nationalism and Islamism so that the Muslim Brotherhood became a regional organization of the political oppositions. “Secular parliamentary politics, party politics and the political elites had formed Trinity”. As a result, the channels of political participation of people clogged, so that “the Egyptian people’s values gradually shifted from secular Western political philosophy to traditional religious and political philosophy” (Ha, W., 2007: 134). In 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood was founded under the leadership of Hassan al-Banna. It became a typical representative of the political group of the oppositions. As the originator of the Islamist organizations in the
Middle East, it advocated reforming the existed society by revolution based on the original principles of Islam. It advocated overthrowing the existing secular regime, changing the existing world order, and establishing an Islamic state and social order ruled by religious leaders or scholars and on the basis of the Islamic law. Since then, the Muslim brotherhood has evolved into a transnational Islamist organization in the Middle East, and become a powerful opponent of the secular state. It has a profound impact on the political development in Arab countries.

Second, the Nasser-style “Officer Revolution” became the typical way to overthrow the monarchy regime in Arab countries, and to establish a secular republic authoritarian regime. For example, in 1958 the Iraqi military coup led by Abd al-Karim Qasim overthrew the leadership of the Faisal dynasty (later replaced by the Arab Baath Socialist Party). In 1969 the Libyan military coup led by Gaddafi overthrew the Idris dynasty. Thereafter, in the Arab world, the military coup has become a common phenomenon. For instance, in Sudan, Nimeiri gained power in a military coup in 1969, and was replaced in 1985 in a new military coup; in Iraq, in ten years after the overthrow of the Faisal dynasty in 1958, there had been more than a dozen various coups, unsuccessful coups and armed insurrections. After the Arif regime was overthrown by a coup led by Becker in 1968, Iraq established the Baath Party regime, then it was gradually controlled by Saddam Hussein (Tian, W., 2012: 32-33).

Other Arab countries, such as Tunisia, Libya, and Sudan in North Africa, and Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and other countries in West Asia, have also carried out a constitutional reform and democratic reforms under the representative system. For example, as the starting place of a series of upheavals in the Middle East, Tunisia promulgated of the first constitution in the Islamic Arab world in 1861 (Powel, B. & Sadiki, L., 2010: 17-18). In 1881, after Tunisia became a French protectorate, although the Constitution was repealed, it laid the foundation of political democratization in Tunisia (Li, J., 2012: 41).
Other Arab countries had also been exploring the constitutional system of representative democracy. (See table below)

**Early experiments of the constitutional system of representative democracy in Arab countries**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Starting year</th>
<th>Ending year</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>1921</td>
<td>1958</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>1923</td>
<td>1952</td>
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<td>Lebanon</td>
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<td>1975</td>
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<td>Syria</td>
<td>1930</td>
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<td>Libya</td>
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<td>Jordan</td>
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In the Gulf region, the only state that achieved national independence before World War II is Saudi Arabia, which was administered by the ruling family and the Wahhabi Islam since its establishment in 1932. Other regions remained essentially under the colonial rule, with a combination with the institution of chieftaincy. Due to the smaller impact from Western democracy and secularism in this region, coupled with long-standing religious and tribal traditions, they had not yet begun the process of democratization. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Oman, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain gained independence after the British withdrawal from the Middle East. They implemented monarchy similar to Saudi Arabia, and formed the world’s most concentrated areas of monarchy today. These
countries also established the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981, and therefore also known as the GCC countries.

Based on the above political development of Arab countries, foreign scholars categorized the Arab countries after independence into three political models: first, represented by Egypt, Iraq, and Syria, countries, namely nationalistic and authoritarian countries; second, semi-democratic countries represented by Jordan and Lebanon: there is a greater degree of pluralism in their political field, but the national capacity in political mobilization and social control is very limited; third, the pure Rentier States, namely the Gulf oil-producing states, a gathering of traditional monarchies in contemporary world (Bromley, S., 1997: 323). During the early postwar period, although there were more and more democratic states among Arab countries, few achieved substantive progress. Some analysts pointed out that “the aristocracy, electoral fraud, and the majority of illiterate rural voters, were the salient features of the early semi-democracy in the Middle East. It has only the form of democracy, but is actually ruining the reputation of democracy” (Cong, R., 1999: 310).

(II) The loosening of authoritarian regime and “Hijacked Democracy by Islam”

Since the 1970s, influenced by the world’s third wave of democratization and the end of the Cold War, the Arab countries have also carried out reforms on political liberalization to lift the ban on political parties and ensure freedom of expression. They initiated new constitutions, and held unlimited elections. Its specific performance includes: First, the authoritarian regime introduced limited liberalization reform; second, in some countries, there was a transition from authoritarian to a semi-democratic political system, but its multiparty, parliamentary system and the protection of civil liberties and rights were very limited; third, individual quasi-democratic states restored democracy; fourth, the traditional monarchy countries adapted along with the times, and expanded political participation. But the effect of the democratization process in
the Arab countries was not significant, “accompanied by political liberalization and semi-democratization, there was a revival of Islamist movement” (Cong, R., 1999: 299).

In the Islamic revival movement, religious political oppositions attempted to gain power through democratic elections. However, the Arab countries usually took measures to curb and pressure on the Islamic political oppositions, which led to political disorder and profound impacts on the political stability of Islamic countries in the Middle East. In Egypt, accompanied by political liberalization of Sadat government, the Muslim Brotherhood “maximized the use of peaceful means that Sadat government had granted to realize the establishment of Islamic society” (Baker, R., 1990: 246). The Muslim Brotherhood itself “experienced a transition with definite target. It clearly chose to accept moderate and progressive policies of political pluralism and parliamentary democracy in order to achieve social and political reform” (Esposito, J., 1999: 170). Members of the Muslim Brotherhood claimed: “establishing a real democracy is the only way and the only road leading to a better solution of the crisis” (Tamimi, A., 1993: 168).

Sadat government adopted the policies that utilized and limited the development of the Muslim Brotherhood, which eventually resulted in a serious confrontation between the two. After Mubarak came to power, he started a combined strategy of tolerating and disintegrating, appeasing and repressing the Muslim Brotherhood at the same time. However, he did not allow any Islamic organization to directly participate in political activities, while allowed non-violent Islamic “moderates” to participate political activities in an indirect way (Liu, Z., 2000: 26-27). Nevertheless, in the period of Sadat and Mubarak administrations, the Muslim Brotherhood has become Egypt’s largest political group of oppositions. At that time, some scholars predicted, “if Egypt held a truly free elections, the Muslim Brotherhood would most likely win the majority of votes” (Kaplan, R., 1994: 28).

The Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria seemed more striking from its rise to the failure. In 1989, the Algerian government promulgated a
new constitution, and announced it would be under a multi-party system. In the 1990-1991 election, the Islamic Salvation Front achieved a formidable victory, but then lost power because of the military intervention. Algeria therefore was caught in turmoil for more than 20 years. In this context, the West raised the issue of “Hijacked Democracy by Islam” (Esposito, J. & Voll, J., 1996: 196), namely, in Islamic countries in the Middle East, once they start truly free elections, victory often belongs to the Islamist forces. Democratic elections are merely a means for the Islamic forces to seize power. The real goal is to establish Islamic states under Islamic creeds (Pool, D., 1997: 213). To contain the development of Islamic “Hijacked Democracy by Islam” and maintain stability in the Middle East, the US and Western countries usually allowed and supported Arab countries to suppress Islamic forces.

(C) The US “Greater Middle East Initiative” and rehearsal of the “Arab Spring”

After the 9/11 attacks and the Iraq war, US “Greater Middle East Initiative” had an important impact on process of democratization in the Middle East and Arab countries. In 2004, the US “Greater Middle East Initiative” was officially launched in the G7 Summit. Its core content included “promotion of democracy and good governance; the establishment of a knowledge society; and expansion of economic opportunities” (Ahmad, T., 2005: 17-18). Despite Arab countries officially were in opposition to US democracy exports, they did make a certain response on how to promote democracy. In March 2004, the Arab League Summit issued a “Tunis Declaration”, indicating that on the one hand, Arab countries were unhappy with the US’ interference in Arab affairs; on the other hand, they were also willing to “strengthen democratic practices, expand participation in political and public life, and strengthen the role of civil society” (Ahmad, T., 2005: 46-47). They “actually received some of the requests in the US “Greater Middle East initiative” (Ahmad, T., 2005: 17-18).

In the context of US’ implementation of the “Greater Middle East
Initiative”, important changes took place in the political ecology of the Arab countries. In February 2005, then Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak proposed to the People’s Assembly to amend Article 76 of the Constitution, and instructed parliament to abolish the current system of presidential elections, namely, “the only candidate” elections, and allow multiple parties and multiple candidates to gain power through direct presidential elections. Some analysts pointed out, this was “the newest and the clearest example that Egypt had made a direct response to the pressure from US” (LaFranchi, H., 2011: 125). Mubarak’s statement further confirmed this argument. He said, “The United States put forward the ‘Greater Middle East Initiative’ to reshape the political map of the Middle East, which has been a threat to our nationality and identity... however, a rigid government can not deal with these challenges. We have no ways to save Egypt other than reforming the government” (Meital, Y., 2006: 257). Mubarak’s proposal was approved by Consultation Parliament and the People’s Assembly, and was adopted by referendum. Of course, the Constitution had strict restrictions on the qualifications of the candidates; as a result, other candidates could not pose a real challenge to Mubarak. In spite of this, in the 2005 Egyptian election, the Muslim Brotherhood still gained a remarkable achievement. It not only put forward a fairly moderate package on the Egyptian reform, but also won 88 out of 454 seats in the People’s Assembly’s, and became the largest opposition group in People’s Assembly. Other Egyptian political oppositions were also inspired by the US “Greater Middle East Initiative”. From 2004 to early 2005, demonstrations organized by liberals, leftists and Islamic participants occurred many times in Cairo University. They openly raised the slogan of “Topple down Mubarak” (Wang, T., 2011: 127). Some other remarkable events from 2004 to 2005 also marked the expansion of the Arab democratic process. In March 2004, Iraq held its first parliamentary elections, marking the start of the US-controlled democratic transition process in Iraq. In February 2005, the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri
triggered protests and demonstrations, and was named “Cedar Revolution” by the West (cedar is the Lebanese national tree) (Wang, S., 2012: 236).

Around 2004, the Gulf countries, whose democratic development was progressing slowly in a long time, also started a number of democratic reform measures within the framework of monarchy. Within Saudi Arabia, two political opposition groups composed of liberals and Islamists had continued to exert pressure on the royal family and asked for reform since the Gulf War, and there was a trend of convergence of these two forces in the turn of the centuries (Wu, Y., 2011: 32-57). In Saudi Arabia, the society began to request elections, the implementation of “constitutional monarchy” and other petitions. Externally, the tension between the United States and Saudi Arabia after the 9/11 attacks and pressure from US “Greater Middle East Initiative” had forced authorities to intensify reform in order to ease social tensions. From February to April 2005, Saudi Arabia held its first municipal elections in the history, and promised women the right to vote in the next round of local elections (2009). This was a major democratic reform after Saudi Arabia set up a “consultative congress” in 1993. In Kuwait, Jordan, Morocco, Bahrain and other monarchies, the progress of reform was more obvious, and was represented by the expansion of civil rights for women. There were parliamentary elections in Jordan in 2003 and six women won seats and three women were appointed as ministers; in April 2003, Qatar promulgated the constitution by referendum, giving women the right to vote; In May 2005, the Kuwaiti National Assembly approved the amendment, allowing women to enjoy right to vote and to participate in election (Wang, L., 2006: 12).

As the Arab countries including republics and monarchies started democratic reform, the Western media put forward the concept of the “Arab Spring” in March 2005 for the first time (Jacoby, J., 2005: March 10). Of course, the US “Greater Middle East Initiative” was not the root cause for democratic transition of the Arab countries. Demands
for democratic reform within Arabian society, and internal long-standing problems in political, economic and social areas, were the fundamental driving forces of the Arab democratic transition, and also the root cause of the “Arab Spring” since 2010.

II. Democratic Transitions of the Arab Countries in the Middle East after the Upheavals

Since the end of 2010, under the impact of the wave of mass protests as well as the intervention and influence of external forces, the Arab countries have gone through regime changes resulting from the wave of protests (such as Tunisia and Egypt); or external military intervention triggered by the wave of protests (such as Libya); or achieved peaceful transition of power through external intervention and mediation (such as Yemen); or trapped in mire of civil war between the existing regime and the opposition groups (such as Syria). In this context, political development of Arab countries and regional geopolitical landscape of the Middle East have undergone profound changes.

1) The nature, features, and causes of the upheavals in the Middle East

There is a huge dispute among both domestic and foreign scholars on the nature of these upheavals in the Middle East. Representative views on the nature of the upheavals include democratic revolutions, uprisings and riots, political crisis, the social movement, etc. The upheavals in Middle East are regional political and social movements that involved the whole Arab world. It is the third wave of regional political and social movements, following the Arab nationalist movement in the 1950s-1960s, and the Islamic Revival Movement in the 1970s-1980s. To enhance democracy and improve people’s livelihood are the main political requests in this series of movements. Its typical manifestation is the political protests by the public and political oppositions, in order to overthrow the existing
regimes.

Arab countries share some common characteristics in these upheavals in the Middle East, but among different countries, there are also huge differences. Their common features include: the wave of protests is the main form; the main political requests are to improve people's livelihood and strengthen democracy; there is a lack of independent leadership and political philosophy; the youth are the main force; widespread use of the network, mobile phones and other new media; there is significant regional and transnational feature.

The main differences include: First, the depth and effect of the wave of protests in the Arab republics are significantly greater than that in monarchies. For example, the four countries that end up with regime change, as well as Syria, which is trapped in civil war, are republics; secondly, political protests in different countries have led to different levels and forms of the crisis. For example, Tunisia and Egypt had peaceful protests, while Yemen went through tribal conflicts, and Libya and Syria went into wars, showing a gradual increase of intensity; third, degrees and means of external intervention are different. The US and Europe adopted a typical pragmatic strategy to intervene in the political process of the Arab countries. In Libya, they carried out military intervention. In some countries, they relied on diplomatic pressure (such as Egypt and Tunisia). In addition to direct military intervention, they implemented a variety of means (such as in Syria). In Bahrain, they supported Saudi-led GCC countries to suppress Shiite oppositions. (Liu, Z., 2012: 3-8).

The upheavals have resulted from some internal and structural causes such as the Middle East countries' problems in political, economic and social areas, but also from the challenges of globalization, the expansion of the international financial crisis, the impact of the US “Greater Middle East Initiative” and other external factors. However, the long-term accumulation of internal problems in Arab countries should be the root cause of the upheavals in the Middle East. Detailed analysis in other papers on this issue had been
conducted. (See Liu, Z., 2012: 8-13); therefore, here I only briefly summarized my analysis as follows:

In the political sphere, a serious crisis of political legitimacy and ideological crisis is the major cause of turmoil in Arab countries. From the perspective of political legitimacy crisis, no matter it is a republic or monarchy, the long-term authoritarian political system and gerontocracy both turned the country into a rigid system, especially in republics; with respect to ideological crisis, since the modern times, Islamic reformism, secular Arab nationalism, Arab socialism, and Islamic revivalism, all have failed to achieve the goal of the Arab national revival, and the Arab society has undergone a serious ideological crisis.

The economic and social causes of the upheavals in the Middle East are rooted in the development crisis, especially the crisis in development mode, which is represented by the fragile economic structure and failure of economic policy. These make Arab countries vulnerable in front of challenges of economic globalization, especially the impact of the international financial crisis. In terms of the specific reasons, rampant corruption, serious economic polarization, larger proportion of young population, high unemployment, high inflation, high rates of poverty and other social problems, are direct incentives of the massively unrest in Arab countries.

The mistaken foreign policies are also an important cause of the political crisis in the Arab countries. Some countries acted as long-term allies of the United States, giving up their diplomatic independence, but were eventually abandoned by the US (e.g., Egypt); some had a long-term confrontation with the West and tried to challenge the existing international system (such as Libya before 2003). They made themselves isolated from the global system; some were in a radical swing between the above two situations (such as the Libya after 2003). The result is that those countries as allies of Western countries in a long-term have lost domestic support from the public, while those countries running against the international system have
missed the opportunities to develop themselves in globalization.

In the ideological and cultural fields, Arabian elites and intellectuals have criticisms on long-standing problems in the Islamic society. There are interactions between their thoughts and external democratic ideas and thoughts. This has provided an ideological foundation for this series of drastic political changes in the Middle East. In the contemporary Arab world, the traditional thinkers influenced by Islamic culture, liberal thinkers influenced by the Western ideas, they all pay attention and raise profound concerns on the political, economic, cultural and social crisis faced by the Arab world today, and even predicted that Arab society would be bound to experience great change or revolution. ①

Although the nature and causes of upheavals in the Middle East are very complex, democratic revolution and democratic transition undoubtedly constitute an important part of the drastic changes in the Middle East. Since those changes came out in the Middle East, the Arab countries that have experienced regime changes, and those have not experienced regime change, including the Gulf monarchies, are now both in a comprehensive reforming and adjusting stage, and democratization in the Arab countries will undoubtedly constitute an important part of the transition and reform. In this regard, the analysts noted, “yet the events of 2011 have decisively undermined the notion that the Arabs aren’t ready for – or don’t want – democracy” (Rogan, E., 2011), “regardless of how the socio-political situation in the Arab countries evolves, even though it is likely that many countries still maintain the political model that seems completely not democratic, ① For example, the famous Egyptian writer ‘Alā’ al-Aswānī was interviewed by New York Times in 2008. He pointed out: “I am convinced that once people are in anger, everything will change. Revolution is so spontaneous and erupted in Egypt without any human planning. Life in Egypt is so intolerable that people can no longer be silent. All should be changed and they will change. I think there certainly will be tremendous change waiting for us in the future.” Quoted from Xue Qingguo, “Cultural Review of the Upheaval in Arab”, Symposium: Upheaval in the Middle East and its Impact, Shanghai: Shanghai International Studies University, 2011, pp. 35-38.
their degree of attention on public opinion and the people will rise” (Lukjanov, F., 2011: April 27).

2) Democratic transition of Arab countries with regime changes

Since the outbreak of the regime changes in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, and Libya, the four countries have already established an elected government or transitional government. Politically, most of them have amended the constitution, adopted multiparty democracy and parliamentary elections. But they generally face intensified conflict between religious and secular forces, the serious deterioration of the economy and livelihood, expanding power of local and tribal forces, social unrest, challenges of religious extremism and terrorism, and other issues.

In Egypt, since the January 25 Revolution in 2011, there have been frequent referendum, parliamentary elections, and presidential elections, including a referendum on the new draft constitution held in March 2011, three parliamentary elections held from November 2011 to January 2012, consultative council elections held from January to March 2012, and a presidential election held from May to June 2012. In the presidential election from May to June 2012, Mohamed Morsi, candidate of the Freedom and Justice Party established by the Muslim Brotherhood, was elected in a narrow majority. However, he had only ruled for a year and was deposed by the military force later. In June 2014, Egypt held the second presidential election. The military leader Abdul Fattah el-Sisi won the election without any doubt. During this period, the conflict between the Muslim Brotherhood, which represents the Islamists, and the military, which represents the secular political forces, has become the core theme of the democratic transition in Egypt (Liu, Z., 2014: January 7).

In Tunisia, the Ennahda Movement, which had been long suppressed by Ben Ali regime, won the Constituent Assembly elections held in October 2011. It formed the ruling coalition with the “Congrès pour la République” (Congress for the Republic), “Forum democratique pour le travail et la liberte/ FDTL” (Democratic Forum
for Labour and Liberties) and other political parties, jointly responsible for the daily work of the Provisional Government, and proceeded to draw up a new constitution (Liu, Z. & Li, Z., 2013: 96). However, political situation in Tunisia was still very unstable. The assassination of leaders of opposition political party happened twice, and protests were frequent, which imposed a serious impact on the political stability of Tunisia.

In Libya, according to the process of political transition arrangements after the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime, political reconstruction was planned in three phases: establishing a transitional government, holding National Assembly elections, and developing a new constitution. Libya has entered the third phase — developing a new constitution. But in the transition process, Libya is facing some problems, including its vulnerable domestic security, heavy economic reconstruction task, conflicts between Islamists and secular forces, national reconciliation, and judiciary reconstruction difficulties. In addition, the war in Libya has caused several problems such as regional refugee outflows, increasing of threats of weapons proliferation and terrorism, etc.

In Yemen, since the end of 2011 when Saleh regime accepted the mediation of the GCC and agreed the peaceful handover of power, Hadi was elected president of Yemen in 2012. The current task of the transition is to continue to promote the “National Dialogue Conference” launched in March 2013, try to complete the formation of the Constitutional Commission, establish a new constitution, and hold a constitutional referendum, presidential elections and other political processes (Zhang, J., 2013: 84-99). However, due to the fragile Yemeni state power, poor governance, and serious conflicts between tribal and sectarian forces, the “National Dialogue Conference” has repeatedly been postponed. Meanwhile, local forces and tribal forces took the opportunity to expand its influence. This not only becomes a constraint of national reconciliation and political reconstruction, but also leads to local and tribal extremism.
3) The democratic transition in Arab monarchies

The impact of upheavals in the Middle East on eight Arab monarchies can be divided into four types (Ding, L., 2013): Qatar and the UAE were almost unaffected; Saudi Arabia and Oman were mildly affected — the two countries experienced small-scale local protests and riots, especially Shites protests in eastern Saudi Arabia, which had important links with Bahrain Shites protests; Jordan, Morocco and Kuwait were moderately affected, as both experienced the massive protests; Bahrain suffered most. Shiite believers account for 70% of the population in Bahrain. They were the major protesters and their goal was to overthrow the Sunni royal regime, which was obviously different from protesters in other monarchies: people in other countries, although asked for the development of democracy and improvement of people’s livelihood, did not want to overthrow the royal regime. Bahrain’s unrest not only highlights the contradiction between the Shiite oppositions and the Sunni regime, but also reflects the contest between Iranian Shiite forces and Saudi Arabian Sunni forces. “The Arab royal families often resorted to Iran to justify the bloody suppression of the protests.” However, in order to contain Iran, protect their energy security, maintain counter-terrorism cooperation, military bases and security considerations of self-interest, the US remained silent when the Saudi Arabia-led GCC intervened in Bahrain. “The Gulf region has a major naval base of US, therefore, Washington does not want to condemn the brutal crackdown on protesters” (Heydarian, R.).

Although none of the Arab monarchy regimes were overthrown during the upheavals in the Middle East, these protests have also led to top-down political and social reforms. In Saudi Arabia, after the small-scale protests were suppressed, the royal regime introduced a number of polices to improve people’s livelihood, as well as financial plan to increase employment. It also conducted a number of political reforms including consultative parliamentary elections, the expansion of women’s rights and improving human rights, etc (Ding, L., 2013).
Jordan and Morocco, the two constitutional monarchies, initially resorted to cabinet reshuffle and elections in advance and other ways to deal with the crisis, and then started a number of democratic reforms as well. Particularly, in Morocco, the reform was more remarkable. In Jordan, the king has promised parliamentary elections under the proportional representation system, and the party won a majority of seats in the cabinet would be responsible to establish a cabinet. This has changed the traditional way that the prime minister was directly appointed by kings. At the same time, it also strengthened the economic reforms and efforts to combat corruption (Wang, D. & Su, X., 2011: June 13). In Morocco, in March 2011, King Mohammed VI announced a revision of the constitution, including the implementation of a real parliamentary cabinet system, strengthening the power of parliament and political parties, appointing prime ministers by the party who got parliament election victory, and reform for improving the Berbers’ rights. In the first elections after the constitutional amendment, the “Parti de la Justice et du Développement” (the Justice and Development Party) won the election and formed the cabinet (Hicham, E., 2013: 142).

III. The Core Issues and Future Trends of the Democratic Transition in Arab Countries

Compared with other regions and countries in the world, the democratic transition of the Arab countries is more complex. For example, democratization process in Arab countries is more diverse, not synchronic, and there are external inputs in it.

1) Islam and democratic transition

The relationship between Islam and democracy is a disputable issue in the studies on democratic transition in the Middle East. Such debates can also been found in Western academia. The most representative arguments are the “Arab exceptionalism” and “Islam exceptionalism”, which represent the viewpoints of the majority of
Western scholars. They believe that Islamic civilization has a natural defect which is difficult to change. Therefore, Islam does not have the basic conditions of democracy, and Islamic civilization and Western civilization are naturally against each other. For example, some scholars have stressed that “Islam is an ideology of religious community and social control, while in contrast, liberal idea is a concept of secularism, equality, individual autonomy and economic freedom ... in respect to constituent of individual rights, social community boundaries and mechanism, Islam and liberalism are contradictory to each other” (Murden, S., 2002: 94-95). In Western countries, a few scholars believe that there is certain compatibility between the Islam and democracy. Esposito, a US scholar, holds that Islam is not against democracy, but in favor in Islamized democracy. “The Islamic democracy is based on the reinterpretation of traditional Islamic concepts in modern ways.” The traditional concept of consultation and mass discussion in Islamic tradition can become “ideas supporting parliamentary democracy, representative electoral system and religious Reformation” after reinterpretation (Esposito, J., 1997: 18).

In the Islamic world, basically there are three views around the relationship between Islam and democracy: firstly, Islam and democracy are mutually exclusive, which is represented by radical Islamist thinkers and their views against Western-style democracy. Secondly, Islam is compatible with democracy. This is mainly held by modernist Islamic thinkers, emphasizing on the compatibility of democracy and consultation and mass discussion in traditional culture. Thirdly, democracy with the Islamic characteristics: Islamist thinkers emphasize the uniqueness of Islamic society, which is different from Western democracy. Chinese scholars have pointed out that there is an uncertain relationship between Islam and democracy, which is quite accurate from this paper’s perspective. Islam can not only be used to support some concepts of democracy, it can also be used as the basis of opposing views against democracy. The realistic relationship
between Islam and democracy depends on how to understand Islam and the social, economic and political environment associated to Islam. Islamic values can either strengthen or impede the process of democratization by influencing the social, political, economic, cultural and other areas (Wang, L., 2005). Because of the limited space, the paper put forward the following three points about the reality and the main trends of democratic transitions in the Arab countries instead of further theoretical discussion:

First, the contradiction between religious and the secular force is an important variable influencing the democratic transition in Arab countries, especially republics, as well as a potential problem for the Arab countries’ democratic transition in a long term. Currently, in Egypt, which has long been viewed as a barometer of democratic transition in the Arab world, the polarization of the two camps constitutes the root causes of social division and confrontation. Even in Jordan, Kuwait and other monarchies, Muslim Brotherhood has a strong resentment against the regime. After the fall of the Morsi administration, there were serious conflicts between the religious and secular camp, as well as serious polarization and confrontation. The street politics and religious-secular conflicts make democratic transition in Egypt extremely difficult (Liu, Z., 2014: January 7). How to handle the relations with the Muslim Brotherhood will be the dilemma faced by the newly established Sisi administration. From a historical perspective, the Algerian military repression on “Islamic Salvation Front” in 1991 had led Algeria into a long-term instability, and directly spawned the rise and development of Al-Qaeda’s Maghreb branch. Viewing from Egypt’s own history, the Egyptian regimes’ several suppressions on Muslim Brotherhood have resulted in the separation of extremist factions from the Muslim Brotherhood, and then the extremist factions embarked on the road of extremism and terrorism, becoming a destructive force threatening the country’s political stability and democratic transition.

Second, the moderate Islamists have been exploring democracy
with Islamic characteristics, and it has been one of the trends in Arab democratic transition. In terms of the rise of Islamic forces in upheavals in the Middle East, although the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the Freedom and Justice Party suffered from a severe setback, the Islamic forces such as the “Ennahda Movement” (Revival Movement) in Tunisia and Morocco’s Justice and Development Party are still in a ruling position. They are moderate Islamist forces, rather than the ultra-conservative Islamist forces. With regard to the understanding of Islam, they are more focused on the rational spirit of Islam. For example, in Tunisia, the leader of Ennahda Movement, Rached Al-Ghannouchi has already clear pointed out that Islam should be “Islam in reality” rather than “Islam in museums” (Takeyh, R. & Gvosdev, N., 2004: 6). In terms of the political goals, they have gradually discarded the emphasis on the Islamic creeds and a comprehensive implementation of Islamization. Their main goal has shifted to democracy, people’s livelihood and other issues. Ennahda Movement and the Justice and Development Party have both learned from Turkey’s “secular Islam” mode, and strived to turn into the models that present compatibility of Islam and democracy (Wang, L., 2012: 85-86). In terms of political participation, they pay more attention to the peaceful and gradual methods of achieving democratization through elections, and gradually abandon the radical ways to seize power by violent means (Wang, F., 2013: 92-109). Of course, whether those moderate Islamists can find a successful development mode with Islamic characteristics or not is still subjected to the test of practice.

Third, the relationship between Islam and democracy is in a trend of diversified development. In the process, the relationship between Islam and democracy will continue to adjust and remodel. In the Arab world, Egypt may still be an example of religious-secular tensions in a certain historical period; Tunisia and Morocco could become representatives of moderate Islamists that explore the compatibility of Islam and democracy; and Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries
could become models of gradual reforms based on theocracy and
traditional legitimacy framework of monarchy. Although these
countries are facing different challenges, Islam and democracy are not
simply contradictory to each other, and there are several different
forms. Under the impact of upheavals in the Middle East, democratic
reform will become a trend, no matter through top-bottom reform, or
bottom-up reform. Arab countries will not copy the Western
democracy; instead, they will achieve democracy based on their own
national conditions and Islamic traditions.

Viewing from the landscape of the Middle East, it is obviously
that modes of relations between Islam and democracy vary. Turkey
has experienced a tortuous democratic transition from authoritarian
regime alternately to multi-party democracy and military intervention,
and then to the moderate Islamic democracy created by the Justice and
Development Party. It is characterized by the emphasis on traditional
Islamic values on the basis of maintaining national principle of
secularism. It treats freedom of religion as an important part of
democratization (Wang, L., 2012: 90-93). The Islamic republic of Iran
has some unique features since the Islamic revolution. It is a concrete
manifestation of the binary system of election: the “Islamic” embodies
the highest religious leader. The highest leaders are elected by the
Commission of Jurists, which was elected by voters. This is featured
with the democratic “consultation” and “mass discussion” in
traditional Islam; and “Republican” is reflected in the highly
competitive and regular parliamentary and presidential elections. ①

① In theory, in terms of the degree of democracy, the current system in Iran has
made certain historical progress, compared to its predecessor, monarchy of the
Shah and absolute monarchies in the Gulf area. However, Iran pursues a foreign
policy of “No East, No West, Only Islam”. In particular, it pursues a strong
anti-Western policy at the international level and at the regional level, pursues
“exporting revolution”. As a result, in addition to the long-term impact of
sanctions due to the nuclear issue, it is facing extremely difficult situations in the
Middle East and international community, further making their explores to
“religious democracy” more heterogeneous and isolated. However, this system
has lasted for thirty years in such an unfavorable international environment.
2) Military intervention and democratic transition

In essence, frequent military interventions in the process of democratization in the Arab countries are resulted from two important factors.

On the one hand, most of the Arab republics are established by “Free Officers Revolutions” that overthrow the monarchy, the military enjoys a special position in Arab countries and have a pivotal role in their political life. This can be reflected in three aspects: Firstly, in Arab countries, military forces often represent a relatively advanced power, which is the basis of its important role in political life; Furthmore, tribal culture and underdeveloped social structure in Arab world has formed a realistic logics of “jungle law”, which provides favorable external environment for military interference in domestic affairs; lastly, Middle Eastern countries are facing security challenges, therefore, the military plays an important role in the country’s political life, which is an objective need (Tian, C., 2012: 33).

On the other hand, military intervention is the concomitant of religious-secular contradiction or concomitant of the relationship between Islam and democracy. In Arab republics, the army is a representative and defender of secular forces. Once the signs of “hijacked democracy by Islam” appear in the democratization process, the military interference and coup will be an easy choice to suppress or strangle Islamist forces. The military suppression on “Islamic Salvation Front” in Algeria in 1991, and the Egyptian military dethroning of Muslim Brotherhood regime in 2013, both have this typical characteristic.

The military intervention in the Arab countries is a paradox in the process of democratization. On the one hand, military intervention can help maintain stability and defend the secularism; on the other hand, it has been repeatedly criticized due to its destruction on modern democracy and civilian rule. This article will not discuss how to judge military intervention, but author put forward the following two observations surrounding the question how to understand the future
trends of military intervention and the Arab democratic transition.

First, with respect to the period of democratic transition (Bao, S., 2012: 17-27), the Arab countries have just got started, and not yet entered the “consolidation of democracy” or “democratic functioning” stage. Military intervention is normally in the start-up phase of democratization, and it’s disappearance needs a long historical process. The democratic transition process in many countries all over the world shows that, most countries (except for a few ones such as the US and Canada), have experienced a retrogression or several retrogressions, like civil war, revolutions, military coups and external invasions in their democratic transition. ① The establishment of an authoritarian military regime by Napoleon after the French bourgeois revolution is among examples. Arab countries, whose democratic foundation is weak and ethnic and religious conflicts are complex, are more vulnerable to military intervention. After the start of democracy, only through long-term consolidation of democracy and with real mature-level democracy, could the military intervention gradually retreat from the stage of history. Just as Huntington said, the role and status of the armed forces change with the development of the whole society. “With the change of social development, the role of the army will change. In the world of oligarchy, the military is radical; in middle-class world, the military is a participant and arbitrator; when the civil society appears, the military becomes conservative guardians of the existing order” (Tian, C., 2012: 34).

Second, to be specific, the future role of military intervention in democratic transition of the Arab countries depends on the relationship between religious and secular forces after the long-term interaction and normalization. It is helpful to understand the future trends of Arab military intervention to learn from another important

country in the Middle East, Turkey. Turkey is the only Middle Eastern country that has achieved democratic transition in the second wave of democratization, as well as the most thoroughly secular country within the region. However, when transferring from an authoritarian system to a multi-party democratic transition, Islamic parties tried to change the secular nature of the state, which led to three military coups respectively in 1960, 1971 and 1980 and “soft coup” in 1997 (Li, B., 2010: 171-173). In this process, religious parties such as the National Order Party, the National Salvation Party, and the Welfare Party, as the predecessors of Justice and Development Party, have been banned by the military coup because they posed threats to the secular nature of the state. Since 2002, when the ruling Justice and development Party (AKP), which was elected for three times, was no longer to challenge the secular foundation of the country, the relationship between the military and the civilian government move toward normal. There is no doubt that, one of the fundamental reasons of this is that military intervention has tamed the Islamic forces. The Justice and Development Party have learned the lessons from the previous Islamic parties, and move towards a moderate ruling party. When the Justice and Development Party are no longer to challenge secular system, military intervention has lost its legitimacy. It is one of the reasons that the Justice and Development Party have gradually weakened the military power in recent years. Turkey has the highest level of secularization and democratization in the Middle East. However, the Turkish military and the Islamic parties have gone through interactions and accommodations for half a century before they gradually normalize their relations. For Arab countries with low degree of democratization and complicated secular-religious relations, it will be a longer and more tortuous process for military intervention’s disappearance in historical stage.

3) Geopolitics and democratic transition

The Arab world is one region with most complex geopolitical
structure in the world. Geopolitical fragmentation and long-term instability constitute an important constraining factor that impacts the Arab democratic transitions. Here this paper only briefly analyzes on the three aspects: the internal factors of Arab countries, the regional politics of Middle East, and the Western powers’ interference.

First, internally, complex religious, sectarian and ethnic conflicts and associated political conflicts are important negative factors in democratic transition. In Arab countries, there are four types of political conflicts induced by religious and ethnic conflicts (Liu, Z., 2008: 14-15). One is the internal conflict caused by power distribution among ethnic groups, such as ethnic and sectarian decentralized structure in Lebanon and Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime. In this type of conflicts, the national power structure has inherent vulnerability and instability. The second is the ethnic conflict resulted from monopoly of power by one ethnic group. Marginalized and vulnerable sects and ethnic groups tend to change the existing power structures through democratic protests. Examples include Bahrain Shiite, Sunni oppositions in Syria, eastern tribes centered at Benghazi in Libya in the upheavals in the Middle East. The third is the ethnic conflict between majority and minority groups. This mainly lies in issues such as protection of the rights of minorities in the democratic transition process, such as the Egyptian Christian Copts issue and Berber issue in Algeria and Morocco. The fourth is cross-border ethnic conflicts triggered by the request of autonomy and independence, such as the Kurdish issues in Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran.

Second, with regard to the entire Arab world and the Middle East, spill over effect of ethnic and sectarian conflicts, ideological competition and regional leadership contest have closely linked politics of the Arab countries, and had a negative impact on the democratic transition. The fact of one single nation but 22 different states in this region is a legacy issue of Western colonialism. Combined with isomorphic relationship between ethnicity and
religion, this led to the result that “there has almost been no real diplomatic relations within the Arab world, but only an expanded part of the family politics” (Korany, B., 1984: 2-3) since the formation of the national state system. Some scholars noted that the Arab countries “can export loyalty to the foreign political centers or religious centers. Any Middle Eastern leaders can easily seek public support from their neighbors by funding newspapers of oppositions and political oppositions of neighboring countries, which is very natural, and it is widely accepted” (Owen, R., 1983: 20-21). From the perspective of sectarian conflict, contradiction between the Sunni and Shiite not only affects the internal power contest within Arab countries, but also can influence the pattern of international relations between Arab countries, and even regional pattern through cross-border sectarian infiltration of sectarians. From the perspective of ideological competition and contest for regional dominance, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Libya represented those pursuing pan-Arab nationalist and republic system, while the Saudi Arabia-led Gulf Arab states constituted a group of those pursuing pan-Islamism. They have been fighting for leadership in Arab world for a long time (Liu, Z. & Bo, G., 2006: 76-78). Meanwhile, inside of the pan-Arab nationalists camp is full of contradictions. During the upheavals in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab states actively supported the Syrian Sunni oppositions to subvert the Assad regime, however, at the same time, they also supported Bahrain royal family to suppress Shiite protests. This was doubtlessly related to sectarian conflicts, and was aimed at weakening the Shiite and Iran at the same time (Abdo, G., 2013: 1-8). The Gulf countries actively supported protests in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Syria, with the purpose to further weaken the secular Arab nationalism, and thus establish leadership of Islamist monarchies in the Arab world (Liu, Z., 2012: March 6). After the upheavals in the Middle East, GCC has discussed the plan of absorbing two monarchies Jordan and Morocco into the group, indicating the intention to establish a “holy alliance” in the Arab world. After Muslim
Brotherhood gradually seized power in Egypt, Saudi Arabia expressed strong support in the Egyptian military’s ouster of Morsi regime. One important consideration is that the Muslim Brotherhood represents modern Islamism and its development throughout the Middle East, which has threatened the leadership of Saudi Arabia in the Islamic world. What’s more interesting, there is competition even inside the GCC between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Saudi Arabia supported the Egyptian military, while Qatar supported the Muslim Brotherhood. Turkey and Iran, as the two non-Arab states, got involved in Arab countries’ affairs and their democratic transition, one important reason was religious, ideological conflicts and competition for regional leadership (Venetis, E., 2014: 5-8).

Third, the development of the Arab world and the Middle East has always been influenced by the Western-dominated international system. Due to the military intervention and export of democracy by the Western powers, democratic transition in Arab countries has certain external-driven features, exacerbating the turmoil of the Arab countries during the process. The relations between Arab-Islamic world and the international system have been tense for a long time. Accordingly, the Middle East has always faced tremendous pressure from the international system (Liu, Z., 2009: 59-65). From a historical perspective, unsuccessful constitutional reform in late colonial period, “semi-democracy” experiments such as the establishment of a parliamentary system and electoral system, democracy promotion by Europe and the US in post-Cold War era (Yacoubian, M., 2006; Katulis, B., 2009; Carapico, S., 2002: 379-395), and US “Greater Middle East initiative” after the Iraq war in 2003, are important variables affecting the process of democratization in the Middle East, especially the regime change and democracy transition in Afghanistan and Iraq. Afghanistan and Iraq “are being democratized” at gunpoint, but so far democratic transition of the two states are still immature and hopeless. Upheavals in the Middle East since 2010 is subject to the profound impact from the Western powers, including the delivery of democratic
values, public condemnation and various means of diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, and military intervention by the US and Europe. Some analysts believe that the “Arab Spring” is the fruits of US “Greater Middle East Initiative”; it is “Bush’s victory” (Harshaw, T., 2011: February 11) and “America’s success” (Evron, Y., 2011: February 17). Despite Western intervention in Arab countries has promoted the spread of democracy and the external pressure played some positive roles in democratic reform in the Arab countries, regime changes through military intervention, harsh practices performed by the western countries during the intervention, and their double standards, all had a very negative impact on transition to democracy in Arab countries.

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