

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTHERN AFRICA REGION. AN INTRODUCTION

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It has been 10 years since the “perfect storm” of the Arab spring swept through the Middle East dismantling old post-Cold War regional political order, disturbing social, economic, tribal, and sectarian balance, resuscitating old rivalries, bringing up new challenges, as well as opportunities.

Until today, the consequences of those events are still debatable and are difficult to be assessed precisely. Was the Arab Spring a success? Or was it a disaster for the region and its peoples? What is a “success” in this regard? How can one examine such controversial and sophisticated developments? On what criteria and through which dimension should we do this? Have we actually devoted enough time to exploring the phenomenon of the Arab Spring to be able to jump to certain conclusions?

However, ten years after the start of the Arab Spring, it can be stated that no revolution has solved any serious problems (and, apparently, could not solve it). Most of the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) countries still suffer from the very reasons, which are believed to have constituted the core drivers of the Arab Spring protest wave: corruption, lack of substantial reforms, unstable labor market, inefficient public administration policies, distrust in national political elites, communal violence, ethnic, tribal and sectarian discords, usually exacerbated by a weak central government and a broken social contract. Everything that had to be done for modernization was either already done or could be done within the framework of authoritarian regimes. All this raises the question of how universal democratic principles of governance can be while leaving societies guessing: is the modernization in the region is really confined to a small group of people led by an autocrat? (Simon 2021).

Revolutions, of course, can stir up society, activate new forces, raise topical issues on the agenda, and provide a great political experience. They can change something in a positive way. But there is not much of a chance that revolutions will actually solve the most important problems. And, unfortunately, the development model is not proceeding according to the desired pattern from revolution to democracy, but from revolution either

to counter-revolution (as in Egypt) or to new revolutions or to the emergence of terrorist entities like the "Islamic State".

One of key factors affecting the course of the revolution is the ability to self-organize and produce a vision for a common future. Unfortunately, too often, opposition movements in the Arab Spring countries failed to unite people and organize effective governmental policies. Therefore, no shared sense of future was presented, which allowed for either counter-revolutionary or radical forces to step in and fill the political vacuum (Rosiny & Richter 2016).

Tunisia and Egypt, among the countries heavily involved in the Arab Spring, remain the most economically prosperous. Nevertheless, Tunisia, being the most modernized, although it was able to resist a political breakdown (some fragile but real democracy remained there), economically found itself in a worse position than before the "Jasmine Revolution". And although moderate Islamists from the Al-Nahda party promised to use the Turkish experience and, as a result, create a successful, rapidly developing democratic country in which religion plays an important role, it soon became clear that they were not succeeding (Yakovina 2013). In addition, the Islamist terror tortured Tunisia, and at the same time there was a danger of introducing a tougher regime (still in the form of martial law).

At the same time, Egypt, which carried out a counter-revolutionary coup, is showing good economic performance. It turns out that it is returning to counter-revolution (see, e.g., Korotayev & Issaev 2014; Vasiliev, Korotayev, & Issaev 2014)? However, we must not forget that the military in Egypt, who drove the Muslim Brotherhood underground and established an even tougher dictatorship than before. Thus, Arab countries can develop not in a straight line, but in a socio-political spiral (Grinin, Issaev, & Korotayev 2015).

Whether Arab spring was a purely anti-authoritarian democratic current, a broad manifestation of region's social and economic grievances, a powerful cultural phenomenon or a religious struggle for the future of Islam is still a hot issue for discussion. Surely, it derived from the logic of state building and social development. Be that as it may, as Russian orientalist Alexey Vasiliev notes,

The paths of democracy and revolution in Arab countries sooner or later had to go their separate ways, and they parted. (Vasiliev 2018: 341)

Indeed, the long shadow of Mohammed Bouazizi, a poor Tunisian merchant, whose self-immolation on 17 December 2010 triggered the Arab Spring, still persists over the Middle East. Still, Stephen Cook's words seem to be accurate MENA has become a "dystopia". If earlier the main slogan of the masses was the demand to displace the regimes, now the demand for stability is coming to the fore.

The experience of Egypt here is very indicative. The Egyptians yearned for a "strong hand." Al-Sisi became the personification of the newest aspirations of the Egyptian people. By voting for him, the majority of Egyptians not only chose another president who emerged from the military environment, they demonstrated their readiness to go back to the times of Hosni Mubarak, preferring "stability" to democratic

transformations. In the person of al-Sisi, the people would like to find a strong leader, a person capable of putting things in order with a "tough hand", concentrating all power. Al-Sisi, in turn, must go all the way in implementing his election program (Vasiliev, Korotayev, & Issaev 2014).

In addition, Egyptian post-revolutionary developments showed that the Arab Spring protest wave, although brought to end the authoritarian rule of Hosni Mubarak, did not change the public perception of power. Particularly, the military remained the political, social, and economic source of power in post-Arab Spring Egypt (Dentice 2021).

Events in the region had their own logic and followed their own laws. In the Arab society, the forces of Islamists grew up, who gave their answers and pseudo-answers to acute public issues, put forward their own ways of solving them on the basis of socio-political problems understood in their own way (Totten 2012). However, difficult compromises, which they were forced to get into to stay in power, and challenges arising from young secular protest movements made it extremely hard for the Islamists to united societies and deliver a common vision of a post-revolutionary democratic state (Hamid 2017).

The restoration of authoritarianism shows that even superficial forms of democracy are unlikely to appear in such socio-economic conditions (Tkachenko & Tkachenko 2020: 25). As the past years have shown, existing problems can again give rise to massive radical Islamist movements, which gave the appearance of responding to challenges and recruited supporters. Despite the defeat of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, a significant weakening of Al-Nusra (Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham), they can exist in new forms and with new slogans, appealing to the hearts of believers driven into a socio-economic dead end (Vasiliev & Zherlitsina 2021).

Political and economic dynamics following the outbreak of the Arab Spring brought a brand-new reality, in which several post-Cold War states, such as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Libya, lost much of their positions in the regional security and political architecture inherited from 1970s-1990s. At the beginning of the third decade, the Arab countries came in this form: the statehood of Libya was destroyed, in Yemen it was partially destroyed, significantly weakened in Iraq and Syria. Egypt has ceased to be a regional leader, apparently temporarily. And Saudi Arabia could not become a full-fledged leader of the region (Vasiliev & Zherlitsina 2021).

The Arab region as a whole "from ocean to Gulf" has been thrown to the periphery of the modern world because of the shocks of the Arab Spring, civil wars, external military intervention, economic stagnation and rising unemployment due to demographic problems. It is hardly possible to expect any breakthrough in the medium term. The pandemic has led to a drop in GDP everywhere and at the same time increased the control of the authorities over the population (Vasiliev & Zherlitsin 2021).

The Arab spring led to an utter collapse of old republican political systems in Libya, Syria, Yemen, Egypt, and Tunisia, which were forged in the turbulent bipolar Cold War-era world of 20th century. However, Egyptian military and political elites managed to re-consolidate their power and restore the traditional order in just two years. Other countries

still lack central governance or any kind of new political balance and social contract between the society and the state. Syrian elite groups are still clinging to old Hafez al-Assad-era inter-elitist alliances and regional, tribal, and sectarian family-extended networks in an effort to save the political system and rush it out of the war without having to break up the state (Van Dam 2016).

The Gulf states were hit the least of all, though it accelerated their push for westernizing social reforms and economic diversification. The Arabian oil states did not have sufficient potential for revolutionary explosions; transformation processes could still proceed in an evolutionary way. The unwritten "social contract" continued to operate: the oil monarchies shared part of their income with the indigenous population, and it did not interfere in politics and was the social base of the regimes (see, e.g., Belbagi 2015; Kinninmon 2017; Thompson 2018). In the end, because of the Arab Spring's aftereffect, Gulf Arab monarchies were forced to adapt to a swift change in regional policies: establish a more active stance towards the region, take on more responsibility for certain areas of cooperation and enter a new round of power competition with Iran.

The Arab Spring allowed non-Arab regional powers to enhance their influence in the Middle East. Particularly, Iran increased its presence in Iraq and Syria after concluding a 2015 nuclear deal with the United States and having successfully pushed away ISIS terrorist forces from Baghdad in 2014. In addition, Iranian influence grew in the Hamas-controlled Gaza and crisis-ridden Lebanon, which again was a direct result of post-Arab Spring security, economic, and social aftershocks (Azodi 2019).

From the other side, Turkey has significantly improved its positions in the Levant, Eastern Mediterranean, North Africa, and Qatar, all through military or political intervention in order to fill the vacuum of power, left by the Arab Spring, or because the events of 2010–2011 had led to such outcomes which allowed for Ankara to bolster its regional positions and expand its geopolitical periphery.

An initial rise of secular liberal-democratic political forces, which were at the forefront of early protests in 2010–2011, eventually were pushed out of the scene in later stages, with Islamists taking over as the most mobile, organized and unified opposition group. However, they didn't manage to hold on to power for long, particularly in Egypt, where counter-revolutionist forces abruptly ended their attempt to rule in 2013. Neither the Islamist political groups appeared to have come up with a new model of public-power interaction and government policies, which could have become a viable alternative to what many people saw as morally bankrupt and socially corrupt political regimes of the past. Tunisia, dubbed "the only successful example of the Arab Spring", have recently been shaken by a kind of a post-Arab Spring political crisis, pushing aside the Islamist Al-Nahda party and threatening a return of authoritarian practices in the country (Yerkes & Mbarek 2020).

Even many years after the Arab Spring, the region still feels its delayed effects. Anti-elitist social-economic revolts in Lebanon and Iraq in 2019–2020 and the collapse of old presidential systems in Algeria and Sudan in 2019 emphasized that problems, which had led to the Arab Spring in the first place, are pretty much still at the center of socio-economic, political, cultural transformations in the region. To some extent, one

could argue that the post-Arab Spring decade of 2011–2021, as well as the phenomenon itself, are a perfect manifestation of a two-system crisis in the Middle East, that of the Versailles and the Cold War regional order.

Finally, the Arab Spring completely changed the reconfiguration of the Middle East and North Africa region. The problem, however, lies not only in the fact that the processes of socio-political destabilization have affected, to one degree or another, practically all Arab countries, but also in the fact that the structure itself has been broken, both horizontal (between regional players) and vertical (between regional and global players) relationships (Naumkin & Baranovsky 2018). Moreover, this was largely due to the reconfiguration of American Middle East policy launched during the presidency of Barack Obama.

It is the United States of America that has been perceived by the countries of the region since the end of the 20th century as an unconditional guarantor of the preservation of the existing status quo. In fact, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the stability of the Middle East world order, as well as the Arab regimes themselves, largely depended on the nature of relations with Washington. It is no coincidence that the elites of the Arab countries during the 1990s–2000s sought, first of all, support and guarantees of their own security in the White House.

However, the balance of power that had existed in the Middle East and North Africa region for decades was upset by the events of the Arab Spring, with all its side effects. Many of the Arab regimes that fell victim to the anti-government protests in 2011 turned their gaze towards Washington in the hope of gaining at least moral support in their address. But no intelligible reaction appeared.

The Arab Spring exposed a crisis of confidence between the countries of the region and the United States. American policy in the Middle East became less and less understandable for the Arabs themselves, causing more and more questions and complaints. Suffice it to recall the bewilderment in a number of Arab capitals caused by the rapprochement of the American administration with Mohammed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. As a result, the view has become stronger that the Barack Obama administration did not at all had a clear strategic goal in the region, as well as the political will to pursue its interests. This thought was especially reinforced in contrast to the active Middle East policy pursued by Obama's predecessors in the presidency, especially the two presidents Bush.

The hesitation of the United States during anti-government demonstrations against the allied regimes of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Zine al-Abidine bin Ali in Tunisia and Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen was interpreted as betrayal at best. And at worst, as Washington's deliberate policy to reshape the entire Middle East and North Africa. Although in fairness it should be noted that American policy also did not find adequate support in the camp of opponents of the overthrown regimes as well, and American neutrality was interpreted not in their favor.

As a result, the MENA states, probably for the first time in recent centuries, turned from objects of regional geopolitics into its subjects. If throughout the recent history of

the region, global actors have played a decisive role in the construction of the Middle East system of world order (the most striking example in this case is the creation of the State of Israel), then in recent years the initiative has shifted to regional players (Naumkin, Baranovsky 2018). The region has faced such a situation for the first time, and the new architecture of security and world order in the Middle East and North Africa largely depends on the ability to provide an adequate response to the challenges the Middle East regimes are facing.

Special issue “Social and Political Transformations in the Middle East and Northern Africa Region” of the Ideology and Politics Journal was initiated to further research on the transformations in the MENA region. This issue presents interdisciplinary research that allows its readership to look at the processes of socio-political development of the region from a different angle.

This issue opens with an article by **Ruslan Zaporozhchenko**, who analyzes geohistorical transformations in the region. The author makes a difficult attempt to answer the question what are the historical preconditions for the emergence of social movements in the MENA region in 2011 and what is the role of ideological and military power in these processes? This is followed by an article by **Leonid Issaev, Egor Fain and Andrey Korotayev**, which examines the consequences of the Arab Spring for neighboring regions. The authors reveal the connection between the socio-political turbulence in the Arab world and the growth of terrorist activity in the Sahel countries. Conducted analysis has shown that there are several trajectories of the Arab Spring’s influence on terrorist activity in the Sahel. And then a study by **Alisa Shishkina and Georgy Shishkin** focuses on the intifada, a phenomenon characteristic of the Arab world. Analyzing the first and second Palestinian intifada, the authors come to the original conclusion that it fit into the broader context of protests in the Middle East bearing similar motives to those events that led to the Arab Spring revolutions.

The next part of the issue offers several cases that are important for understanding the processes in the MENA region. **Maria João Barata** focuses on the most important problem of self-determination for the modern world. From the standpoint of symbolic interactionism and the theory of international relations, the author consistently examines the numerous possibilities and limitations that exist in the construction of a sense of national belonging by the population of Western Sahara. Then **Nawar Kassomeh and Jalal Qanas** invite the reader to pay attention to the Gulf region. The authors try to understand why the Arab Spring led to the collapse of many authoritarian regimes in the region, but practically bypassed the Gulf. The article attempts to explain this in terms of the social contract that took shape over the decades in the monarchies of the Gulf. Finally, **Nikolay Kozhanov**, using the example of Qatar, draws attention to the extremely interesting phenomenon of the “small state”, which was noticeably actualized during the events of the Arab Spring. Kozhanov argues that Qatar’s previous efforts aimed at the development of its export-oriented LNG industry allowed the Emirate to fund and pursue a foreign policy strategy that was uncommon for a small state. Whereby during the last two decades, Doha was also more oriented towards interaction with players outside of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

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