"Why does every nation on Earth move to change their conditions except for us? Why do we always submit to the batons of the rulers and their repression? How long will Arabs wait for foreign saviors?" That is how the inflammatory Al Jazeera talk-show host Faisal al-Qassem opened his program in December 2003. On another Al Jazeera program around that same time, Egyptian intellectuals Saad Eddin Ibrahim and Fahmy Howeidy debated whether it would take American intervention to force change in the Arab world. Almost exactly seven years later, Tunisians erupted in a revolution that spread across the entire region, finally answering Qassem's challenge and proving that Arabs themselves could take control of their destiny.

Throughout this year of tumult, Arabs have debated the meaning of the great wave of popular mobilization that has swept their world as vigorously as have anxious foreigners. There is no single Arab idea about what has happened. To many young activists, it is a revolution that will not stop until it has swept away every remnant of the old order. To worried elites, it represents a protest movement to be met with limited economic and political reforms. Some see a great Islamic Awakening, while others argue for an emerging cosmopolitan, secular, democratic generation of engaged citizens. For prominent liberals such as Egypt's Amr Hamzawy, these really have been revolutions for democracy. But whatever the ultimate goal, most would agree with Syrian intellectual Burhan Ghalyoun, who eloquently argued in March that the Arab
world was witnessing "an awakening of the people who have been crushed by despotic regimes."

In March, Egyptian writer Hassan Hanafi declared that the spread of the revolutions demonstrated finally that "Arab unity" -- long a distant ideal in a region better known for its fragmentation and ideological bickering -- "is an objective reality." This unified narrative of change, and the rise of a new, popular pan-Arabism directed against regimes, is perhaps the greatest revelation of the uprisings. Not since the 1950s has a single slogan -- back then Arab unity, today "The People Want to Overthrow the Regime" -- been sounded so powerfully from North Africa to the Gulf. This identification with a shared fate feels natural to a generation that came of age watching satellite TV coverage of Palestine, Iraq, and Lebanon over the previous decade. Al Jazeera, since its rise to prominence in the late 1990s, has unified the regional agenda through its explicitly Arabist coverage -- and its embrace of raucous political debates on the most sensitive issues.

That pan-Arab popular identification extended to the democracy movements that multiplied across the region -- whether Egypt's tenacious street protesters, Bahraini human rights activists, or Yemenis (including this year's Nobel Peace Prize winner Tawakkol Karman) protesting President Ali Abdullah Saleh's nepotism and corruption. A decade-long, media-fueled narrative of change is why Arabs immediately recognized each national protest as part of their own struggle. As Wadah Khanfar, the network's recently departed director-general, put it, "That was Al Jazeera's role: liberating the Arab mind. We created the idea in the Arab mind that when you have a right, you should fight for it."

So while the Arab uprisings generated a marvelous range of innovative tactics (uploading mobile-camera videos to social media like Facebook and Twitter, seizing and holding public squares), they did not introduce any particularly new ideas. The relentless critique of the status quo, the generational desire for political change, the yearning for democratic freedoms, the intense pan-Arab
identification -- these had all been in circulation for more than a decade. What changed with the fall of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia was the recognition that even the worst tyrants could be toppled. It shattered the wall of fear. That is why hundreds of thousands of Egyptians came into the streets on Jan. 25. It's why protests broke out in Yemen, Bahrain, Morocco, and Jordan. It's why Syrians and Libyans took unfathomable personal risks to rise up against seemingly untouchable despots despite the near certainty of arrest, torture, murder, and reprisals against their families.

The uprisings came in the wake of years of institutional and political decay diagnosed acutely by Arab intellectuals such as Egyptian jurist Tariq al-Bishri, by the prescient 2002 Arab Human Development Report, and by nascent political leaders like former International Atomic Energy Agency chief Mohamed ElBaradei. Beneath the edifice of stability, they warned, state institutions were crumbling, their legitimacy faded in the relentless drift of corruption, nepotism, casual brutality, and indifference toward their people. Elections became ever more fraudulent (with the Egyptian and Jordanian elections of late 2010 among the worst), security services more abusive, graft more flagrant.

All this greatly contributed to the economic underpinnings of this year's discontent. The previous decade saw neoliberal economic reforms that privatized industries to the benefit of a small number of well-connected elites and produced impressive rates of GDP growth. But, as ruthlessly dissected by Arab economists like Egypt's Galal Amin, the chasm between the rich and poor grew and few meaningful jobs awaited a massive youth bulge. For many leftist activists, the uprisings were a direct rejection of this neoliberalism -- and those ideas and the technocrats who advanced them have likely been driven from power for the foreseeable future.

But the uprisings were not only about jobs and bread; as Sudanese intellectual Abdelwahab El-Affendi wrote in January, echoing a famous slogan of the 1950s, the revolutions were needed so that the people would deserve bread.
The theme of restoring the dignity of the people pervaded the Arab uprisings. The police abuse that drove Tunisian fruit vendor Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation and killed the young Egyptian Khaled Said struck a chord with populations who experienced daily the depredations of uncaring states. The gross corruption of Ben Ali’s in-laws and Hosni Mubarak’s efforts to groom his son for the presidency simply insulted many Tunisians and Egyptians -- and they were ever less afraid to say so. A fiercely independent and articulate rising generation would no longer tolerate brazen corruption, abusive police, indifferent bureaucracy, a stagnant economy, and stage-managed politics.

Egypt’s Kefaya ("Enough" in Arabic) movement was in many ways the forefather of the Arab uprising. Originally drawn together for state-sanctioned protests over Palestine and Iraq, the organizers of the loose movement courageously turned their focus inward to challenge the succession of Gamal Mubarak. Kefaya brought together an astonishing range of ideologies with revolutionary socialists protesting side by side with Muslim Brothers, and liberals with Nasserists. It pioneered the use of social media, mastered the art of symbolic demonstrations, and pried open a space in the Egyptian media.

That opening was seized by an increasingly aggressive press, led by figures like the irreverent editor Ibrahim Eissa and liberal publisher Hisham Kassem, as well as determined new Internet citizen journalists. Independent newspapers such as Eissa’s al-Dustour eviscerated the pretensions of their rulers. Al Jazeera talk shows threw every issue open for debate. Activists like Tunisia’s Sami Ben Gharbia used Internet tools to reveal the Tunisian first lady’s shopping trips to Paris on the president's private jet. Bahrainis used Google Earth to reveal the shocking size of lands expropriated by the royal family for private use. Egyptians like blogger Wael Abbas circulated videos of police abuse and identified individual officers online. This opening of closed regimes to raw information and opinion, a faith in the power of public ideas, was itself one of the key ideas underpinning the Arab uprisings.
But it would be a mistake to portray the enthusiasm for revolution as universal in the Arab world. Saudi and Gulf intellectuals, in particular, argued fiercely against the spread of the revolutions to their own lands, insisting that the Gulf monarchies were different. Many, such as Emirati writer Sultan Al Qassemi, argued that the monarchical regimes would prove more resilient than the republics, whether due to greater legitimacy or simply greater wealth. Most have indeed avoided significant internal challenges. For now.

Some Arab intellectuals go further to say that the Gulf is leading a "counterrevolution" -- a wide-ranging conspiracy to restore the status quo. In this telling, the conservative Gulf regimes, after protecting themselves, set out to use their wealth and media empires to rebuild relations with the Egyptian military, rid themselves of the hated Muammar al-Qaddafi, promote Islamist movements against liberals, and support the challenge to Iran's major Arab ally, Syria. Anxious revolutionaries around the region likely attribute too much coherence and power to these counterrevolutionary efforts. But even in Egypt, the fears of chaos and disorder run deep, and many will be susceptible to the lure of a return to normality. No final answer has yet been delivered to the question posed by Lebanese liberal Hazem Sagheih in February: "Can a corrupt dictator be overthrown without descending into chaos or a new tyranny?"

And then there is the contested role of religion in the Middle East's new politics. Islamist political movements such as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and Jordan's Islamic Action Front have long participated in elections, citing the fatwas of Doha-based cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi to avoid seeing democracy as an un-Islamic innovation. In Tunisia and Egypt, such movements rapidly demonstrated their mastery of the techniques of political competition, out-organizing and out-campaigning their secular rivals. Even more tellingly, their longtime Salafi critics -- who had spent decades denouncing them for joining an un-Islamic political game -- now rushed to form their own political parties. But as their power grows, these Islamists have
struggled to reassure their domestic critics and the West of their commitment to democratic principles -- and, given their first opportunity to actually exercise power, to figure out for themselves how deep those commitments run.

The uprisings were also about America -- just not in the way most Americans would have it. Arabs found the idea that Iraq's liberation had inspired their democracy struggle laughable; if anything, it was the protests against the Iraq war that taught them the value of public dissent. Americans cheered themselves with the thought that the protesters in Tahrir Square were not burning American flags -- and that Libyans in Benghazi were waving them. But this was a dangerous misunderstanding. Many Arab analysts directly equated dictatorial regimes at home with a foreign policy they considered subservient to Israel and the United States. The Arab uprisings called for independence, national sovereignty, and respect for the will of the people -- all of which pointed to less eager cooperation with Washington and frostier relations with Tel Aviv.

None of that, however, means that Arabs are flocking to join a new anti-American axis. Indeed, groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah, which inspired many Arabs over the last decade with their perceived success and anti-American defiance, have lost appeal, equivocating as their patrons in Damascus and Tehran preside over the slaughter of unarmed protesters in the streets. In a pointed challenge to Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad, who has sought refuge in "resistance" to Israel as Syrians have risen against him, Palestinian writer Ibrahim Hammami wrote in June, "We say to those who raise the slogan of resistance to repress their people: Freedom first, and dignity is more important."

So it's early days yet. But as Palestinian intellectual Khaled Hroub wrote in February, "the fundamental change is the return of the people" to the region's politics. And that -- the idea that the opinions of Arabs matter and can never again be ignored -- may be the most potent new idea of all.