In 2011, citizens across the Middle East took to the streets to demand more representative governments, social justice, and economic reforms.Surprisingly, in the countries that have leaned toward democracy in recent years, people tend to see China and Russia as more beneficial economic partners than the United States−−whereas in some of the Middle East's authoritarian−leaning countries, the idea of strengthening economic links to the United States fares better.As U.S. influence has waned and regional economies have stagnated, the Chinese economic and development model and, to a lesser extent, the Russian one have become more attractive to many Arabs, particularly in contrast to the perceived limitations of Western neoliberalism.Even as autocrats reasserted control in the years immediately following the Arab Spring, many analysts continued to aver that the revolts had unleashed aspirations for new economic and political arrangements, signaling the dawn of a more inclusive era.The International Monetary Fund has estimated that the annualized growth rate across the region of the Middle East and North Africa in 2020 was negative 4.7 percent, and the World Bank has estimated that the pandemic has left tens of millions of Arab citizens at income levels that qualify as below the poverty line in upper−middle−income countries.To a large extent, however, the movements behind those developments were calling for better governance and economic management rather than democracy per se. It appears that the people of the Arab world have internalized one lesson above all from the revolts of the last decade: democratic change does not necessarily produce economic improvement.In Egypt and Tunisia, protest movements toppled dictators who had ruled for decades; authoritarian regimes elsewhere in the region were rattled as never before.Although Washington declined in 2011 to strongly support the Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak, a longtime U.S. ally, it also declined to counter the 2013 military coup that overthrew the democratically elected government that had eventually emerged after Mubarak's downfall.Egyptians and Tunisians saw economic considerations as the primary reason for the Arab Spring revolts in their countries, according to Arab Barometer surveys conducted in both places in 2011.Today, the region is plagued by the same issues that have dragged down its economic development for decades: high unemployment, especially among young people; low rates of participation in the labor force, especially among women; a lack of high−quality education; rising inequality; and rampant corruption.In 2019, prior to the onset of the pandemic, long−standing dictators were deposed in Algeria and Sudan, and protests forced changes of government in Iraq and Lebanon.Protest movements and nascent democratic governments ultimately failed to end a decades−long era of authoritarian rule, but that did not necessarily mean that the desire for democratic change had dissipated.The COVID− 19 pandemic has made things much worse, not only leading to illness and death but also spurring a collapse in oil prices, a dramatic drop in tourism, and an across−the− board decline in economic activity of all kinds

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