



ANOTHER SPRING

THE MIDDLE EAST BETWEEN HISTORY OF REVOLTS AND FUTURE GEOPOLITICS

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Fadi Elhousseini

Associate Research Fellow (ESRC) at the Institute for Middle East Studies, Canada

For further information please contact Ernst STETTER, FEPS Secretary General at ernst.stetter@feps-europe.eu or David KITCHING, FEPS Policy Advisor at david.kitching@feps-europe.eu

Regularly, when spring comes, people expect flowers and green shoots and optimism prevails. Alas, things in the Middle East are quite different. With every spring that comes, people recall the outbreak of the first spark of the current "Arab Spring" that started in Tunisia 2011 and swept Arab countries, wondering what will come after and where it will hit next. After being caught by surprise, numerous scholars and observers have been writing extensively about the "Arab Spring", trying to uncover its wellsprings and link it to other incidents and circumstances, in an attempt to read the portents of the rough and tumble of the Middle East. Yet, I contend, this pursuit is often a vain one especially given that the available literature is not yet adequate to explain the various aspects of what has gone before. Fully aware of this gap, I aim to reveal first of all a number of the missing contours and dynamics in order to further articulate the term "Arab Spring". In the same vein, I will also try to analyze the current political and geopolitical conditions in the Middle East in an effort to draw some relevant conclusions and provide a working prognosis of the future course of events in the region.

It can be said that the events of the current Arab Spring are molded within two composite layers, each with its own features, characteristics and hypotheses. The first layer comes within a global nexus. Arguably, the current spate of revolts in the Middle East might be considered as the fourth wave of democratization, with reference to the concept developed by Samuel M. Huntington in his book *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* published in 1991. According to Huntington, each wave was followed by a reverse one. Huntington argues that the first wave occurred between 1828-1926, with its roots in the recent French and American revolutions. This wave swept Europe and Latin America, and was marked by military coups. It lost momentum in the interwar period between World War I and World War II when a number of dictators rose to power, which led to a shift away from democracy toward traditional authoritarian or new ideologically-driven, mass-based totalitarian regimes.

The second wave took place from 1943-1962, and featured coups and the establishment of authoritarianism across Latin America, South and East Asia and allied occupation post- World War II. Huntington proposes that the beginning of the end of Western colonial rule produced a number of new states with democratic tendencies. Yet, he argues that political development, especially in Latin America, took on an authoritarian cast, and the decolonization of Africa led to the largest multiplication of authoritarian governments in history. Accordingly, one third of the working democracies in 1958 had become authoritarian by the 1970s.

The third wave between 1970s and 1980s manifested in the collapse of the former Soviet Union and swept Southern Europe, South America and Africa. In effect, a number of scholars (among them Dr. Ali Sarihan of Qatar's Georgetown University) have opted to insert the current Arab revolts within

this framework. They opine that with the onset of the current Arab Spring, the fourth wave of transformation or “Democratization of Communist and Islamic Regimes” began as per the fact that it has an impact on other regions and inspired revolts and demonstrations in Europe, Asia, Latin and North America, it gained its global contours.

The second layer operates within a regional setting. Within this framework, the current "Arab Spring" has proved to have its own characteristics and features which require further analysis. It can be argued that the current round of revolts now termed "Arab Spring" or "Arab Awakening" does not constitute the first manifestation of Arab mass protests that have led to a change in the social and political structure of Arab societies. In fact it comes as the third wave of Arab mass revolts each possessing its own grounds, circumstances, ideologies, slogans and outcomes.

The first wave of Arab revolts took place in 1914, and was called, "the Great Arab Revolution". What characterizes this wave is that it had a leader, Sharif Hussein, who led the revolution and the main target was ending Ottoman rule in Arabia. This wave coincided with two major events, one global and another regional. World War I was the major global event, while the waning and finally the collapse of the Ottoman Empire (Pax-Ottoman) was the major regional event. The old adage of "the road to hell is paved with good intentions" was conspicuously manifested in the course of the events of the first wave of revolts in the Arab region as will be shown shortly.

It can be said that such a myopic wave was externally driven, as the revolutions were supported by the British, who were aiming to end and replace the Ottomans presence in the region. For all that, the effect of the revolts was ephemeral as they were bereft of their main goal of independence. This fact was referred to by Dr. Mehmet Sahin, Turkey's Gazi University, in his article "1950-1960 Arab Revolutions and 2011 Arab Spring: Similarities and Differences", where he pointed out the final result of the Great Arab revolution, "... was only a change of the master. Instead of Muslims (Turks) the new masters were Christians (British and French)".

In this context, a number of slogans and ideologies were endorsed through this wave and the main slogan was nationalism. This slogan was deemed important in order to encourage Arabs to get rid of any other subordination, mainly Islamism, which inevitably meant yanking out any connection to the Ottoman Sultan and the warding off of any yearnings for the Ottoman heritage.

The second wave of Arab revolts took place in the 50's and 60's, and was called "the Arab Spring" by a French writer. In his book "Un printemps arabe" published in 1959, Jacques Benoist-Méchin describes the Arab revolts that took place in the "Arab"

Middle East, and tries to link them to the European Revolutions of 1848, known as the 'Spring of Nations' or 'Springtime of the Peoples'. These revolts inspired new revolutions in former

Czechoslovakia and led to what was best known as the "Prague Spring". The Arab Spring of the 50's and 60's came after two major events, one regional and another global. The latter was World War II, which had a great impact on the revolts and caused them to be driven by external factors. In other words, foreign powers and forces encouraged and even stimulated these revolts as Communist powers wanted to fight the Western presence and colonization in the Middle East. For that reason, 'Fighting Imperialism' and 'Progressivism' were among other key slogans and themes of this period.

Yet, the major regional event was the establishment of the State of Israel in the center of the "Arab" Middle East. This led to the emergence of another slogan which became afterwards an ideology - "Arabism". Arabism was coined, and adeptly promoted by the late Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser (hitherto, his combined notion of Arabism and socialism was called Nasserism). His name was largely aligned with the second wave of Arab revolts, and his ideology widespread struck a chord with and inspired other leaders who steered revolts in other countries in the Middle East. In effect, Arabism gained popularity in Arab streets as it developed as a natural ideology and movement to counter the Zionism which attended the establishment of the State of Israel. The revolts targeted not Israel but the other colonial presence in the Middle East deemed to be the real instigator and creator of Zionism and hence the State of Israel. In this regard, a number of crowns, condemned by their alliance or reliance on Western "imperialistic" powers, paid the price and were toppled in Libya, Iraq, and primarily Egypt.

The current wave of Arab revolts, which erupted in Tunisia in 2011, has its own characteristics. First and foremost, and unlike the previous two waves, the current revolts have neither a well-known leader, nor an external provenance. They were stimulated solely by internal dynamics as proposed by Dr. Nadia Mostafa, Cairo University, at the 'Second Annual Conference of Insight Turkey' in Cairo on January 30, 2012. This view was also put forward by Prof. Ziya Onis in a workshop entitled: 'Working Together for Democracy in the Arab World' in Ankara on October 27, 2011. Dr. Onis believes that the current Arab revolts are "internally driven". Social, economic, youth bulge and the remarkable evolution in the means of communication were among many crucial factors that led to the eruption of the current wave of revolts. They were not instigated by a specific country or model.

Similar to previous revolts, the current wave came in the aftermath of global and regional transformations. On the global level, the collapse of the former Soviet Union produced unlimited repercussions as most maladroit Arab regimes were lying idle and could not adapt themselves to such massive changes. Against the emergent dynamism, they remained static, failing to sense the seriousness of these reverberations, and could

not adjust their status quo ante policies, practices and affiliations. On the regional level, the major

transformation was manifested in the US occupation of Iraq and the collapse of the first dictatorship in the region. One of the important ramifications of the latter was the fading of the praxis of "Arabism". To elaborate, Saddam Hussein of Iraq was one of the staunchest supporters and believers in "Arabism", and when he was attacked by the US, other Arab countries either watched or supported the American invasion. This led to a great shock for those who still believed in "Arabism" and significantly helped to strengthen two main ideologies in the region: Islamism and liberal modernism. In addition to Islamism and modernism, the revolts produced social demands including human rights, democracy and independence (from foreign influence) that helped fuel the revolts targeted against corrupted regimes (Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Syria) which were deemed responsible for their stagnant social and economic conditions and known for their alliance with the West.

Inter alia, the collapse of the former Soviet Union, the fading of Arabism, toppling a number of Arab regimes and the waning of historical Arab leader states led to a power vacuum in the region and the intervention of foreign powers (either regional or global) became inevitable. Traditional super and global powers are still seeking a bigger, newer, role in the Middle East, in response to the changes. The US, Russia, China and Europe compete among each other in order to guarantee the larger scale of leverage and wider foothold in the region, at times using their soft power instruments, at others their historical cooperation, not forgetting economic incentives. In his article in the Russian *Odanko* magazine entitled 'Obama et Poutine vont-ils se partager le Proche-Orient?', the French writer Thierry Meyssan underscores this hypothesis and suggests a new scenario for the division of the Middle East between the U.S. and Russia.

Turkey, Iran and Israel, on the other hand, are the most favored regional powers with this end in view. However, Israel's chances hinge greatly on a peace agreement with the Palestinians, not to mention the obvious fact that Israel is culturally different from the rest of the countries in the region. History, culture and religion outweigh Iran's odds over Israel, as it has also succeeded in building a network of allies within the region. However, Iran does not seem to be an appealing model for many Arabs, especially when it comes to freedom, human rights, economy and relations with the rest of the world, especially the West. Turkey, who is part of the culture, history and religion of the region, appears to have the best odds in her favor. It presents an appealing model for its democracy, freedom and modernity, human rights, booming economy and relations with the West, along with the presence of Islamic elites in power. Yet, the term "the Turkish Model" has been overplayed and has put Turkey's popularity on the line. In other words, and among other challenges, Turkey's potential in the Middle East is marred by its explicit zeal and overt use of its soft power, which may lead to untoward effects.

Yet, trading the path into the Middle East should be charted carefully. It is well known for being one of the most volatile regions, and for its complexity is often described as “a Quick Sand”. At this juncture, it isn’t be difficult to fathom the feeling of frustration that permeates nearly every Arab, who believes that their destiny should not hinge on others, but remain in their own hands. Lamentably, this desired outcome will not materialize until historical Arab leader states rise and shake the dust of weakness and reluctance from their shoulders.

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