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The Middle East: Ten Years' on from the Arab Spring

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Introduction

In December 2010 the tragic self-immolation of a Tunisian street stall holder triggered a wave of protests across the Middle East and North Africa. The Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi was overthrown in 2011, partly following British and French military intervention to prevent air strikes by his regime on Benghazi. In Egypt President Hosni Mubarak was forced to resign and elections were held. In Syria the protests were suppressed violently and turned into a civil war that still continues.

Yet for the most part what some commentators labelled “the Arab Spring” fizzled out. Autocratic regimes survived, whether through the use of force or money or because their citizens feared that regime change would mean civil wars like those in Libya, Syria and Yemen.¹

But in 2019 a new wave of protests emerged in the region, most notably in Algeria, Lebanon and Sudan. Different in style and tone from those of 2010/11, they nonetheless demonstrate that the underlying reasons for the Arab Spring – growing populations, economic disadvantage and authoritarian governments – remain.

For countries around the Middle East, the Arab Spring left a daunting set of challenges including economic instability, successive waves of refugees, and a prolonged period of insecurity. Repeated intervention in the region by other countries, including Iran, Russia, the United States and several European countries showed how apparently domestic disputes could quickly become internationalised, with serious consequences.²

The causes of the Arab Spring

The causes of the explosion of unrest that swept across the Middle East and North Africa in 2011 lay in a cocktail of issues and problems going back many decades. At the heart of the problem lay the gap between the governed and those who govern them. In the Gulf, it was the autocratic absolute monarchies that faced criticism over the absence of democracy, equality and the rule of law. The inequality faced by women had become particularly difficult to maintain with so many young Arab women able to access education in the West but with few opportunities at home.

¹ Marwan Muasher, 'Is this the Arab Spring 2.0?', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 30 October 2019

² This background paper was originally prepared for a seminar organised by Regent's University London and the Senior European Experts Group, which had to be cancelled due to the coronavirus.

In Egypt and Tunisia it was the corruption and the failure of the elite to govern competently and fairly that inflamed public opinion. So many governments were sustained not by popular support but by repressive measures and arbitrary enforcement of the law.

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is home to the world's fastest growing population, due to double in size in the first half of the twenty-first century.³ Almost half the population of the region is under the age of 25. That is, as UNICEF has pointed out, an opportunity as much as it is a problem but in 2011 the governments of most MENA countries had no strategy to provide their growing young populations with education and employment.⁴ In the age of the Internet and social media no amount of repressive measures could keep from those young people the knowledge that they lacked the wealth and opportunities available to young people in other countries, particularly north of them in Europe and in the United States.

For many young Arabs, there seemed no point in going to university and gaining qualifications if at the end of their education there were no jobs for them to fill. The economic model of many of the Middle Eastern states is a rentier one – that is, that it is based on living off the exploitation of resources.⁵ The biggest export is oil and gas and it provides the bulk of the state's revenues but only two or three per cent of the workforce will be involved in oil extraction.⁶ Nor is there a substantial private sector and extensive networks of patronage and social services which, while they provide many with a comfortable existence, do not offer rewarding personal opportunities or any role in the leadership of the country. Although there had been attempts in some Arab states to diversify economies to make them less reliant on oil and gas exploitation, these had not succeeded in creating truly diversified economies.

Furthermore, ageing dictatorships once perceived as radical and exciting but now as just repressive, for example in Libya and Syria, had lost support from large sections of their population and Algeria, Egypt and Sudan were failing to respond to demographic and social change.

In addition, hanging over the entire region were differences between the two main branches of Islam: Sunni and Shia. These differences have long contributed to the tensions between Arab countries but also within them. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 by the US and its western Allies reopened age old arguments as the Sunni dominated regime of Saddam Hussein was swept aside and long-repressed politicians from the Shia majority took power. They in turn looked to Shia-dominated Iran for inspiration and leadership; this then raised concerns about the growth of Iranian influence in Sunni states such as Saudi Arabia.

In some countries longstanding tribal differences repressed by the governing regimes for decades, underlay other divisions in society. This was particularly true in those states in the region where the governing elite came from one tribal or ethnic grouping whereas most of the population came from another tribe or group.

³ See, for example, Geert Cappelaere, Regional Director, Middle East and North Africa, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 'MENA's growing population is a huge opportunity – if we get it right', World Economic Forum, 4 April 2019

⁴ UNICEF, *MENA: Generation 2030*, 30 April 2019

⁵ Jim Krane, 'Subsidy reform and tax increases in the rentier Middle East' in *The Politics of Rentier States in the Gulf, Project on Middle East Political Science*, POMEPS Studies 33, January 2019

⁶ See International Monetary Fund, *Economic Diversification in Oil-Exporting Arab Countries*, 29 April 2016

Why did the Arab Spring fail?

A decade on from the Arab Spring, the perception is largely that it failed. That, despite the widespread protests, the fall of a number of repressive regimes and governments, and a ringing call from US President Barack Obama for a change in the governance and values of the region, ten years on little seems to have changed.

Looked at from this perspective, the period since the protests began has been marked by counter-revolutionary repressive measures that have successfully ensured that the sitting regime has remained in power (*e.g.* Bahrain) or even lead to the replacement of one repressive regime by another (*e.g.* Egypt).

Yet this widespread view is only part of the picture which is more complex; and the assessment of change in the region needs to be seen in the context of its culture and norms. The failure of the Arab Spring is a particularly western assessment, albeit one that would be shared by many Arabs and North Africans.

Was it really ever likely that repressive regimes across the Middle East and North Africa could simply be swept aside by street protests and replaced with one person, one vote, and rule of law democracies? The notion that such radical change could follow so quickly was surely naïve because the conditions were not in place for the establishment of such profoundly different systems of governance and law. The transition from dictatorship to democracy is rarely straightforward or smooth; there was no reason why it should be so in the MENA when it had not been so in, for example, Russia after the fall of the Tsars and then again after the fall of communism.

Western inaction?

The perception of the failure of the Arab Spring in the west cannot be divorced from the view that the west appeared at the beginning of the protests to promise support for change but then failed to back that up. Part of this criticism of western policy is a response to the hopes raised by President Obama in 2011 and the subsequent retreat from that policy both by his administration and even more so by that of his successor, Donald Trump.

In a major speech by in Cairo in May 2011, President Obama in Cairo gave a powerful endorsement of the calls for change in the region. He went further when he declared that:

America must use all our influence to encourage reform in the region [...] we need to speak honestly about the principles that we believe in, with friend and foe alike.

The President offered a three pronged strategy to support major change in the region. This would involve the US standing up firmly for democratic values; supporting troubled economies; and a new concept of US engagement in which it would interact with citizens as well as governments.

Considerable excitement was engendered by this speech and its implicit promise of US intervention in a region many of whose repressive governments had long been backed by the United States. Indeed, Obama's intervention was all the more striking for its disconnect

with post-war US policy. With hindsight, it was perhaps always unlikely that all parts of the US political and economic establishment would embrace such a radical change in policy, one that would break longstanding ties with many governments and ruling classes in the region.

US disengagement

US policy did not live up to President Obama's commitments. Although there was an initial surge of enthusiasm for US engagement with the democratic movements in the region, the difficulties (especially the murder of the US Ambassador in Libya in 2012) that followed western intervention triggered a marked retreat in US policy. Part of the difficulty was that Obama had wanted greater leadership from the European Union and was reluctant to commit US military resources to back up change. Without security, protest movements were vulnerable to the violent measures used in response to the protests and were unable to achieve meaningful change.

The US did provide significant economic assistance to Egypt and Tunisia to help their transition to democracy and a fairer, less exploitative, economic system. But this support did not produce the kind of political change which many US politicians had hoped for and in some cases belief in change was undermined to the extent that the US appeared to lose confidence in its own policy.

The election of President Trump in 2016 saw a further shift in US policy away from intervention in the region and a swing back towards supporting those governments which the US had historically had a good relationship (e.g Saudi Arabia). The Trump administration has maintained this policy, albeit with some inconsistencies, ever since.

The only substantial area of US engagement has been the negative one of its confrontation with Iran. President Obama negotiated the Iran nuclear deal, agreed with the UN Security Council Permanent Five plus Germany in 2015 and supported by the EU. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action was an agreement with Iran for it to limit its nuclear programme and allow international inspectors to ensure that it was complying with its Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty obligations not to produce fissile material or develop a nuclear weapon capability.⁷ In return, sanctions that had crippled much of the Iranian economy would gradually be lifted.

President Trump condemned the Iran nuclear deal on the grounds that it did not curb Iranian backing for terrorist groups and interference in Middle Eastern countries like Syria, Bahrein, Yemen and Lebanon and in May 2018 withdrew the US from it, later reinstating aggressive economic sanctions against Iran. In response, Iranian militia attacked US interests in the Middle East and Iran's political and religious leaders demanded that the remaining signatories take action to counter the US response. The consequence has not been the overthrow of the Iranian regime – clearly Trump's goal – but the loss of Western influence over Iran's nuclear and military activities. It is hard to see how Iranian adventurism can be addressed without engaging with Iran politically.

⁷ 'Iran nuclear deal: Key details', *BBC News*, 11 June 2019

Repressive measures

Another factor in the failure of the Arab Spring to bring about lasting change was the surprising effectiveness of the repressive measures introduced in many MENA countries. These proved effective in suppressing or curtailing protests in a number of countries perhaps because the bulk of their citizens feared that radical change could have negative consequences such as the extreme disorder seen in Iraq, Syria and later in Libya.

Several governments did make concessions to the protesters, for example Jordan and Kuwait. In Jordan the King signed a new constitution reducing his power, protests were permitted and the government had a dialogue with opposition groups.⁸ Others used their considerable sovereign wealth to buy off protesters with improvements and social measures.

Revolutions tend to beget counter-revolutions and this occurred after 2011 in several countries in the region, most notably Egypt. President Sisi's government was seen as unable to deliver effective government and had to rely on new forms of repression. This was another demonstration of the way the absence of democratic traditions made it difficult for countries to transition from dictatorship to democracy.

What were the consequences in the Middle East, North Africa and elsewhere?

A decade that began in hope ended in despair. Instead of a flowering of democracy the region instead saw a savage outbreak of violence across multiple countries in some cases lasting the full decade. The period after 2011 was one of turbulence in which few regimes fell but many others appeared to totter on the edge of downfall. Ultimately, there was not the shift in power and wealth from the governing elites to the people that protesters had first gone on to the streets to campaign for.

Civil conflict & the rise of Islamic State

Civil wars in Libya and Syria seemed to demonstrate the inability of ordinary people to overthrow repressive regimes without military support. Libya remains riven by tribal divisions and competing forces seeking to form a new government. As in other countries in the region, part of Libya's difficulties may reflect its international borders, borders which were devised during the colonial era and reflect power politics at that time.

The counter revolution in Egypt helped to undermine the credibility of democracy and the rule of law with the removal of an elected president. Democracy was seen to fail in Egypt; the fact that this happened in the largest Arab country undermined the credibility of democracy in the region as a whole.

One of the most shocking consequences of the turbulence engendered by the Arab Spring was the emergence in parts of Syria and Iran of a new strain in fundamentalist Islam, the so-called Islamic State. Driven in part by the arrival of jihadi guerrillas from all over the world, Islamic State established an exceptionally barbaric regime which for a time occupied about

⁸ H. Varulkar, 'The Arab Spring in Jordan: King Compelled to Make Concessions to Protest Movement', Middle East Media Research Institute, 12 December 2011

a third of Syria and 40 per cent of Iraq.⁹ It exploited the power vacuum created by conflict within those countries to establish a brief administration which governed with extraordinary savagery and whose presence enabled President Assad of Syria to claim that his opponents were not seeking to replace his Ba'ath Party dictatorship with democracy but were terrorists committed to indiscriminate violence.

A coalition of powers emerged to combat the activities of so-called Islamic State, with the British, Americans, Australians and French prepared to use force, particularly air power and special forces, to attack Islamic State forces while the same time Iran and Russia, for different reasons, also became engaged in combating Islamic State. In the latter two cases, it was with the agreement of President Assad and the intention was as much to assist the survival of his regime as it was to bring an end to Islamic State's extreme violence.

Lives and property destroyed

The period after 2011 was characterised by dreadful human suffering as millions of Syrians sought to escape President Assad's fightback and the barbarism of Islamic State, triggering a mass exodus of a million refugees to Europe via Turkey and Greece and also across the western Mediterranean. In the process, human traffickers were enriched, lives lost and the politics of central and Western Europe profoundly disrupted.

There was too, dreadful destruction of precious cultural artefacts across the region particularly in those parts of Syria and Iraq occupied by so-called Islamic State where ancient ruins were often despoiled because they contained human images, were sacred to particular Islamic sects or to Christians and therefore attracted the wrath of Islamic State's mono cultural view of the world.

As so often in its recent past, turbulence in the Middle East contributed to a further decline in the presence of Christians in Arab countries. Brutal terrorist attacks on Coptic Christian churches in Egypt were a particularly marked feature of the last decade. The pluralism and diversity of the Middle East came under attack leading to potentially permanent demographic social and religious changes whose consequences cannot yet be evaluated.

External interventions

The growth in the involvement of external powers in many states in the region has been a notable feature of the last decade. The largest of these foreign interventions have been made by Iran and Russia but Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates have all become active participants in conflicts across the region. As noted above, Iran and Russia have both been major players in the Syrian civil war, intervening both to prop up a regime to which they are sympathetic but also in order to assert their own power in the region.

Saudi Arabia has been a major participant in the civil war in Yemen, a country long divided by tribal disputes and from which attacks have been mounted on Saudi territory. The brutality of the Yemeni civil war and the suffering of the civilian population have damaged the reputation of Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies. Saudi involvement reflected not only concern about disorder in a neighbouring state but also about Iranian activity in Yemen.

⁹ Cameron Glenn, Mattisan Rowan, John Caves & Garrett Nada, 'Timeline: The Rise, Spread and Fall of Islamic State', Wilson Centre, 28 October 2019

By contrast, the US has been largely absent from the Middle East in terms of active military intervention except in tackling Islamic State. President Trump committed to withdrawing US troops from what he described as “foreign wars,” although the consequences policy seem all too likely to be a loss of US influence in the region and further instability and insecurity weakening rather than strengthening US security.

France and the UK played a significant part in the overthrow of President Gaddafi’s regime in Libya. But in both countries there was a reluctance to become involved in the Syrian civil war. In 2013 the British House of Commons rejected UK involvement through air strikes in Syria even after Assad had used chemical weapons against his own people.¹⁰

Regional impact

The scale of the violence in the Middle East has had profound effects on its neighbours. A series of shocking terrorist atrocities across a number of western European states including especially in France, Germany and the UK contributed, alongside large scale refugee movements, to feelings of insecurity and vulnerability. This in turn assisted the rise of xenophobic populism across the European Union, seen in the substantial votes of hard-line populists in countries as diverse as Sweden, Britain, Italy, Germany and the Netherlands.

In Saudi Arabia, there was a distinct changing of the guard. The rise of Mohamed bin Sultan, known as MBS, saw a sharp shift in direction for the country characterised by a renewed determination to diversify the country’s economy. There was also some liberalisation of the restrictions on the lives of women. But the consolidation of power around MBS led to if anything a more authoritarian regime than had been evident in recent years. This was seen in a particularly shocking episode when the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi was murdered in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul as a reprisal for his public criticisms of MBS.

Saudi Arabia’s involvement in the Yemeni civil war was very much a project of MBS. It led to international outrage over the suffering of civilians as a result of aerial bombardment. Worse, from the Saudi standpoint, was that its intervention was unsuccessful in defeating the Iranian-backed forces in that country.

The increasingly authoritarian regime of President Erdogan in Turkey also faced terrorist attacks, an attempted coup and huge movements of refugees across its borders. These refugee movements lead to an agreement between Turkey and the European Union through which the EU provided substantial financial support to Turkey to enable it to support refugee camps on the Syrian border to accommodate the huge numbers fleeing the Syrian civil war and to deter them from trying to enter Europe. Despite this, huge numbers of refugees did reach Greece and became stuck in refugee camps there often in squalid conditions because of the reluctance of other European countries to admit them. Part of that reluctance derived from the fact that amongst the refugees were economic migrants fleeing other countries in Asia and the MENA region.

In the western Mediterranean, especially off the coast of Libya, large numbers of refugees attempted to cross the sea each summer to claim asylum in EU countries, particularly Malta, Italy and Spain. Hundreds drowned despite various EU maritime missions to tackle the

¹⁰ ‘Syrian crisis: Cameron loses Commons vote on Syria action’, *BBC News*, 30 August 2013

problem. The arrival of many of the migrants in Italy led to a substantial political backlash and contributed to the growth in support for Italian populist parties.

Finally, the decline of the old order in the Middle East and the long period of instability that followed only added to the sense of insecurity felt in Israel. Initially some in Israel had enjoyed the spectacle of the Arab world turning in on itself but the subsequent violent upheaval was alarming, especially when seen against a backdrop of growing Iranian influence, Israel's most powerful enemy. Throughout this period there was a notable failure to find any accommodation between Israel and the Palestinians or to move towards a permanent settlement of the Israel/Palestine question.

2019: Arab Spring 2.0?

In 2019 a dozen countries in the MENA region were affected by new political protests. This fresh outpouring of public concern was characterised by peaceful protests that, rather than seeking the violent overthrow of the current political leadership in their country, tended to be hostile to politicians in general. Demands were also often specific rather than more general demands for democracy or justice.

There is limited evidence that these protests are having an effect. In Sudan, following demonstrations which led to the overthrow the unpopular government of Omar al-Bashir (who is wanted on war crimes charges by the International Criminal Court¹¹). Public protests were initially violently suppressed by the armed forces with the loss of over 100 lives. After some weeks, the military was able to reach agreement with civilian leaders to end the protests and begin a return to normality and the rule of law.¹²

In Algeria the resignation in April 2019 after widespread public protests of the country's president Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who had been in power for 20 years, gave hope that the country might take a new direction.¹³ The election in December of one of Bouteflika's allies as president however brought protesters back on to the streets.¹⁴

Although this new wave of protest in the region attracted considerable attention, it is not been on the same scale and with the same effects as the larger and more powerful protests of 2011. Governments are perhaps also better adapted to responding to public concerns and therefore able to defuse protests of this kind.

What does the future hold?

After a decade of instability the region desperately needs a reduction in violence, an increase in political engagement and greater economic development to spread jobs and opportunities as well as to diversify the economies of many states in the region.

It is hard to see how stability can be restore without first establishing security in places such as Libya and Yemen. In both countries complex tribal and historical differences are

¹¹ See International Criminal Court, 'Al Bashir Case: The Prosecutor v. Omar Hassan Ahmad Al Bashir, ICC-02/05-01/09', 21 April 2020

¹² 'Sudanese military and protesters sign power-sharing accord', Jason Burke & Zeinab Mohammed Salih, *The Guardian*, 17 July 2019

¹³ 'Could Algeria's protests set off Arab Spring 2.0?', *France 24*, 4 April 2019

¹⁴ 'Thousands march in Algeria after controversial election result', Jason Burke, *The Guardian*, 13 December 2019

interacting with external intervention to produce an intractable political and security situation. A way must be found to bring the parties to the negotiating table if peace is to be achieved in either country.

Throughout the region there is a need for political processes that enable peaceful change to take place. This is as apparent in Lebanon as it is in Bahrain or Syria. The absence of such a mechanism for change predisposes these countries to periods of violent turmoil and on-going economic difficulties. It also exposes them to the risk of foreign intervention particularly when Iran or its regional rival Saudi Arabia sense an opportunity to either increase their influence or feel the need to defend it.

While external interventions by countries such as Iran, Russia and Turkey added to the turmoil in the region they are not a determinant as such interventions were in the twentieth century. US disengagement from much of the region and its on-going dispute with Iran has failed both as a strategy to isolate Iran and to tackle its often malign influence as well as making it easier for Russia to intervene in Syria.

Important developments in 2020 will include the policies of the new Israeli government and the outcome of the impending US presidential election in November. A different US President might well pursue an alternative agenda in the region, including re-engagement with Iran, and show less tolerance for MBS and his aggressive policies. What role will the new Israeli government and a new US administration will play in the Palestinian question can only be guessed at.

Another extremely important factor this year is the extraordinary global impact of the coronavirus pandemic. The economic impact on the world's largest economies from the US to China and across the whole of Western Europe could well be immense. A world-wide recession deeper than that which followed the global financial crisis could develop by the middle of the year. Against such a backdrop, the economies of many Middle Eastern and North African countries will be particularly exposed, not least because of the collapse in the price of fossil fuels. And the normal mechanisms to support countries in economic transition, such as loans from the International Monetary Fund, may be in short supply as the world's larger economies turn inward to focus on their own recovery. In a way, the region has never needed more attention from its neighbours and allies but it may struggle to interest them as they become preoccupied with the domestic economic, social and inevitable political impact of the most important pandemic since 1918.


May 2020



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