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THE "ARAB SPRING"

– FIVE YEARS AFTER:
THE **NEGATIVE IMPACT** OF THE
ANTI-REGIME PROTESTS

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abstract

THE ARTICLE PRESENTS THE PROBLEM OF THE SO-CALLED "ARAB SPRING" – A SERIES OF ANTI-AUTOCRATIC PROTESTS IN THE ARAB WORLD THAT DEGENERATED INTO THE SO-CALLED "ARAB WINTER" – A RESURGENCE OF AUTHORITARIANISM COMBINED WITH RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM. THE PROBLEM IS KNOWN TO HISTORIANS AND CONSISTS IN THE FACT THAT TRANSITIONAL PERIODS MAKE AN OPPORTUNE TIME FOR VARIOUS FACTIONS INTENDING TO USE THE MOMENTUM AND INSTABILITY TO SEIZE POWER. THE AUTHOR WILL PRESENT THE BACKGROUND AND CHIEF MECHANISMS OF THE UNDERLYING SOCIAL UPRISINGS OF THE LARGE VARIETY OF COUNTRIES INVOLVED IN THE ARAB SPRING, AND ILLUSTRATE THE SCALE OF THE AFTERMATH OF THE UNFINISHED RAPID TRANSFORMATION THAT HAS BEEN TAKEN ADVANTAGE OF BY VARIOUS AUTOCRATIC AND EXTREMIST FACTIONS. THE MATERIAL IS CONCLUDED WITH A VISION OF THE UNCONCLUDED PROTEST AS AN 'OPEN WOUND' LEAVING THE STATE VULNERABLE TO NEW THREATS.

ARAB SPRING, ARAB UPRISING, CIVIL WAR, DICTATORSHIP, PROTEST, EGYPT, LIBYA, SYRIA, YEMEN

keywords

THE ARAB SPRING IS WIDELY RECOGNIZED AS THE SUM OF THE DEMONSTRATIONS AND REVOLTS THAT TRANSPIRED IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA ESPECIALLY IN THE EARLY 2010S, EVEN THOUGH THE ROOTS OF THE SERIES OF EVENTS CAN BE TRACED BACK TO THE PREVIOUS DECADE. MOREOVER, IN SOME AREAS THE CONFLICTS AND DISPUTES UNTIL TODAY HAVE NOT BEEN SETTLED. ADDITIONALLY, IT MUST BE MENTIONED THAT THE REVOLUTIONARY WAVE OF DEMONSTRATIONS HAS REACHED BEYOND THE BORDERS OF THE MENTIONED GEOPOLITICAL AREA AND TRIGGERED VARIOUS FORMS OF PROTEST IN OTHER AFRICAN COUNTRIES AS WELL AS PARTS OF PERSIA AND EVEN THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT.¹

Among the chief causes of the Arab Spring, the ones referred most frequently are a general dissatisfaction with the activities of both local and state governments, and unfavorable economic conditions, visible especially as striking gaps in terms of income levels. Specially, protests were mainly fueled by youth and members of the unions, i.e. people holding a solid educational background and/or a running experience of the occupational employment.²

However, a series of protests of that magnitude could not have been fueled by a narrow selection of socio-economic issues alone that could be addressed through dedicated reforms or via a temporary compromise. In the case of the Arab Spring, there were a number of additional factors that collectively led to the escalation and propagation of protests. The sources commonly point to issues, such as strict or inconsiderate rule based on absolute monarchy or civilian dictatorship, and to a lesser extent also party dictatorship, e.g. in Syria until 2012, as well as the recurrent cases of human rights violations. Wikileaks also revealed unquestionable proof of

¹ Israeli 2013: 282.

² Carlo, Sadian 2012: 29.

political corruption that added credibility to the protests.³ The countries that witnessed revolutions across the MENA region experienced the effects of the economic decline, continuing and/or rising unemployment, and in some cases extreme poverty despite willingness to work. The dissatisfaction among the young generations had erupted due to a number of unfavorable demographic factors,⁴ notably a high percentage of properly educated yet discontented youth unable to find appreciation, opportunities for career development, or even employment.⁵ Together with the salient and striking concentration of riches in the hands of powerful autocrats, paired with unclear patterns of the redistribution of wealth, confirmed cases of corruption, the youth, and professional employees could no longer accept the existing status quo.

While the discussion of the respective stages and territory-specific events included within the Arab Spring are largely beyond the scope of this article, it is sufficient to state that until the end of February 2012, various rulers had been removed from power in multiple countries, including Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen.⁶ Nation-wide civil uprisings had started abruptly in Bahrain and Syria, and major protests had been recorded in Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, and Sudan, not counting countries affected by minor and predominantly peaceful protests, e.g. in Mauritania, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Djibouti, Western Sahara, and Palestine.⁷

Considering the scale of the protests, and their mainly anti-regime nature, one should inquire about the outcome of the long-term engagement of the involved social groups, military troops, and external factors. As a matter of fact, the main body of the negative results of the Arab Spring has recently been given the name of Arab Winter or Islamist Winter.⁸ According to various sources, the Arab Winter is defined as the distributed surge in authoritarianism paired with religious extremism,⁹ developed as a negative consequence of the Arab Spring protests across the countries of the MENA region. Reportedly, the notion was first used in an article published by the Washington Post in December 2011.¹⁰ There are scholarly views that the Arab Spring entirely degenerated into a sort of Arab Winter within four years from its onset.¹¹

3 Cockburn 2015.

4 Korotayev, Zinkina 2011: 139-165.

5 Radsch 2014.

6 Gloppen 2014: 168.

7 Zakaria 2015: 68.

8 Phillips 2012.

9 Israeli 2013: 37-39.

10 Byman 2011.

11 Fiedler, Osiewicz 2015: 182.



THE ARAB SPRING ENTIRELY DEGENERATED INTO
A SORT OF ARAB WINTER WITHIN FOUR YEARS
FROM ITS ONSET

The term refers to the rather ironic results of the protests considering their nature described above, consisting in wide-scale instability and numerous acts of violence throughout the region covered by the events of the Arab Spring. The fall of autocratic regimes, and the resulting instability and political fluidity prompted the rapid outbreak of nation-wide civil wars, regional insecurity, and economic as well as demographic decline across the Arab League, not to mention the religious conflicts, often escalating to communal conflict, between Sunni and Shia Muslim groups. Suffice to observe that by summer 2014, the toll of the Arab Winter has reached 250 thousand casualties, not to mention millions of refugees.¹²

Some of the initial results of the Arab Spring may be misleading when studied in isolation from the events they eventually triggered. Yemen, for instance, was initially seen as a successful case of a state affected by the course of the Arab Spring. However, the newly established government ended up being destabilized by the group of Houthis, essentially a faction of Shia rebels, which endangered the already fragile new leadership. In the first half of 2015, the turmoil in Yemen has further escalated after the suicide bombings in the capital city of Sana'a. The events led to fast reactions of the neighboring states. Saudi Arabia conducted a military intervention, but it appears to have only increased the existing divisions among Yemeni factions.¹³

Apart from the Crisis in Yemen, the “Arab Winter” has come to symbolize multiple other conflicts involving the use of hard power and various militias, among others in the Syrian Civil War, the insurgency in Iraq and the resultant civil war, and the Egyptian Crisis. In Egypt the Arab Winter included events that caused the removal of President Mohamed Morsi. State power was seized by General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi – the unofficial leader of a largely anti-Muslim Brotherhood campaign.¹⁴ In reference to Egypt the term ‘military winter’ is sometimes used to denote the transpired political developments, especially the return of authoritarian rule and the accompanying forceful suppression of civil liberties since July 2013. Needless to say, such a transformation remained in stark opposition to the original objectives of the Arab Spring.¹⁵

12 Khallaf 2013: 6.

13 Toska 2015.

14 EuroNews, 08-02-2013.

15 Hayden 2013.

The Libyan Crisis included numerous military groups. Local tribes have also began fighting in Libya following a cessation of negotiations. According to some sources, Libya has constituted the foreground of the Arab Winter scene alongside Syria¹⁶ – the situation in both countries remains highly unstable at the time of writing this article. Furthermore, the areas of Bahrain and Lebanon have also been included as arenas of the Arab Winter.¹⁷



YEMEN, FOR INSTANCE, WAS INITIALLY SEEN AS A SUCCESSFUL CASE

According to some sources, the conflict in the northern territories of Mali characterized by structurally weak central state authority, that triggered a failed military coup, have been identified as indirectly affected by the Islamist Winter. In 2013 EuroNews stated that political transformations occurring in Tunisia, especially the change of government, also suggested the tendency of the country as “heading into a new Arab Winter.”¹⁸

According to the reports quoted by Rivlin, by January 2014 the total cost of the turmoil and instability caused by Arab Winter throughout the states of the Arab League amounted to approximately 800 billion USD. At the time they calculated that 16 million people residing in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey were to require extensive humanitarian assistance in the year 2014.¹⁹

Moreover, the incessant political chaos and the ensuing acts of violence across the MENA region have led to an enormous displacement of population throughout the Arab and North African world. The most widely publicized was the emergence of the so-called ‘boat-people.’ They included internally displaced individuals and various types of asylum-seekers as well as refugees from Libya and Tunisia, heading towards the shores of the European Union, signifying an adverse unwanted secondary effect of the Arab Winter beyond the MENA region.²⁰ Unsurprisingly, those desperate attempts to pursue safety and escape the violence by the illegal crossing of the Mediterranean Sea ignited waves of fear among European politicians as well as their citizens. The scale of the immigration made some social groups believe the newcomers might eventually “flood” their lands, and disrupt the living conditions at and beyond the shores of the

16 Barnett 2014.

17 Rivlin 2014: 2-3.

18 EuroNews 08-02-2013.

19 Rivlin 2014: 1-2.

20 Khallaf 2013: 8-9.

European Union. The situation initiated a stir of legislative activity across the continent, and increased patrolling of the Mediterranean waters to handle and control the arrivals from Northern Africa.²¹

In early 2015, the refugee crisis was further exacerbated due to the massive exodus by large groups escaping from conflict zones. The waves of refugee immigrants included large numbers of Libyan, Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan people heading towards Europe, mostly through Turkey. All these issues are in line with the analysis of Carlo and Sadian that toppling governments constitutes but “the first step in a long journey towards democratization.” This observation specifically applies to newly democratized countries, where “the polls resulted in the election of Islamist figures [are] less likely to implement genuine democratic reforms.”²²

European repercussions aside, current trends in the MENA region appear alarming. According to a recent account presented in *The Economist*, the political situation in the Middle East appears to be worsening, and the Arab world is described as “worse off than ever.”²³ Of course, there have been sparse exceptions from the overall negative trend. After the resignation of the Nahda-led government in Tunisia in 2013, the next years were marked by a partial resolution of the political crisis in the following years. In January 2014, a constitution was approved by the Tunisian parliament, and in October the parliamentary elections were won by Nida Tounes’ centrist and secular party, and its leader, Beji Caid Essebsi, was elected president. However, the events of June 2015, when a Jihadist gunman killed 38 people at a beach resort, cast a shadow on Tunisia’s progress.²⁴ Nevertheless, during 2015 the country was announced as the first Arab state in history to be considered as completely ‘free’ by Freedom House, an American organization monitoring civil liberties. Notably, according to Democracy Ranking Association in Vienna, Tunisia has advanced 32 positions upwards in the ranking of all monitored states.²⁵



THE ARAB WORLD IS DESCRIBED AS “WORSE OFF THAN EVER”

21 Khallaf 2013: 8.

22 Carlo Sadian 2012: 23.

23 *The Economist* 09-01- 2016.

24 Akbar Drury 2015.

25 *The Economist*. 09-01- 2016.

The situation remains far from stable particularly in the states of Libya, Syria and Yemen. After the assassination of Qaddafi in 2011, and since the first democratic elections held in Libya in July 2012, during which the independents managed to win most seats in the newly established General National Congress (GNC), the country faced one wave of instability after another. Killing the American ambassador later that year during the Benghazi attack was symbolic of the numerous incidents that were to take place in Libya. In August 2014, a coalition called Libyan Dawn supported by Islamist and ethnic military groups, managed to take the capital city of Tripoli. Two months later Jihadists declared Derna to be under Islamist rule. The beginning of 2015 brought ISIS control over the port city of Sirte – it was also the time when Egypt started bombing ISIS targets in Libyan territories.²⁶

The stability in Yemen has been disturbed by repeating acts of terrorism, protest and armed conflict. Since the events of March 2011, when troops killed 45 protesters in the capital city of Sana'a, and al-Qaeda seized control of the large part of the Abyan province, the country's political stability has not been restored. The rise of petrol prices in 2014 provoked anti-government demonstrations, and forced President Hadi to dismiss the cabinet. In September that year, Houthi fundamentalist rebels captured most of the capital. At the beginning of 2015, Hadi was forced to flee to Aden. Soon afterwards, in March that year, an ISIS bombing resulted in 137 deaths in the capital city – an event, which triggered a military intervention on the part of a Saudi-led coalition.²⁷

The situation in Syria has been receiving considerable media coverage due to the multiple political actors involved in the area: the forces loyal to President Assad, military opposition, US-led coalition, Russia, ISIS, and Jabhat al-Nusra – a Syrian affiliate of Al-Qaeda founded in 2012. Consequently, the number of complexity of military conflicts has risen to horrendous proportions. In March 2013, ISIS assumed control of Raqqa. Later that year, United Nations reports the use of chemical weapons during anti-rebel attacks in the capital city of Damascus. 2014 is marked by the involvement of US-led coalition, and the consolidation of its Iraqi and Syrian territories by ISIS. 2015 brings no resolution to the multi-lateral conflict, and introduces Russian air strikes, chiefly against non-ISIS anti-Assad rebels.²⁸

26 Bacchi 2015.

27 The Economist 09-01- 2016.

28 The Economist 09-01- 2016.

The events transpiring throughout the region speak for themselves. Other countries, even seemingly more stable, such as Egypt, also face difficulties, and their stability cannot be ensured in the long-term perspective. The year 2013 began with more than 50 people being killed during protests. Later that year President Mursi was removed from office through a military coup. During the ensuing anti-coup protests, the police killed over 800 demonstrators, and eventually the Muslim Brotherhood was banned in Egypt. On the positive note, the new constitution agreed on in a referendum in January 2014, and the following victory of the presidential election by Al-Sisi could mark a new turn for Egypt, especially considering the result of parliamentary elections held in December 2015, in which most seats were won by pro-Sisi independents.²⁹

The history of Russian involvement in the Middle East dates back to the times of the Cold War. The underlying goal of the decisions made at that time was to demonstrate the strength of the Soviet Union in the various parts of the Old World. Simultaneously, joint efforts to contain the possible expansion of the Soviet communism were conducted by the USA. In the later period, the Russian involvement in the MENA region can be associated with the cooperation with the local leaders, e.g. Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, after a long break lasting since 1972.³⁰

Considering the development of political events in the early 2010s, Russia is remembered for its air strikes targeted at rebel forces stationed in Syria. Unlike the US-led coalition against ISIS, the Russian offensive was aimed at destroying forces threatening President Assad's rule in Syria. Nevertheless, the ability to act fast and decisively rendered Russia a power to be reckoned with in the MENA region ever since the mid-2010s. The support and approval gained among various Middle Eastern states, including Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey – commonly believed to be primary strategic partners of the USA – have allowed Russia to extend and strengthen the scope of its political influences in the region to the point where certain sources speak of the Russian reemergence in the area.³¹

The development of events in the MENA region also spawned a rise of tensions on the axis between Saudi Arabian and Iranian influences. Symbolically, one can refer to acts such as arresting Ahmed Ibrahim al-Mughassil, a member of the Saudi Hezbollah, by Saudi intelligence before his attempted journey from Beirut to Tehran. From a broader perspective, such acts reaffirm that Saudi Arabia and Iran have remained in the state

29 The Economist 09-01- 2016.

30 McDermott 2013: 86.

31 Hannah 2016.

of the Cold War at least since the 1990s. With the advent of the turbulent period related to and following the events of the Arab Spring, both powers have been seeking to assert their power in the Arab world.³²



TEHRAN SUPPORTS PUTIN'S ACTIONS AGAINST ANTI-ASSAD REBELS TO THE POINT OF CALLING IRAN A RUSSIAN ALLY

Both powers have been involved in so-called proxy wars, two of which deserve particular attention. First, Saudi Arabia, under the auspices and support of the USA, has led a military intervention in the neighboring Yemen threatened by the domination of the Houthi rebels, nota bene, supported by Tehran. As already noted, the resultant chaos that erupted in Yemen facilitated the development of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Secondly, Iran has supported Syrian president Al-Assad by supplying arms and fighters, not only directly from Iran, but also from the Lebanese branch of Hezbollah. In the context of the previously discussed Russian influences in the region, it ought to be mentioned that Tehran supports Putin's actions against anti-Assad rebels to the point of calling Iran a Russian ally. Unsurprisingly, Iran's and Russia's actions have been criticized by the USA and Saudi Arabia, with the latter country supporting rebel forces believing in their capacity to remove Assad from office.³³

The most recent events include the complication of the situation in the Northern Syria, where the Kurds and the Turks have been set against each other, especially after capturing the border city of Jarablus controlled not by ISIS, but by a Kurdish military group called the People's Protection Units or 'YPG.' The offensive led by the Syrian army combined with the Turkish incursion resulted in a major fiasco in the YPG-controlled areas of Syria. It must be noted that the Turkish intervention was related to the long-standing perception of YPG as allied with Kurdish independence-seeking groups in Turkey. Note that as largely secular and anti-Jihadist, YPG used to be an ally-of-convenience for the Syrian government.³⁴

On the other hand, Turkish leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has publicly supported Jabhat Al-Nusra, a powerful Jihadist movement operating in Syria. However, as Turkey, as a NATO ally, offered its support of the American case in Syria against ISIS, the cooperation with YPG became a matter of secondary importance. During the Turkish inception, although

³² Powell 2016.

³³ Powell 2016.

³⁴ Mercouris 2016.

technically successful, Kurdish militia were viewed as terrorist forces and forced to withdraw from the area. The act was only mildly criticized by the USA; almost simultaneously, the American power hesitated to criticize the attempted coup in Turkey that transpired in 2016. Having failed to predict the Turkish-Kurdish tensions nearby the border, the USA declared not being involved in the local, often violent, campaigns led by Turkey against the Kurdish population.³⁵

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³⁵ BBC News 29-08-2016.

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