

Rethinking the “Arab Spring”

Just a Media Event?

by Eyal Zisser

Although there are those who prefer spring, there are also those who prefer winter or summer ... “Spring” expresses something temporary because it is one of the seasons of the year. Hence the use of the term “Spring” [to describe what is happening in Syria] is ... wrong. After all, the seasons are repeated every year.

— Bashar Assad.¹

The tidal wave of violent protest that shook the Arab world a decade ago, sweeping away some authoritarian regimes and destabilizing other states, was dubbed the “Arab Spring” by the Western media and academia in the hope that it would usher in a new era of Middle Eastern democratization and political stability, economic prosperity, and greater freedoms.²

This is not what happened. As the dust settled, the protests were all but forgotten, and the region reverted to its old self, proving yet again that, for better or worse, the century-long contemporary Middle Eastern political system is more resilient and less susceptible to change than is commonly assumed. What went wrong?



The “Arab Spring” represented a tidal wave of protests by the younger generation, who found themselves hopelessly caught in socioeconomic distress, political repression, and lack of future prospects.

¹ Bashar Assad, *El Pais* (Madrid), May 1, 2001.

² See, for example, Marc Lynch, “Obama’s 2011 Arab Spring,” *Foreign Policy*, Jan. 6, 2012; Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the Middle East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012).

New-old Middle East

Over the past century, there has been repeated talk of the birth of a new Middle East. This happened most commonly in the context of redrawing the (supposedly artificial) borders created in the wake of World War I on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire. This was offered as the reason for the formation of the 1958-61 Egyptian-Syrian union or the 1990 Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, which allegedly sought “to return the part and branch, Kuwait, to the whole root, Iraq.”³ But at times, the alleged claim to a new Middle East rested on profound socio-cultural changes such as disengagement from Islamic traditions or adoption of a secularized modern identity. Examples included the secularizing policies of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk or those of the Pahlavi dynasty, which aimed at substituting a secular national identity in Turkey and Iran for the millenarian sociopolitical Islamic identity underpinning Middle Eastern societies. Another instance was the attempt by Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser to forge a pan-Arab identity that would predominate regional affairs. None of these endeavors came to fruition: predictions of Islam’s demise proved highly premature just as pan-Arabism’s dreams of grandeur proved ephemeral.⁴

In the early 1990s, Shimon Peres prophesied that the nascent Palestinian-Israeli

peace process would usher in a “New Middle East” in which political stability, sustained security, and economic prosperity would prevail.⁵ Like previous predictions of a new regional order, Peres’s vision collapsed within years when, in September 2000, Yasser Arafat launched his war of terror (euphemized as “Al-Aqsa Intifada”), followed six years later by an all-out war between Israel and Lebanon’s Shiite organization Hezbollah. Thrilled by Hezbollah’s perceived successes in the war, Syrian president Bashar Assad quickly proclaimed the advent of a new Middle East characterized by resistance and struggle (*muqawama*) against Israel—the complete inverse of Peres’s idyllic vision.⁶ Before long, Assad was to realize that the Palestinian question and the struggle against Israel no longer featured at the top of the agenda of the man on the street in many Arab states, including his own.⁷

Islamic Winter, Generals’ Summer

The Arab upheavals represented a tidal wave of protest by the younger generation, who found themselves hopelessly caught in socioeconomic distress, political repression, and lack of future prospects due to the failure of Arab states and societies to bridge the deep gap between traditional values and

³ Efraim Karsh and Inari Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein: A Political Biography* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), p. 222.

⁴ Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961); Ali M. Ansari, “The Myth of the White Revolution: Mohammad Reza Shah, ‘Modernization’ and the Consolidation of Power,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, July 2001, pp. 1-24; P. J. Vatikiotis, *Nasser and his Generation* (London: Croom Helm, 1978).

⁵ Shimon Peres *The New Middle East* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1995).

⁶ Seth Wikas, “[The Damascus-Hizballah Axis](#): Bashar al-Asad’s Vision of a New Middle East,” The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, D.C., PolicyWatch 1142, Aug. 29, 2006; Bashar Assad, Fourth General Conference of the Journalists Union, Damascus, [Aug. 15, 2006](#), *VP News*.

⁷ *As-Safir* (Beirut), Oct. 5, 2011.

ways of life and the demands of modernity.⁸

Given that under 30-year-olds accounted for some nearly two thirds of the Arab world's population,⁹ it was hardly surprising that Western academics and pundits euphorically dubbed the ongoing turbulence a “Spring” in the hope that this unrest would not only sweep the local dictatorships from power but would transform the region's social, economic, and even political order. Columbia University professors Hamid Dabashi and Joseph Massad, for example, described the upheavals as an “Arab awakening” (alluding to George Antonius's influential 1930s book on the rise of pan-Arabism) that was directed against the West and Israel, which were perceived as the mainstay of the Arab autocracies.¹⁰ Tariq Ramadan, Oxford University professor and



Egyptians celebrate the election of the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi as president, June 24, 2012. Following the upheavals, Islamic groups took advantage of the Middle East's deeply ingrained Islamic identity to further their political goals.

grandson of Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan Bana, similarly titled his book *The Arab Awakening: Islam and the New Middle East*, claiming that the unrest was an all-out Sunni response to what appeared to be the hegemonic surge of Iran and the Shiite world more generally.¹¹ There were even those who considered the “Arab Spring” part of a worldwide revolt by geographically and socioeconomically marginalized parts of society (whether by the ballot box, street demonstrations, or even anti-regime uprisings) against the omnipotent, and often destructive, forces of globalization.

⁸ David W. Lesch and Mark L. Haas, *The Arab Spring: The Hope and Reality of the Uprisings* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Larbi Sadiki, ed., *Routledge Handbook of the Arab Spring, Rethinking Democratization* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

⁹ Juan Cole, *The New Arabs: How the Millennial Generation Is Changing the Middle East* (New York: Simon Schuster, 2014), pp. 1-135; Leila Vignal, ed., *The Transnational Middle East, People, Places, Borders* (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 1-18; Paul Rivlin, “Middle East Demographics to 2030,” *Iqtisadi: Middle East Economy*, The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University, Aug. 12, 2019.

¹⁰ Hamid Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), pp. 1-40; Joseph Massad, “The ‘Arab Spring’ and other American seasons,” Aljazeera TV (Doha), [Aug. 29, 2012](#).

¹¹ Tariq Ramadan, *The Arab Awakening: Islam and the New Middle East* (London: Penguin Books, 2012); see, also, Khair El-Din Haseeb, ed., *The Arab Spring, Critical Analyses* (New York: Routledge, 2013); James L. Gelvin, *The New Middle East: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Paul Danahar, *The New Middle East: The World after the Arab Spring* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

In one respect, Ramadan may be right. As the waves of protest across the Arab world reached a dead end, failing to substitute a young and democratically-oriented leadership for the fallen autocrats, the newly-created vacuum was filled by an assortment of Islamic groups—whether political parties and movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood or Salafi-jihadist groups such as ISIS. These groups took advantage of the Middle East’s deeply ingrained Islamic identity—which had formed the region’s organizing sociopolitical principle for over a millennium—to further their political goals. They made extensive use of the pervasive Islamic infrastructure—mosques, religious institutions, educational and welfare systems—which had long remained at the core of Arab society.

These Islamic groups broke into the forefront of the political arena and, for a time, even gained political control in some states. Yet, like their democratically-oriented rivals, their success proved ephemeral as they failed to maintain their grip on power (as starkly demonstrated by the short-lived Muslim Brotherhood regime in Egypt), let alone to establish a long-lasting Islamic sociopolitical order. In the final account, the forces of the old order—the political and socioeconomic elites, the “deep state” institutions that remained in place, and, above all, the military—managed to contain the Islamic wave, thus indicating the inherent weakness of the Islamic movements, once perceived as powerful forces casting their shadow over the secular, autocratic Arab regimes.

Thus the “Islamic Winter” that supplanted the “Arab Spring” gave way to a “Generals’ Summer” characterized in places by the complete restoration of the old order



Photo: Bachounda

Economic distress and the weakening of ruling autocrats may explain the waves of protest that broke out in 2019 in Algeria (above), Sudan, Lebanon, and Iraq, nearly a decade after the so-called “Arab Spring.”

and, in others, to prolonged instability, internecine strife, and even internal collapse.

What Went Wrong?

How then did most pundits and academics get the picture so wrong? It seems that the desire for headlines and sensations combined with the innate inclination to project Western or Islamist ideals, values, and ways of thought to Arab and Islamic societies. This produced an idyllic vision of a historic milestone in the region’s transition “from a dark night into light” (in the words of French philosopher Bernard-Henry Lévy),¹² where stability, prosperity and the

¹² Bernard-Henry Lévy, “Libya, Sharia, and Us,” *Huffington Post* (New York), Nov. 3, 2011.

ideals of democracy, progress, and tolerance would prevail.

It is true that, given only ten years' perspective, it may be premature to determine what long-term meaning the "Arab Spring" might assume. On the one hand, the impact and consequences of the January 2011 revolution on the course of Egyptian history may prove to be rather negligible—a historical footnote in the transition from Hosni Mubarak's 30-year-long era to that of Abdel Fatah Sisi, who in June 2013 overthrew the short-lived Muslim Brotherhood regime headed by Mohamed Morsi.¹³ On the other, the downfall of Libya's long reigning dictator Muammar Qaddafi was an important and significant event that led to the collapse of the Libyan state and the outbreak of a civil war. Yemen offers a similar case in point though the regime there might have well collapsed on its own due to an accumulation of adverse domestic circumstances.

In all, the waves of mass protest ultimately turned out to have a far less dramatic impact than what appeared on television screens at the time. So much so, that it is arguable that the Arab unrest was essentially a media event wrought to gargantuan proportions rather than the transformative Big Bang it appeared to be at the time. Falling like a ripe fruit to the lap of the media (especially the electronic media that had made a huge leap over the previous decade), it became a reality show of sorts. Millions of spectators throughout the world

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watched events as they unfolded or consumed real-time information about their nature and characteristics with the underlying narrative being about a sweeping political revolution that

would change the Middle East beyond recognition.¹⁴ In reality, the unrest in the Arab world was a corollary of disparate developments and grievances that were rooted in distinct local circumstances and needed to be understood as such rather than segments of an overarching grand picture. Local circumstances, mainly economic distress and the weakening of ruling autocrats, can also explain the waves of protest that broke in 2019 in Algeria, Sudan, Lebanon, and Iraq, nearly a decade after the outbreak of the "Arab Spring." But apart from some changes in the top leadership, these waves, too, were contained and faded away.

Nor did the Arab upheavals represent a wholly new sociopolitical phenomenon in the post-World War II Middle East. spurts of mass protest by rising, predominantly young social forces seeking fundamental sociopolitical change recurred throughout the decades in line with vicissitudes in regional affairs. The main difference between these early upheavals and the "Arab Spring" was that the former were often led by a distinct and well-organized group that managed to seize power on the crest of the revolutionary turmoil. Thus, for

¹³ Bernard Rougier, "Introduction: Egypt in Revolution," in Rougier and Stéphane Lacroix, eds., *Egypt's Revolutions, Politics, Religion, and Social Movements* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 1-15.

¹⁴ Haythem Guesmi, "[The social media myth about the Arab Spring](#)," *Aljazeera*, Jan. 27, 2021; Habibul Haque Khondker, "Role of the New Media in the Arab Spring," *Globalizations*, Special Forum on the Arab Revolutions, pp. 675-9, Nov. 18, 2011; Gadi Wolfsfeld, Elad Segev, and Tamir Sheafer, "The Social Media and the Arab Spring: Politics Always Comes First," *The International Journal of Press*, Mar. 2013.

example, the regional restiveness attending the pan-Arab failure to destroy the state of Israel at its birth was exploited by young military officers in Egypt and Syria

(and later in Iraq) to topple the incumbent regimes and establish their own rule. That these regimes have successfully survived for decades—in Egypt as a straightforward military regime, in Syria and Iraq under the guise of the Baath party—has largely to do with the fact that they constituted a vital channel of social mobility, which allowed the tiny Alawite minority to dominate Syria, and Iraq’s small Sunni minority to dominate the much larger Shiite majority.

By contrast, the upheavals were spontaneous eruptions without a clear leadership in any country, let alone an overriding regional central command. Hence, they did not produce a lasting regime change but rather instability and chaos that were exploited by numerous rival groups and organizations (often Islamist) to plunge the respective states into bitter internecine strife. The only partial exception to this rule, where the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood capitalized on its prominent role in Mubarak’s overthrow to seize power, proved fleeting as the army regained control before long with the backing of a substantial part of the Egyptian population.

Back to the Future

As the storm across the Arab world gradually subsided, the region largely reverted to its old self. However destructive the upheavals had been to Arab rulers, regimes, and the fabric of some states, they only touched the outer shell of the sociopolitical order leaving the deeper undercurrents of collective identity and basic ways

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of life largely unscathed. Moreover, the regional changes that did take place in the 2010s (and again in 2019) were either unrelated to the “Arab Spring” (e.g., the

normalization agreements between Israel and four Arab states) or tenuously related to these upheavals (e.g., the surge of Kurdish national identity in Syria and Iraq, women’s struggle for civil rights), and most did not advance very far. As such, rather than produce the anticipated regional transformation, the “Arab Spring” served to reinforce some of the Middle East’s ubiquitous patterns:

The triumph of ruler and dynasty. Debunking delusions about the Middle East’s imminent democratization, the “Arab Spring” showed that the region’s distinct circumstances make it unripe for democracy. These include its sociocultural tradition and historical heritage (notably Islam’s sociopolitical pervasiveness) as well as its socioeconomic reality (e.g., absence of Western-type civil society or an established middle class). Primordial frameworks and identities—tribal, ethnic, clan, and familial—remain the basis of social activity, thwarting the efforts to unite the population around national agendas and patriotic slogans, let alone liberal ideals such as the struggle for freedom and liberty. Even Islam, which constitutes the greatest common denominator among the region’s populations, was historically associated with rulers and dynasties that held both religious and temporal powers. While the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the abolition of the caliphate in the wake of World War I ended this millenarian state of affairs, religious groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood have either sought to restore Islam’s sociopolitical preeminence, or more commonly, vested the (often secular) regimes and dynasties with

religious legitimacy. Neither pattern has been conducive to Western-type democracy.

This helps explain the enduring preeminence of the dynasty as an institution rooted in tradition and heritage, as evidenced among other things by their resilience to the upheavals. The Arab world is a place where the role of the absolute ruler/dynasty supersedes that of political institutions, and where citizenship is largely synonymous with submission. Especially the monarchies—long considered the weak link in the Arab regional order, doomed to succumb to the revolutionary waves that swept across the Arab world from the 1950s onward—successfully weathered the political tsunami. Contributing to this success was the relatively moderate approach the monarchies displayed to their subjects and political opponents over the years, which in turn lowered the level of frustration, anger, and resentment among the local population in comparison to that directed against the Arab autocratic and dictatorial regimes.¹⁵ Moreover, the institution of dynastical monarchy seems to be viewed by the local Arab populations as anchored in Islamic and Arab heritage and tradition. As such, it enjoys the religious and political legitimacy that its secularist counterparts (notably the Baath party) lack, their regimes being often perceived as an alien, imported political paradigm.



This image of the late King Hussein of Jordan (left) and his son and heir King Abdullah appears on many ministerial buildings in Amman. The Arab monarchies—long considered doomed—weathered the “Arab Spring.”

Continued volatility and its implications.

The lingering internecine strife in Syria, Libya, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, among other things, indicates that the Middle East will continue to be a hub of conflict and instability, its notorious volatility rooted in its explosive mixture of demographic, social, economic, and religious factors rather than in specific political differences and rivalries. Unlike the past, however, when interstate conflicts were largely ideological in nature, today’s struggles are characterized by the far more pragmatic (if no less ferocious) competition for regional hegemony and/or control of natural resources, with the attendant creation of the oddest bedfellows: hence the decline of Arab interest in the Palestinian problem; the normalization agreements with Israel and the crystallization of a Sunni-Israeli alliance; the conflict over energy resources in the eastern Mediterranean and over water, as evidenced by the Egyptian-Ethiopian feud over the construction of the Ethiopian Renaissance

¹⁵ Joseph Kostiner, *Middle East Monarchies: The Challenge of Modernity* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2000); Curtis R. Ryan, *Jordan and the Arab Uprisings: Regime Survival and Politics Beyond the State* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

Dam.¹⁶ Even the Syrian civil war was largely triggered by a severe water crisis in the country.

In addition, this continued volatility is also likely to keep the region a major source of emigration as the Middle East is projected to experience a rapid demographic expansion with its population reaching 750 million by 2050 compared to today's 400 million, according to estimates.¹⁷ The "Arab Spring" upheavals have already driven millions of (mainly Syrian and Iraqi) people to flee their countries in search of physical survival and economic livelihood, and the enduring reality of dwindling resources and political instability will most probably prevent the Arab regimes from managing the anticipated natural growth, sending millions of refugees knocking on Europe's gates.

Regional and global effects. Contrary to common assumptions, the "Arab Spring" did not restore the Arab world's regional preeminence but has rather strengthened non-Arab actors such as Iran, Turkey, and Israel, and has returned the global powers to a position of influence they have not experienced for years.

To be sure, many viewed the Arab uprisings as heralding the end of the prolonged "Pax Americana" in the Middle East that ensued in the wake of the 1991 Kuwait war and the collapse of the Soviet Union later that year. Contributing to this perception was Washington's inaction in the face of the upheavals that befell the Arab world, notably its betrayal of key local friends and allies and its reluctance to

intervene in the intensifying crises in Syria, Libya, and Yemen. This inaction was due to the determination of the Obama administration (and to some extent the Trump administration) to disengage from the region so as to avoid being drawn again into its myriad conflicts and wars, and it allowed Moscow to play a much greater role in the region than in the more recent past. Yet this resurgence of Russian influence should not be overstated as Washington has maintained its clear military edge in the region, not to mention its greater political, economic, and cultural influence with the Arab states. Hence, Moscow backed away whenever Washington took military action, notably the 2017-18 air strikes against Syria in retaliation for the regime's gassing of its own civilians or the January 2020 killing of Qassem Soleimani. And, as in the past, the Arab states seem to prefer the U.S. political, military, and economic assistance to the Russian bear hug.

Conclusion

Contrary to much hyped expectations, most Arab regimes have weathered the "Arab Spring" upheavals; the Arab masses have settled for the familiar authoritarian repression and economic distress they have endured for decades, if not centuries, rather than opt for the uncertain promise of the alien democratic ideal.

Nor did the revolts undermine the Middle East's territorial state system. Quite the reverse, in fact. Despite its endless denigration as an artificial post-World War I Western creation, this system successfully outlasted widespread mayhem and dislocation occasioned by the recent upheavals, as it had with past challenges such as Nasser's militant pan-Arabism of the 1950s and 1960s and Tehran's post-1979 Islamic imperialism.

¹⁶ Sherif Mohyeeldeen, "The Dam That Broke Open an [Ethiopia-Egypt Dispute](#)," Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut, Feb. 12, 2021.

¹⁷ Patrick Clawson, "[Demography in the Middle East: Population Growth Slowing, Women's Situation Unresolved](#)," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, D.C., Mar. 16, 2009.

This in turn means that a decade after the eruption of the “Arab Spring,” the “New-old Middle East” remains pretty much a region that provides its inhabitants with neither economic prosperity nor human dignity, let alone freedom, social justice, and human rights. It is a region firmly rooted in past religious, tribal, and dynastic-authoritarian traditions; deeply mired in social and economic problems; rife with extremism, violence, and terrorism; and saddled with inherent instability. Yet, it seems that most Middle Easterners have come to terms with this reality, realizing full well that any attempt to change it by force (especially by external powers) will push the region backward.¹⁸ The sooner the West

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realizes this reality and eschews any attempt to impose its alien democratic vision on a region that is not ripe for it, the better for the Middle East and its various neighbors. The Middle East is where it has been for the last 250 years, and there is no reason to expect a fundamental change in the foreseeable future.

Eyal Zisser is the vice rector of Tel Aviv University. He has written extensively on the history and the modern politics of Syria and Lebanon and the Arab-Israeli conflict.



¹⁸ Richard LeBaron and Leah Hickert, “[Do Arabs want democracy?](#)” The Atlantic Council, Washington, D.C., Aug. 22, 2019.