

The Numbers Behind the Middle Eastern and North African Revolts

By [Washington's Blog](#)

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Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [History](#)

In-depth Report: [ARAB PROTEST MOVEMENT](#)

What determines which Middle Eastern or North African (MENA) countries will face revolt?

On February 3rd, the Economist came up with a [list](#) of “vulnerable” countries based upon the amount of democracy, corruption and press freedom:

Poor performance		2010 world ranking for:			
The Arab League		Date of accession	democracy*	corruption†	press freedom‡
Country	Ruler				
Algeria	Abdelaziz Bouteflika	1999	125	105	141
Bahrain	King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa	1999	122	48	153
Comoros	Ahmed Sambi	2006	127	154	102
Djibouti	Ismael Omar Guelleh	1999	126	91	159
Egypt	Hosni Mubarak	1981	138	98	130
Iraq	Nuri al-Maliki	2006	111	175	144
Jordan	King Abdullah II	1999	117	50	140
Kuwait	Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmed al-Sabah	2006	114	54	115
Lebanon	Najib Mikati	2011	86	127	115
Libya	Muammar Qaddafi	1969	158	146	192
Mauritania	Muhammad Ould Abdelaziz	2009	115	143	118
Morocco	King Mohammed VI	1999	116	85	146
Oman	Sultan Qaboos	1970	143	41	153
Palestinian territories	Mahmoud Abbas/Ismail Haniyeh	2005/2006	93	<i>Not ranked</i>	181
Qatar	Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani	1995	137	19	146
Saudi Arabia	King Abdullah	2005	160	50	178
Somalia	Sheikh Sharif Ahmed	2009	<i>Not ranked</i>	178	181
Sudan	Omar al-Bashir	1989	151	172	165
Syria	Bashar Assad	2000	152	127	178
Tunisia	Mohamed Gannouchi	2011	144	59	186
United Arab Emirates	Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan	2004	148	28	153
Yemen	Ali Abdullah Saleh	1978	146	146	173

Sources: Economist Intelligence Unit's *Democracy Index*; Transparency International's *Corruption Perceptions Index*; Freedom House's *Freedom of the Press*; *The Economist* Out of: *167 †178 ‡196 countries or territories

Unemployment

But the Economist index doesn't take unemployment into account.

As Alnetnet [notes](#):

Arab Labour Organisation (ALO) figures show that Arab countries have among the highest unemployment rates in the world — an average of 14.5 percent in fiscal year 2007/08 compared with the international average of 5.7 percent. The rates may even be higher if one accepts unofficial estimates.

Global risk specialist Mi2g [notes](#):

There are a lot of “orphans” and most are young - 65 percent of the population of the Arab League is under the age of 30. Youth unemployment rates are exorbitantly high - as high as 75 percent in some countries like Algeria. While the informal economy provides partial compensation, this does not provide security; the Jasmine Revolution was triggered by the self-immolation of a young man, Mohamed Bouazizi, unemployed after police confiscated his wheelbarrow, used to make ends meet by selling fruits and vegetables.

On February 2nd, Nomura published a [report](#) written by Steven Cook of the Council on Foreign Relations, arguing that youth unemployment and underemployment - along with a large proportion of youth - are primary factors driving revolt in the Middle East:

In both Tunisia and Egypt factors were at play which are also to be found in other economies in the region, notably:-An autocratic and corrupt regime [and] A significant—youth bulge and related unemployment and under-employment....

In other words, when there alot of young, unemployed (or under-employed) people, they might revolt.

Here are statistics from Nomura showing the percentage of youth under 15 years old and median age in years in the Middle East and Northern Africa:

Country

Population Aged <15>

Median Age (2010)

Algeria

27.0%

26.2%

Egypt

32.1%

23.9%

Iran

23.8%

26.8%

Iraq

40.7%

19.3%

Jordan

34.0%

22.8%

Libya

30.1%

26.2 %

Morocco

28.0%

26.2%

Saudi Arabia

32.0 %

24.6%

Syria

34.7%

22.5%

Tunisia

22.9%

29.1%

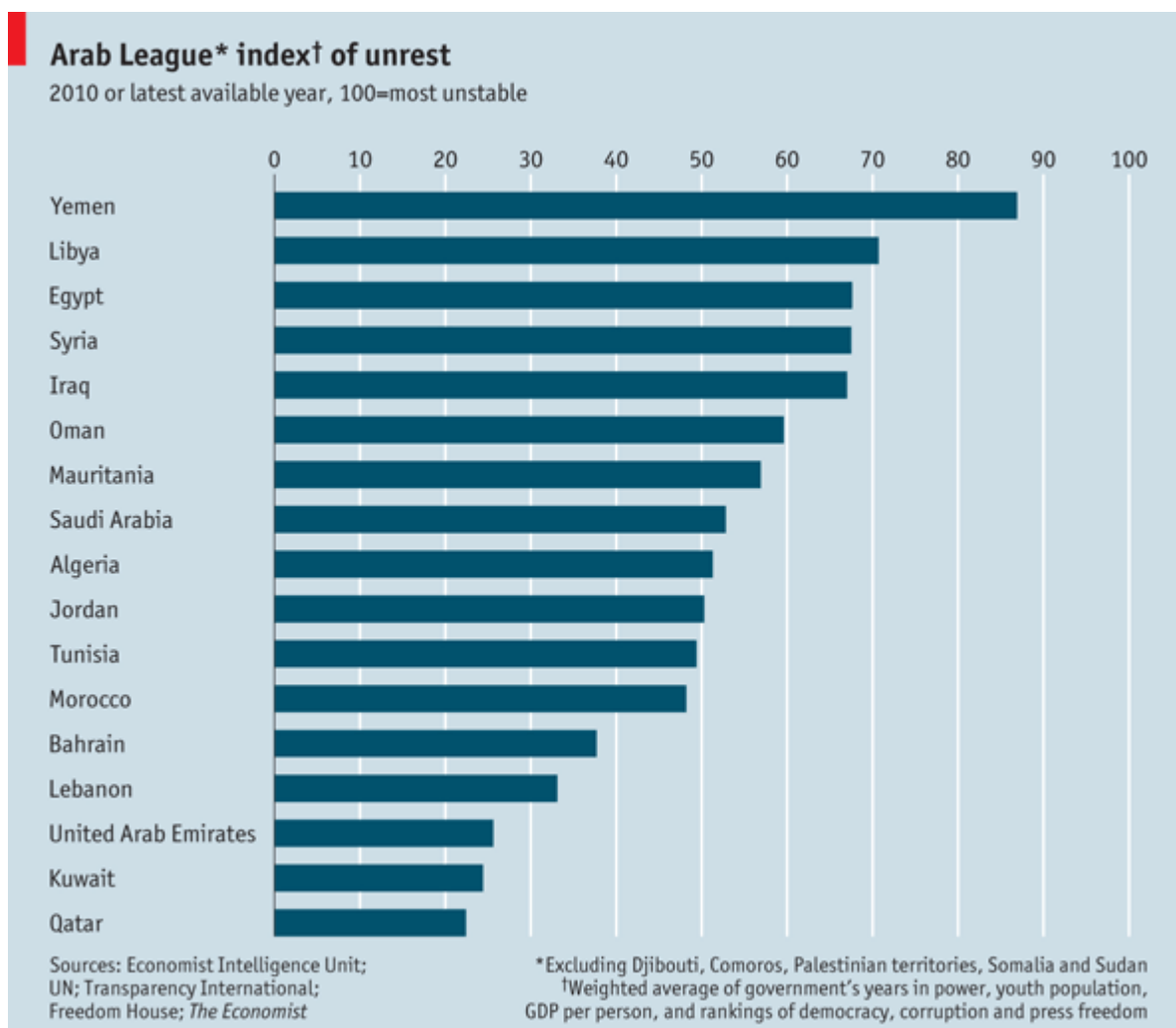
Yemen

43.4%

17.8%

On February 9th, the Economist [came up](#) with a revised index, which they call the “shoe thrower’s index” (throwing one’s shoes at someone is the ultimate sign of disrespect in the Arab world).

The index gives a 35% weighting for the share of the population that is under 25; 15% for the number of years the government has been in power; 15% for both corruption and lack of democracy as measured by existing indices; 10% for GDP per person; 5% for an index of censorship and 5% for the absolute number of people younger than 25:



As a side note, youth unemployment is rising globally. As the New York Times [reported](#) last August:

Youth unemployment across the world has climbed to a new high and is likely to climb further this year, a [United Nations](#) agency said Thursday, while warning of a “lost generation” as more young people give up the search for work.

The agency, the [International Labor Organization](#), said in a report that of some 620 million young people ages 15 to 24 in the work force, about 81 million were unemployed at the end of 2009 — the highest level in two decades of record-keeping by the organization, which is based in Geneva.

The youth unemployment rate increased to 13 percent in 2009 from 11.9 percent in the last assessment in 2007.

“There’s never been an increase of this magnitude — both in terms of the rate and the level — since we’ve been tracking the data,” said Steven Kapsos, an economist with the organization. The agency forecast that the global youth unemployment rate would continue to increase through 2010, to 13.1 percent, as the effects of the economic downturn continue. It should then decline to

12.7 percent in 2011.

In some especially strained European countries, including Spain and Britain, many young people have become discouraged and given up the job hunt, it said. The trend will have “significant consequences for young people,” as more and more join the ranks of the already unemployed, it said. That has the potential to create a “ ‘lost generation’ comprised of young people who have dropped out of the labor market, having lost all hope of being able to work for a decent living.

Data from Eurostat, the [European Union](#)’s statistical agency, show Spain had a jobless rate of 40.5 percent in May for people under 25.

Indeed, as I have previously [pointed out](#), youth unemployment is also very high in the U.S. And when those who have given up looking for work and those who are underemployed are taken into account (i.e. using the U-6 measure of unemployment), it is clear that the youth of much of the world are suffering Depression-level unemployment.

Food

As many have noted, soaring food prices are also one of the main reasons for the revolts in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, Libya and elsewhere.

Nomura [pointed out](#) last September:

The World Bank (2009, p.11) estimates that nearly two-thirds of total income is spent on food in the poor urban population of the developing world. High food prices reduce the ability to meet even basic needs and can lead to increased poverty and become a potential source of protests, riots and political tension

Alternet [notes](#):

“Tunisians and Algerians are hungry. The Egyptians and Yemenis are right behind them,” Emirati commentator Mishaal Al Gergawi wrote in the Dubai-based newspaper Gulf News. “Mohammad Bouazizi didn’t set himself on fire because he couldn’t blog or vote. People set themselves on fire because they can’t stand seeing their family wither away slowly, not of sorrow, but of cold stark hunger.”

While Americans spend less than 15 percent of household expenditures on food, Egyptians spend 50%.

As UPI [reports](#):

Just as in Tunisia, the spark was skyrocketing food prices — increasing at a brisk 17 percent annually in Egypt. That’s unhealthy in any economy but particularly one in which, as estimated by the investment house Nomura, on average 50 percent of household expenditures goes toward food. (In the

United States, by comparison, food costs represent 14 percent — and falling — of the Consumer Price Index.)

For that, Egyptians may in no small way thank the U.S. Federal Reserve and its policies of “quantitative easing” — known by most as “printing money.”

Nomura [prepared](#) the following chart showing household spending on food as a percentage of income (I’ve bolded information on the MENA countries):

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Rank

Country

Nomura’s Food Vulnerability Index (NFVI)

GDP per
capita Current prices US\$

Household
spending on
food % of total
consumption

Net food
exports
(% of
GDP)

1

Bangladesh

101.5

497

53.8

-3.3

2

Morocco

101.3

2,769

63.0

-2.1

3

Algeria

101.3

4,845

53.0

-2.8

4

Nigeria

101.2

1,370

73.0

-0.9

5

Lebanon

101.2

6,978

34.0

-3.9

6

Egypt

101.0

1,991

48.1

-2.1

7

Sri Lanka

101.0

2,013

39.6

-2.7

8

Sudan

100.9

1,353

52.9

-1.3

9

Hong Kong

100.9

30,863

25.8

-4.4

10

Azerbaijan

100.8

5,315

60.2

-0.6

11

Angola

100.8

4,714

46.1

-1.4

12

Romania

100.7

9,300

49.4

-1.1

13

Philippines

100.7

1,847

45.6

-1.0

14

Kenya

100.7

783

45.8

-0.8

15

Pakistan

100.6

991

47.6

-0.4

16

Libya

100.6

14,802

37.2

-1.7

17

Dominican Rep

100.6

4,576

38.3

-1.1

18

Tunisia

100.5

3,903

36.0

-1.1

19

Bulgaria

100.5

6,546

49.5

-0.1

20

Ukraine

100.5

3,899

61.0

0.9

21

India

100.4

1,017

49.5

0.3

22

China

100.4

3,267

39.8

-0.3

23

Latvia

100.4

14,908

34.3

-1.1

24

Vietnam

100.4

1,051

50.7

0.8

25

Venezuela

100.4

11,246

32.6

-1.0

26

Portugal

100.4

22,923

28.6

-1.8

27

Saudi Arabia

100.3

19,022

25.1

-1.8

28

Kazakhstan

100.3

8,513

44.7

0.1

29

Uzbekistan

100.3

1,023

34.7

-0.3

30

Russia

100.3

11,832

34.4

-0.7

31

Mexico

100.3

10,232

34.0

-0.5

32

Indonesia

100.2

2,246

47.9

1.0

33

Croatia

100.2

15,637

30.1

-0.9

34

Peru

100.2

4,477

31.8

-0.3

35

Greece

100.2

31,670

38.3

-0.7

36

Belarus

100.1

6,230

42.3

0.8

37

Slovenia

100.1

27,019

25.8

-1.3

38

Syria

100.1

2,682

47.9

1.5

39

Turkey

100.1

9,942

35.2

0.2

40

South Korea

100.1

19,115

23.1

-0.9

41

Colombia

100.1

5,416

28.0

0.0

42

South Africa

100.0

5,678

25.0

-0.1

43

Serbia

100.0

6,811

44.8

1.4

44

Czech Republic

100.0

20,673

27.4

-0.4

45

Lithuania

100.0

14,098

41.1

1.1

46

Guatemala

99.9

2,848

37.1

1.3

47

Slovakia

99.9

18,212

22.3

-0.4

48

Poland

99.9

13,845

32.1

0.7

49

Singapore

99.9

37,597

21.9

-1.0

50

Kuwait

99.9

54,260

30.0

-1.1

51

UK

99.8

43,541

22.5

-1.0

52

Israel

99.8

27,652

17.7

-0.5

53

Japan

99.7

38,455

19.8

-0.6

54

Italy

99.7

38,492

22.1

-0.3

55

Thailand

99.6

4,043

39.0

2.7

56

Hungary

99.6

15,408

29.4

1.6

57

Sweden

99.5

51,950

17.4

-0.7

58

Finland

99.5

51,323

20.5

-0.5

59

Germany

99.5

44,446

18.5

-0.3

60

Spain

99.5

35,215

21.8

0.4

61

Austria

99.5

49,599

19.5

-0.3

62

Ecuador

99.5

4,056

30.6

2.5

63

Switzerland

99.5

64,327

24.0

-0.5

64

Malaysia

99.5

8,209

37.1

2.9

65

France

99.5

44,508

22.0

0.2

66

Brazil

99.5

8,205

20.8

1.8

67

United States

99.3

46,350

13.7

0.2

68

Canada

99.3

45,070

18.0

0.6

69

Australia

99.2

47,370

19.7

1.1

70

Belgium

99.2

47,085

15.9

0.9

71

Chile

99.1

10,084

22.5

3.1

72

Ireland

99.1

60,460

25.8

1.5

73

Norway

99.0

94,759

16.9

-0.6

74

Luxembourg

99.0

109,903

19.1

-1.0

75

Costa Rica

98.9

6,564

30.6

4.7

76

Netherlands

98.9

52,963

13.3

1.6`

77

Denmark

98.8

62,118

16.8

1.8

78

Argentina

98.7

8,236

33.4

5.6

79

Uruguay

98.5

9,654

25.3

5.6

80

New Zealand

97.7

30,439

18.8

7.5

As should be noted, there are countries outside of MENA with extremely high percentages of spending on food.

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