BEIRUT — The past few weeks have been bad ones for the old Arab order. It started with Egypt, once the dynamic, uncontested leader of the Arab world, whose foreign policy now often amounts to an appendix tacked onto American mediation in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. [A New Year’s Day bombing at a church in Alexandria](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/02/world/middleeast/02egypt.html?scp=3&sq=Alexandria&st=cse) has laid bare what most Egyptians already know: Years of stagnation have solved none of Egypt’s problems and may have created new ones — a Christian-Muslim divide, for one.

Last week, Lebanon found itself on familiar ground. Yet another iteration of a six-year crisis over who will rule the country [paralyzed an already feeble government](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/13/world/middleeast/13lebanon.html?scp=2&sq=Lebanon&st=cse). Lebanese were anxious but not distraught: During the crisis, they have spent more months without a functioning government than with one, and have survived.

Sudan was on the brink of partition, as [black Africans in the south were voting](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/10/world/africa/10sudan.html?scp=3&sq=Sudan&st=cse) for independence from their Arab rulers in the north, with whom they have fought two of history’s bloodiest civil wars. Iraq is not quite the old order, but even there, the legions who follow the radical Shiite cleric Moktada al-Sadr — marginalized, edgy and determined to inherit the country — [poured into the streets of a sacred city to welcome back their leader](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/06/world/middleeast/06iraq.html?ref=moktadaalsadr), who soon made clear that he would be a force with which American allies in Iraq would have to reckon.

Most recently and most spectacularly, [Tunisia was swept up in protests](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/15/world/africa/15tunis.html?hp) over joblessness, corruption and too many years under one of the heaviest hands in the Arab world, forcing a dictator to flee and electrifying the Arab world.

“The people have woken up and revolted against you,” a polemic in Arabic on Facebook told President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. “We’ve said our opinion: We hate you. The Tunisian people will not be oppressed. Resign immediately!”

It’s still early, but 2011 may prove the year that the status quo in the Middle East proved untenable and began falling apart.

In the streets of the Tunisian summer getaway of Hammamet, in the seething quarters of Sadr City or in the claustrophobic neighborhoods of Beirut, hopelessly divided by the most primordial of religious and clan loyalties, Arab states looked exhausted, ossified and ideologically bankrupt, surviving merely to perpetuate themselves. Never has the divide between ruler and ruled seemed so yawning, and perhaps never has it been so dangerous.

“What we are witnessing is the collapse of the Arab state,” Alfadel Chalak wrote in his column Friday in the leftist Beirut newspaper As Safir, channeling a sentiment often heard these days. “Wherever we look across the Arab world, we see wars. We see civil wars, wars among ethnicities, wars between sects and ethnicities, wars among sects, and wars among authorities, sects, ethnicities and the poor,” Mr. Chalak wrote. “Wars among an Arab world that doesn’t have an elite or leadership that draws strategies and tactics that lead to salvation. Therefore, it looks as if we are going to witness for years and maybe decades to come a great deal of devastation, destruction and killing.”

On Dec. 1, 2006, hundreds of thousands of supporters of the Shiite Muslim movement Hezbollah [poured into Beirut’s tony downtown](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/02/world/middleeast/02lebanon.html?scp=8&sq=Hezbollah%20Dec.%202006&st=cse), itself a symbol of the country’s recovery from a 15-year civil war that stopped in 1990 but was never really resolved. The demonstrators, backed by Iran and Syria, were challenging the government and its supporters, who were backed by the United States, France and Saudi Arabia. Soon the protesters gathered around the statue of one of Lebanon’s founders, Riyadh al-Solh, posing a question that was asked at Lebanon’s independence in 1943 and so often since:

What kind of Lebanon?

The collision of two Lebanons that had co-existed uneasily since the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005 manifested itself again in a new crisis last week that is really a version of the old one. Despite a truce reached in Doha in 2008 — truce being a relative term here — the same questions have gone unanswered: whether Lebanon hews to a culture of resistance to Israel or accommodation with it; whether Hezbollah’s allies or the government’s exert more influence; whether Hezbollah itself — and by default, the Shiite Muslim community it represents — reigns supreme; and finally, though hardest to decide, which side gets to define the way that Lebanon imagines itself.

The constant in all those disputes is the utter inability of the state to arbitrate.

“The rules are still being negotiated,” said Peter Harling, an analyst with the International Crisis Group in Damascus, Syria. “The Doha agreement was a truce and nothing more than a truce with a temporary set of rules, but fundamentally, the rules that will define the balance of forces — or the power-sharing formula, if you want — between the players in Lebanon are still being negotiated.”

Lebanon’s dysfunction is an extreme case. Its system of spoils — power divided rigidly among religious communities — offers protections to minorities but makes a sham of a broader notion of citizenship. But the failure of the state here is by no means unique. Iraq’s government, still populated by exiles who returned after the American invasion of 2003, has shown a remarkable inability to resolve that country’s most pressing questions. You only have to listen to the curses directed at it every time the electricity goes out (which is often). In Egypt after the church attack, the state television blared nationalist anthems that did little to drown out the deep frustration at a proud nation’s decline. The protests in Tunisia seemed to be a metaphor: At some point, you can only bear so much.

“Transitions are pending,” said Robert Malley, an expert on the Middle East and North Africa at the International Crisis Group in Washington. He listed the reasons for the beginning of an end: “The loss of energy, the loss of steam among many of these so-called moderate Arab countries, the loss of any purpose around which they can rally other than the simple survival of the regimes themselves.”

In a way, dynamism in the Arab world has simply gone elsewhere. It could be argued that Iran and Turkey, non-Arab states that aggressively pursue divergent aims in the Middle East, play far greater political roles in the Arab world than any single Arab state. Hassan Nasrallah, the stentorian secretary general of Hezbollah, regularly wins popularity contests in the region. (The leaders of Iran and Turkey fare well, too.)

Mr. Malley said their momentum stemmed from a sense of mission: “They do seem to have some purpose around which they are rallying.”

The miserable state of affairs in the Arab world is often seen here as the detritus of Sykes-Picot, the 1916 agreement that was the highlight of Britain’s and France’s deceitful machinations to divvy up the spoils of the Ottoman Empire after World War I. They drew borders that forged only more divisions (Lebanon), imposed monarchs where their families had no roots (Jordan and Iraq), and created a climate of conspiracy in a region where conspiracies are still hatched. The creation of Israel followed, helping give rise to Arab national-security states that claimed legitimacy through their conflict with it.

The United States is also blamed here for helping distort the more modern version of these polities, by failing to end the Arab-Israeli conflict, rejecting engagement with Islamist movements and helping prop up governments like Egypt’s and Saudi Arabia’s that seem incapable of reforming themselves. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton scolded some of those allies last week for that lack of reform, though forgoing mention that some of the most dictatorial are some of America’s closest allies.

What is said about Western mistakes seems true enough, but it lacks a certain self-reflection on the states’ own failures.

For a while, the charisma and popularity of bygone leaders like Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt and Abdel-Karim Qassem in Iraq might have masked the states’ failures. Though harsh and oppressive, they are still viewed with nostalgia in their countries, not least because their successors seem so timid and lackluster. The moment back then was headier, too, buoyed by post-colonial optimism. Whatever else can be said about Habib Bourguiba of Tunisia, it is hard to imagine an Arab leader ostentatiously drinking orange juice on television during the month of Ramadan, when Muslims fast from dawn to dusk. “A modern nation cannot afford to stop for a month every year,” he declared. Right or wrong, the gesture was dramatic, though it earned him plenty of enemies.

Today’s notion of drama is the man who overthrew him, Mr. Ben Ali, offering this concession to angry protesters: He would not serve as president for life. The protesters were not satisfied.

The states have failed to foster pluralism and a universal sense of citizenship. Miserable governance fosters narrower identities as Sunnis, Shiites, Christians and so on. Lebanon’s illness — rigid identities that breed parochial chauvinisms — is becoming less and less the exception.

More tangibly, the many educated young remain frustrated. They might have the basics a state provides, but no future, that bygone notion that tomorrow will be better than yesterday. That is Tunisia, in a potential glimpse ahead.

“What’s happened is there’s been an accumulation of frustration and some anger and some bitterness, a combination of a lack of political rights, shrinking economic opportunities, abuse of power, the dominance of the security state, all these things,” said Rami Khouri, director of the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut. “We’ve kind of passed the tipping point.”

1. What troubling things have been happening in Tunisia, Lebanon, Egypt, Sudan and Iraq
2. Why does Alfadel Chalak believe that these events may mark the collapse of the Arab state?
3. What different causes for the turmoil are offered in the article? Which cause seems the most significant? Why?
4. What similarities and differences exist among the countries discussed in the article?

1. What information in the article surprises you the most? Why?