North Africa, 10 Years After Arab Spring

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Another Arab Spring?

Fishing hooks, bows and arrows and boats were inventions of the early inhabitants of North Africa. Aware of the body’s maladies, they used plants with salicylic acid for pain, kaolin and other herbal remedies to bring comfort. Studies and discoveries in mathematics and astronomy are found in their written works for the next generations. Unfortunately, there was not a cure for greed, a formula to combat an invasion or an invention to remove corrupt government.

It took the self-immolation of a street cart vendor, an average Tunisian man, in December 2010 and his death in January 2011 to start a peoples’ protest and the end of an authoritarian president. The media called it the Jasmine Revolution, after Tunisia’s national flower. When the photographs, videos and messages from cell phones were shared across the globe, people in other Arab world countries protested and demanded jobs, democratic reforms and rights.

Two articles by Post foreign correspondents — “Unfinished business of the Arab Spring” and “In Tunisia, a ‘new generation’ turns to protest” — provide a summary of actions of the Arab Spring and the situation ten years later. Ten Years of Disappointment provides discussion questions and suggested topics for debate. Students also may be given A Country’s Name, Word Study activity, to learn what a country’s name may reveal about it.

As protests have returned to Tunisia because of dissatisfaction with high unemployment, daily living standards and health concerns, police violence and corrupt leaders, citizens in other countries are watching. Will fear overwhelm them or will there be another Arab Spring?
LOST DECADE

Unfinished business of the Arab Spring

The forces that unleashed uprisings across the Middle East in 2011 remain as potent as ever

BY LIZ SLY

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Beirut — Ten years ago, much of the Arab world erupted in jubilant revolt against the dictatorial regimes whose corruption, cruelty and mismanagement had mired the Middle East in poverty and backwardness for decades.

Ten years on, the hopes awakened by the protests have vanished — but the underlying conditions that drove the unrest are as acute as ever.

Autocrats rule with an even tighter grip. Wars unleashed by leaders whose control was threatened have killed hundreds of thousands of people. The rise of the Islamic State amid the resulting wreckage ravaged large parts of Syria and Iraq and drew the United States into another costly Middle East war.

Millions of people were driven from their homes to become refugees, many converging on the shores of Europe and beyond. The influx fueled a tide of
nativism and anti-immigrant sentiment that brought populist leaders to power in Europe and the United States, as fears of terrorism eclipsed concerns for human rights as a Western priority.

Even in those countries that didn’t descend into war, more Arabs are now living in poverty, more are unemployed and more are imprisoned for their political beliefs than a decade ago.

Only in Tunisia, where the protests began, did anything resembling a democracy emerge from the upheaval. The fall of Tunisian President Zine Elabidine Ben Ali after a month of street protests in Tunis inspired demonstrations across the Middle East, including the mass protest on Jan. 25, 2011, in Cairo’s Tahrir Square that fixated world attention on what was prematurely labeled the Arab Spring.

On the face of it, the Arab Spring failed, and spectacularly so — not only by failing to deliver political freedom but also by further entrenching the rule of corrupt leaders more intent on their own survival than delivering reforms.

“It’s been a lost decade,” said Tarik Yousef, director of the Brookings Doha Center, recalling the euphoria he initially felt when the fall of Libya’s Moammar Gaddafi in August 2011 enabled him to return home for the first time in years. “Now, we have the return of fear and intimidation. The region has experienced setbacks at every turn.”

For many of those who participated in the uprisings, the costs have been immeasurable. Esraa Eltaweel, 28, was partially paralyzed after a bullet fired by security forces sliced through her abdomen and chipped her spine during a protest in Cairo in 2014. Some of her friends were killed. Others were imprisoned, including her husband, who is still incarcerated. Eltaweel, who spent seven months in detention, has struggled to find work because of the stigma attached to political prisoners.

“We didn’t achieve anything we aimed for. Things got worse,” she said. “We believed we could change the system. But it is so rotten that it can’t be changed.”

Yet as long as the conditions that provoked the original uprisings persist, the possibility of more unrest cannot be ruled out, analysts say.

For many in the region, the Arab Spring is seen less as a failure than an ongoing process. Demonstrations that toppled the longtime presidents of Algeria and Sudan in 2019 and subsequent protest movements in Iraq and Lebanon have been hailed as a second Arab Spring, a reminder that the momentum that drove the revolts of a decade ago has not gone away. Even in Tunisia, frustration over unemployment and a stagnant economy has prompted a series of often violent demonstrations in recent days, with young protesters and security forces clashing in cities around the country.

“Dictators have prevailed, mainly through coercion,” said Lina Khatib, who heads the Middle East and North Africa program at London-based Chatham House. “However, coercion seeds further grievances that will ultimately force citizens to seek political change.”

Others fear worse instability and violence as the collapse of oil prices — the mainstay of economies across the region for decades — and the fallout from coronavirus shutdowns take a toll.

“We have failing states across the entire region. We have a huge economic challenge coupled with a young generation rising and asking for a role. This puts us on the path to an explosion,” said Bachar el-halabi, a Lebanese political analyst and activist who relocated to Turkey last year because of anonymous threats to his safety. “The region is in a worse situation than ever before.”

Rapidly growing populations

Across the Arab world, countries are facing the same perilous dynamic: Their populations are rapidly expanding, but their leadership is stifling economic growth.

Millions of young people are being propelled into the job market each year with little hope of finding work.

The Middle East has the highest...
youth unemployment rate in the world, as it has for decades. The population of the region has grown by 70 million since the Arab Spring, and it is expected to increase by an additional 120 million by 2030, before stabilizing in the decades after that, according to World Bank figures and U.N. forecasts.

High population growth rates don’t necessarily result in growing impoverishment, economists note. In Southeast Asia at the end of the last century and in Europe a century before, rapid population growth fueled unprecedented economic expansion.

But in the Middle East, jobs have not kept pace with the rising numbers of people. Youth unemployment has worsened over the past 10 years — increasing from 32.9 percent in 2012 to 36.5 percent in 2020, according to the International Labor Organization.

The private sector remains small, constrained by layers of bureaucracy, corruption and a lack of government incentives, said Yousef. Foreign and domestic investors are deterred also by the political risks, according to surveys by the International Monetary Fund, trapping the region in a vicious cycle of decline and instability.

Jobs in the region’s bloated public sector — the world’s largest as a proportion of total employment — have traditionally served as the main source of employment, particularly for educated people. But the public sector has failed to keep pace both with the rising population and expanded access to higher education.

In the 1970s, a male Egyptian graduate had a 70 percent chance of securing a government job. By 2016, that had fallen to less than 25 percent, according to calculations by Ragui Assaad, a professor at the University of Minnesota and research fellow at the Cairo-based Economic Research Forum.

Even in Tunisia, where political reforms have brought new freedoms, jobs are scarce, a source of continued frustration for young Tunisians. “We gained democracy — that’s a very important thing. We can do anything we want now, without limitations,” said Mohammed Aissa, 25, who graduated with a degree in financial engineering two years ago but has since been unable to find work. “Democracy is a great gain for us. But unfortunately, the economic situation is very grave.”

**A steep descent into poverty**

Poverty has also increased over the past decade, making the Middle East the only region in the world where people have become poorer, both in terms of total numbers and as a proportion of the population.

In 2018, for the first time, the Middle East surpassed Latin America in terms of the number of people classified as poor, according to the World Bank.

In 1960, the economies of Egypt and South Korea were roughly the same size, said Yousef. Today, South Korea’s economy is more than four times as large, and its population is only half the size of Egypt’s.

In the monarchies of the Persian Gulf, immense oil wealth has funded the rise of glittering cities dotted with skyscrapers, shopping malls and art galleries. But these countries too have been confronted with falling incomes, investment and employment since the price of oil began to decline in 2015.

The double whammy of the coronavirus pandemic and lower oil prices will only accelerate the economic regression across a region where many Arab governments have relied on gulf aid and many citizens on work in gulf countries, economists say.

While the IMF projected an overall 4.1 percent decline in 2020 for economies in the Middle East and Central Asia, in line with the rest of the world, the figures mask far deeper hits to some countries. These include Iraq, where falling oil revenue was expected to lead to a 9.5 percent contraction of the economy, and Lebanon, where the setback due to coronavirus restrictions pales in comparison with that due to the collapse of the country’s financial system. The Lebanese economy was projected by the IMF to shrink by at least 19.2 percent in 2020, compounding the impact of a 9 percent contraction in 2019.

Both countries have experienced unrest over the past year, linked to the deteriorating conditions. In an echo of the first wave of Arab Spring protests almost a decade earlier, huge crowds took to the streets in Baghdad and Beirut in October 2019 to demand an overhaul of political systems that are ostensibly democratic but have entrenched the power of ruling elites.
Those protests have fizzled, in part because of the impact of coronavirus restrictions and the brutal tactics deployed by security forces, particularly in Iraq, where more than 500 protesters were shot dead and dozens of activists have been assassinated in recent months by shadowy militias.

Frustrations remain high in Iraq, and the economy continues to deteriorate after a sharp depreciation of the currency in November. Yet there is little appetite for further action because fear is so high, said a Baghdad restaurant owner who joined in the protests. “What the security forces and militias did was horrific,” said the man, who spoke on the condition of anonymity out of fear for his safety. “We lost a lot of young people and nothing changed.”

In Lebanon, economic collapse and the trauma from last summer’s huge explosion at Beirut’s port have muted the enthusiasm of those who initially took to the streets. “They’re too broken to face what happened,” Lama Jameledine, a student organizer, said as she surveyed the handful of people at a recent protest commemorating victims of the explosion.

But she said she believes that younger Lebanese have become aware of the damage wrought upon their country by the aging warlords who make up the ruling elite. In the fall, student union elections at Beirut’s major universities were swept by independents and activists, dealing a blow to the traditional sectarian political parties.

“The younger generation is breaking away,” she said. “It’s quite difficult to break away from it, but after the explosion they have seen for themselves how damaging the system is.”

Authoritarianism ascendant

If there is one overriding lesson from the Arab Spring, it is that tyranny can quell dissent as long as leaders exert enough force or offer enough incentives. Syrian President Bashar Alassad has survived the popular uprising against his rule, with Russian and Iranian support, and by bombing towns and cities into submission.

But his strategy has left a destroyed, depopulated and impoverished country where conditions have continued to deteriorate even after it was clear his forces had won militarily, according to Tamara Cofman Wittes, a senior fellow at the Washington-based Brookings Institution’s Center for Middle East Policy, who as a deputy assistant secretary at the State Department helped coordinate the Obama administration’s response to the Arab Spring uprisings.

In Egypt, President Abdel Fatah al-sissi — whose military coup in 2013 ousted the elected government that had emerged out of the Arab Spring — rules with a far tighter grip than longtime autocrat Hosni Mubarak, whose rule ended with that uprising. Today, an estimated 60,000 people are imprisoned for their political views, compared with 5,000 to 10,000 in the last years of Mubarak’s tenure, according to human rights groups.

Egypt still suffers from high levels of unemployment and poverty, but people are cowed into silence, said a 26-year-old photographer, who also spoke on the condition of anonymity out of fear. “I lost many friends. I got injured many times. I became disillusioned and defeated,” he said.

He predicted that an Arab Spring uprising would never happen again: “The first time was a kind of miracle. People were fearless and the regime was weak. But now everyone has lost hope. Everyone sees the revolution as a failure that caused more economic problems and more oppression.”

Throughout the Middle East, authoritarianism is ascendant, noted Halabi, the exiled Lebanese activist. The rise of Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman as the kingdom’s de facto ruler has brought a campaign of repression against dissenters, ranging from women who campaigned for the right to drive to rival princes in the royal family. The United Arab Emirates has championed authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and elsewhere.

And the chaos unleashed in Syria, Yemen and Libya has dampened the appetite for unrest in many parts of the region, while the short-lived success in Egypt of the Muslim Brotherhood, seen as a threat to established elites, has prompted many Arab countries to curtail the space for political activity.

‘The next explosion’

The Arab Spring also shattered a long-held myth that authoritarianism equals stability, said Cofman Wittes. She recalled the scramble inside the Obama administration to adjust to the 2011 toppling of Mubarak, who had been seen as a bulwark of U.S. policy aimed at securing stability in a
volatile region.

“No one saw the Arab Spring coming,” she said. “Repressive states always look stable, but when a government relies on coercion as a primary means of survival, it’s inherently unstable.”

A similar fate might await the oil-rich countries of the Arabian Peninsula, where hereditary monarchs quelled the stirrings of unrest in 2011 by distributing generous payoffs to citizens, said Assaad, the University of Minnesota professor. Over the decades, the gulf countries’ oil wealth has allowed these autocrats to offer their citizens generous services and government employment in return for political quiet.

“A crucial question is what happens in the oil-rich countries,” said Assaad. “They really are powder kegs in terms of the potential instability if oil prices are unable to grow and to drive the population to acquiescence, as they did in the Arab Spring.”

The ripple effect of falling oil prices is already being felt well beyond the gulf. Countries such as Egypt and Jordan are seeing less aid from their richer allies, which had in the past helped shore up their governments, as well as a falloff in remittances from citizens who work in gulf economies but are now being sent home as a recession bites.

Further instability seems inevitable, said Fawaz Gerges, professor of international relations at the London School of Economics. He believes the upheaval of the past 10 years represents the start of a long process of change that will eventually lead to a transformation of the Middle East.

“I don’t think we’re going to see any stability as long as dictators and military intelligence agencies continue to suffocate society,” he said.

He also fears that the unrest could be more violent than it was a decade ago.

“The status quo is untenable, and the next explosion will be catastrophic,” he predicted. “We’re talking about starvation, we’re talking about state collapse, we’re talking about civil strife.”

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Claire Parker in Tunis contributed to this report.

EGYPT — Feb. 21, 2011. Algerian students clash with riot police near the Ministry of Higher Education in Algiers. The students want the government to scrap a new law that dilutes the value of their diplomas by giving equal status to less-qualified degree holders in the job market. Monday’s protest follows scattered strikes and protests in recent weeks in defiance of a ban on public gatherings in Algiers dating to an Islamic insurgency in the 1990s.
A fresh generation of Tunisian youth is protesting economic woes, social inequality, political corruption and other problems, driven by the unfulfilled expectations of a revolution that toppled their dictator a decade ago and ignited revolts across the Arab world.

On Monday night, the mostly teenage protesters clashed with security forces in cities across the North African nation for a fourth night, burning tires and hurling gasoline bombs. Security forces have retaliated with tear gas and water cannons to disperse hundreds of protesters, who are demanding jobs, better government services and an end to police violence, among other changes. While scenes of mayhem and chaos captured in videos zipped across social media, protesters declared they will press on.

The demonstrations were the latest in a series of mass protests in Tunisia, driven by the unfulfilled promises of the Arab Spring and efforts by the country’s president to extend his term of office. The capital has been one of the focal points, with police and protesters clashing in recent days.

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FETHI BELAID/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Demonstrators block a street Monday in a district on the outskirts of Tunis, the capital. It was the fourth night of clashes between protesters and security forces across Tunisia, which on Thursday had marked the 10th anniversary of its Arab Spring uprising.
media, there were also peaceful demonstrations. Hundreds have been arrested, triggering calls for restraint from human rights activists and civil society groups.

By Tuesday morning, the military had been dispatched to protect public buildings and conduct joint patrols with police units in several cities to quell the protests.

The vast majority of those detained over the past four days were 5 to 10 years old during the 2011 uprisings that toppled the nation’s longtime autocrat, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, according to Tunisia’s Interior Ministry.

“It’s a new generation,” said Ons Ben Abdelkarim, Tunisia representative for Expectation State, an emerging-nations development aid group. “They didn’t know anything about the dictatorship. They really grew up hearing about democracy and the revolution and change, but they didn’t see an impact on their daily life.”

The explosion of anger follows Tunisia’s commemoration Thursday of the 10th anniversary of the uprising. It touched off revolts across the Arab world, now commonly referred to as the Arab Spring, that led to the ouster of dictators in Egypt, Libya and Yemen.

Since then, Tunisia has been lauded as the only nation to have emerged from the Arab Spring revolts as a democracy. But despite its unique standing, the country has remained fragile, struggling with economic woes, political infighting and the threat of Islamist extremism.

“Tunisia is free enough to allow such massive protests without much bloodshed, but its people are unhappy with the political leadership and state leadership and are still looking for change,” said Youssef Cherif, a North Africa political analyst affiliated with Columbia University.

Tension and frustration have grown over high unemployment rates, falling living standards, poor state services and public spending cuts mandated by an International Monetary Fund-backed loan program. The coronavirus pandemic has added to the economic and social woes, further shattering an economy highly dependent on tourism. Last week, a new pandemic lockdown added to the grievances of the protesters.

In the first 10 months of last year, more than 6,500 protests were recorded, mostly against economic and social policies, according to the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights. The political class is viewed by many Tunisians as inefficient and corrupt, and police are despised in poorer, neglected areas and are often accused of violent tactics, analysts said.

“There is a big gap between what this young generation is expecting and the overall ruling leadership within the government” and in national organizations and the media, said Ben Abdelkarim, who formerly worked for a Tunisian nonprofit seeking to improve governance and government accountability. “There is a real gap in understanding them and responding to their needs.”

In a November report, the forum warned of “systemic sabotage” due to the failure of successive governments since 2011 to fulfill the aspirations of Tunisians after the revolution, including achieving social justice, combating corruption and aiding long-marginalized areas.

“Gradually, the experience of democratic transition in Tunisia is heading toward a social tragedy,” the group wrote.

The most recent spate of protests ignited Friday in Siliana, a farming town roughly 80 miles southwest of the capital, Tunis. It followed a video that showed a police officer assaulting a shepherd whose sheep had entered the courtyard of a local government building, according to Amnesty International, a human rights watchdog group.

Adding to the frustration was the government’s imposition of a four-day national lockdown that started Thursday, the revolution’s anniversary, in response to a rise in coronavirus infections.
The protests swiftly spread to the capital and as many as 14 other cities, including regions in the center and south with extremely high levels of youth unemployment and poverty.

In some instances, the protests quickly turned to violence. Youths threw molotov cocktails at police in bulletproof vests, vandalized buildings and looted stores.

By Sunday, an Interior Ministry spokesman, Khaled Hayouni, announced that police had arrested 632 demonstrators. Most were between the ages of 15 and 20, he said.

Amnesty International called Monday for calm and restraint. The group cited videos that circulated on social media that showed police officers beating and dragging detainees, as well as eyewitness accounts of people ill-treated in police custody. On Monday, Amnesty said police attacked a peaceful protest with batons and tear gas and arrested a human rights activist, Hamza Nassri Jeridi.

“If there is something that didn’t change in the past 10 years, it’s how security forces are dealing with demonstrations,” said Ben Abdelkarim. “There are still the same reflexes on using violence against this type of demonstrations.”

The mass arrests of teenagers and youths “are adding to the general discontent,” said Cherif. So far, however, it doesn’t appear to be heading toward a 2011-like revolt against the political and security establishment, he said.

“But another police blunder, an unexpected event, more political bickering and maneuvering could trigger a bigger movement,” said Cherif. “For sure, there is enough anger in the street for another revolution to emerge.”

In November 2020, The Post appointed Sudarsan Raghavan to a new role for The Post as a Europe-based correspondent who can be deployed quickly to trouble spots around the world.

As an accomplished veteran who thrives in difficult places, Sudarsan is a natural for the job. Since joining The Post in 2005, his successive posts as bureau chief in Baghdad, Nairobi, Kabul and Cairo (the last five years) have mostly revolved around conflict. He has covered wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Congo, Yemen, Libya, Sudan and Gaza, demonstrating conviction and courage. He has won multiple honors, including Overseas Press Club awards for his coverage of the wars in Iraq and Yemen and the Asia Society’s Osborn Elliott prize for his reporting from Afghanistan.

His deployments – to Africa, the Middle East, South Asia and other parts of the world – will be driven by the need for timely, on-the-ground reporting that fills the newsroom’s most urgent needs.

He will begin his rapid-deployment role from Cairo early 2021, once a new bureau chief is in place. When the school year ends, he and his family will relocate to their new base in Spain.
Ten Years of Disappointment

Tunisian vegetable cart vendor Mohamed Bouazizi’s offer to pay the fine for not having a license was denied, his only livelihood, his vegetables, were seized and local officials refused to hear his complaints of harassment by police. On December 17, 2010, he set himself on fire in front of a government building. His death on January 4, 2011, was the catalyst for street protests and on January 11 Tunisia’s strong-armed president abdicated, fleeing to Saudi Arabia and dissolving the authoritarian government.

Protesters armed with cell phones and signs had begun what became known as the Arab Spring. Regime changes took place across the Middle East and North Africa, but only Tunisia resulted in the beginning of a democratic government.

Read “Unfinished business of the Arab Spring” and “In Tunisia, a ‘new generation’ turns to protest” to learn more about then and ten years later. The following discussion questions highlight main ideas in articles by The Post’s Liz Sly, Beirut bureau chief, and Sudarsan Raghavan, Cairo bureau chief.

Discussion
1. Explain how Mohamed Bouazizi’s life illustrates the social inequality, economic uncertainty, and personal indignities that drove protesters to the streets.

2. Arab Spring brought the end of dictators in Egypt, Libya and Syria.
   a. Who were these dictators?
   b. What happened to them?
   c. What kind of government or political conditions exists in each of the three countries today?

3. Protesters in Tunisia in January 2021 have been primarily teenagers.
   a. How old were most of these protesters in 2011?
   b. What do they want?
   c. Explain the contrast between what they heard growing up and what they are experiencing in their lives?

4. Which of the Arab Spring countries was highly dependent on tourism? How have the pandemic and political instability influenced that part of their economy?

5. What role does social media play in current protests? In the protests of 2011?

6. Provide examples of the success or failure of Arab Spring in the following countries:
   a. Egypt
   b. Libya
   c. Tunisia

7. Select Syria, Lebanon or Egypt.
   a. Summarize the events of Arab Spring in the country you selected.
   b. Summarize the political, economic and human rights conditions that exist today.
8. Do your agree, disagree or partially agree with the following statement? Give examples to support your position.
   “Repressive states always look stable, but when a government relies on coercion as a primary means of survival, it’s inherently unstable.”

9. Liz Sly writes:
   “If there is one overriding lesson from the Arab Spring, it is that tyranny can quell dissent as long as leaders exert enough force or offer enough incentives.”
   Give an example of force and of incentives that have repressed protests.

10. Select an idea or country presented in either of the articles. In two to four paragraphs summarize the information and state your reaction to it. Why does this interest you?

BONUS
The successful abdication of the presidency in Tunisia and the first steps towards democracy was called a Jasmine Revolution.
   a. What was the origin of that phrase?
   b. How did the demonstrations inspired by the protests in Tunisia get the label Arab Spring?

Debate
Now that you have more information about the Arab Spring and the current situation in North Africa and the Middle East, prepare to debate. Use one of the following topics or write one of your own.

1. High population growth does/does not impact a country’s economy.
   *Give examples to support the side you take.*

2. There are/are not reasons for businesses to open in North Africa and the Middle East.
   *You may select particular countries and businesses rather than apply your response to the entire region. Be sure to specify particular companies or products.*

3. It is better to accept conditions than to protest economic, social and political conditions.
A Country’s Name

The United States of America is named after Amerigo Vespucci, the Italian explorer who believed Columbus had discovered a distinct continent. The Library of Congress holds a 1507 map with the new continent named “America.” Italy was originally spelled “Vitalia” from the Latin word *vitulus*, meaning one-year-old calf. So this old name for southern Italy and its people refers to the “Land of Cattle.” The land of the Angles, a Germanic tribe, became England.

Taking time to discover the origin of the name of a country, state or continent gives insight into the history, geography, livelihood and perceptions held when it was named. Moving away from North America and Europe, let’s search Africa to see what we may discover.

When you think of Africa, you picture a place that is usually hot with arid expanses. And 60% of the second largest continent does consist of deserts and drylands. So it is easy to conclude that its name comes from the Latin word *aprica* meaning hot or sunny. Early explorers were surprised to find snow in equatorial Kenya on Mount Kenya. Likewise in Tanzania on Mount Kilimanjaro and ice-capped peaks in Uganda and Ethiopia — but don’t expect to ski there. You have to go to Drakensberg in South Africa or the Atlas Mountains in Morocco to find skiing stations. (By the way, historians and etymologists are still looking for more evidence of the origin of “Africa.”)

*Let’s see what we can find about the names of the five countries that compose North Africa, starting from East and heading west. All five have coastlines on the Mediterranean Sea.*

**Egypt**

One of the important ancient civilizations, Egypt gets its name from its early capital city of Memphis that was founded in c. 3100 B.C. A canal connected this thriving center of commerce to the Nile, providing for lively trade and prosperity for generations.

The Greek name *Amarna Hikuptah*, corresponded to the original name of Memphis which the Egyptian historian Manetho referred to as *Ha(t)-ka-ptah*, “temple of the soul of Ptah,” the creator god and patron of craftsmen associated with Memphis. In the 6th dynasty Memphis was at its height of prestige as the center for religion, commerce and trade. Eventually, the Greeks used the name of Memphis for the united Egypt — *Aigyptos*, meaning “the river Nile” or “Egypt.” The French called the land *Egypte*, which in Old English was *Egip*, their word for “the Egyptians.”

The ruins of Memphis and nearby pyramids of Giza are today’s reminders of its past glory.
Libya

Heiroglyphics from 2000 B.C.E. provide evidence that Libya was the ancient name for this area. In biblical names the meaning of Libya is the heart of the sea or fat. The name was used in ancient Greek (Attic Greek: Λιβύη Libúē and Doric Greek: Λιβύᾱ Libúā). The Greeks sometimes used Libya as the name of all of Africa.

You would think that Libya has always been its name, but nations and war interrupted that. Phoenicians founded Tripoli in western Libya (Tripolitania). Later Greeks settled in eastern Libya (Cyrenaica). Vandals and then Arabs conquered Libya in 642-44. In Middle English its name was Libie. In the 1500s Turkey and Spain fought over the rich coastline, making it a haven for pirates. The Ottomans also recognized three provinces, including the southwest province (Fezzan). When Italy ruled it as a unified colony from 1912, Libya was revived as its name. The country was divided after World War II into Tripolitania and Cyrenaica (under British administration) and Fezzan (under French) from 1943 to 1951 when it gained independence — and its current name Libya. The monarchy was overthrown by a military junta led by Colonel Muammar Gaddafi in 1969; Gaddafi’s authoritarian regime was overthrown in 2011 following the Arab Spring popular uprising.

Algeria

Algeria is the largest nation in the Maghreb, an Arab term meaning the west. And another term for North Africa, extending from Tunisia to Morocco, Algeria to Mauritania. In 2020, Algeria’s population was nearly 44,000,000 with 72.6% living in urban rather than rural places.

By adding the Latin suffix –ia to indicate a country, the city name of Algiers became the country’s name in 1830. After many years of rule by Berbers (pre-Arab inhabitants of the Maghreb), Romans and the Ottoman empire, the region was colonized by France which choose Algiers (Alger in French) as its capital. The name refers to four islands that used to be off the coast but joined to the mainland in 1525.

Algiers is a name derived from the Catalan word Alguèrè, which comes from Djezaïr, the name given by Bologhine ibn Ziri, founder of the Berber Zirid dynasty, who built the city in 944 on the ruins of the ancient Roman city Icosium (or the seagull island), Djezaïr Beni Mezghenna. From the city’s founding the four islands were influential. The name, as given by Bologhine ibn Ziri, referred to them — and maybe more. According to Middle Ages Muslim geographers, the term island could also refer to the fertile coast of Algeria existing between the vast Sahara and the Mediterranean Sea, appearing as an island of life, Al-Jaza’ir.

In the 19th century, Algerine became synonymous with “pirate,” but that’s a story for another day, Barbarosa.

Tunisia

Tunisia was called Ifrīqiyyah in the early centuries of the Islamic period. That name is from the Roman word for Africa and the name also given by the Romans to their first African colony following the Punic Wars against the Carthaginians in 264–146 B.C.E.

Similar to Algiers and Algeria, the country’s name is based on its capital city, Tunis which comes from the French word Tunisie. This name shares its Berber root (transcribed tns, which means “to lay down” or “encampment”) with several other towns. All of these Berber towns were located on Roman roads, and probably served as road houses or stops. Tunis, built on hills at the crossroads between Lake Tunis and the Mediterranean Sea, is believed to be a night camp or bivouac for troops.
Morocco
Our most west and smallest country in North Africa is Morocco. The Italians used Morocco, getting it from the Berber word “Marrakesh,” the name of the city of Marrakesh. It is derived from the Arabic Maghrib-al-Aqsa that means “extreme west.” In French it is Maroc and in German Marokko. So we have another country of North Africa whose name is based on a city’s name.

Historical evidence indicates that human societies have lived within Morocco’s boundaries since the Paleolithic era. Today, it is estimated that more than 40% of the Moroccan people are descendants of the Berbers who used to be the country’s most dominant ethnic group.

If not on a map, travel brochure or in a news article, you may see Morocco on a label. It is a “kind of fine flexible leather,” as described in the 1630s; it was earlier called maroquin (16c.) in French. The sumac-tanned goatskin leather was first made in Morocco. Valued for its firmness of texture, flexibility and grained surface, it was used to make durable book-bindings, upholster seats, and craft shoes.

You have a brief introduction to a country through its name. Perhaps, you want to learn more about these five countries. What sources would you use? Or perhaps, you want to select another country to learn about it through its name’s origin.