

Arab Spring: Aspirations Met or Dreams Unfulfilled?



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Summary

Arab Spring revolutions took the region and the world by surprise. As we near two years of Arab Spring, there is a need to review whether it has been able to achieve what it set out to. Countries like Egypt, Libya and Tunisia have transitioned to the first phase of democracy but they still have a long way to go before they can meet the aspirations of the people. Syria has spilt the world powers down the middle and there seems to be no solution in sight. Yemen continues to boil with a multitude of problems despite the overthrow of its dictator. The rise of Islamists as a dominant force in the mainstream politics of the region is a major offshoot of the Arab Spring. The regional balance of power is also rapidly changing its profile. This issue brief critically examines the Arab revolutions to seek answers to the future of the region.

“There are times in the course of history when the actions of ordinary citizens spark movements for changeThe story of this revolution, and the ones that followed, should not have come as a surprise. The nations of the Middle East and North Africa won their independence long ago, but in too many places their people did not... power has been concentrated in the hands of a few.....In our day and age, a time of 24-hour news cycles and constant communication, people expect the transformation of the region to be resolved in a matter of weeks. But it will be years before this story reaches its end”.

- US President Obama at the State Department on 19 May 2011¹

Introduction

17 December 2010 will remain etched in history books. It sparked off something mostly unanticipated and yet, the Arab masses had waited a long time for the moment. On that day, Mohammed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor, set himself on fire in a show of public protest. Why did he self-immolate? Mohammed Bouazizi was a fruit and vegetable seller whose cart was confiscated by the police. Instead of accepting his fate, he decided to confront the police and was slapped back, that too by a woman official. The malaise of corruption, unemployment and poverty already existed but being slapped by a woman was perhaps the last straw. Bouazizi's self-immolation triggered widespread unrest in Tunisia which was dubbed the Jasmine Revolution. Subsequently when massive protests broke out in a number of other Arab countries, the phenomenon came to be termed as the Arab Spring.

The Arab Spring took the world by surprise. In a region marked by political oppression, economic under-development and well-educated but unemployed youth, the classic conditions for revolution always existed. What it needed was a spark, which came in the form of the self-immolation of Bouazizi.

The final outcome of the protests across the region is still uncertain. People's power in its true sense has not yet arrived in the Arab world and countries have not yet been transformed. The protesting population is therefore left wondering whether they have been able to achieve what they collectively set out to or the situation remains similar to or has worsened from what prevailed before the Arab Spring. As we move into the second winter of the Arab Spring, this Issue Brief attempts to take stock of the progress of the Arab Spring and examine whether the aspirations of people have been met or have they been handed a raw deal.

¹ Full text of speech available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa>, accessed on 30 September 2012.

The Preconditions

The Arab Spring didn't crop up out of nowhere. Revolutions don't happen overnight. They require definite preconditions and sufficient and largely spread discontent to trigger them. Also, it is often the last straw for the oppressed masses with their backs to the wall and 'nothing to lose' attitude.

William Quandt has argued that authoritarian regimes base their survival on four ingredients: 'ideology, repression, payoffs, and elite solidarity'.² In the Arab world, the ideological justification to rule had long disappeared. In the absence of an ideological bond, regimes constantly resorted to an ideology of conspiratorial nationalism, keeping the public voice suppressed in the name of national security interests. The brazen nature of regime corruption was enabled through the exclusion of the majority of the population from the economy. As the numbers of poor and dispossessed increased, the ability of the regimes to provide pay-offs came under increasing pressure. In order to buy off the population, the Egyptian government was reportedly spending \$3 billion a year subsidising the price of bread.³ Finally, in the face of extended street protests, Quandt's fourth pillar of regime stability, elite solidarity, cracked. In Tunisia, Ben Ali ordered Rachid Ammar, the head of the army to fire on protestors. Ammar refused, thus sealing the fate of Ben Ali's rule. A similar dynamic was soon at work in Egypt, where Field Marshall Mohamed Hussein Tantawi refused to order the army to fire on demonstrators, thus hastening Mubarak's exit.

Iran's Presidential election of June 2009 could also in some way be seen as a factor in the final build up to the Arab Spring. Protests by the Green Movement following this election which saw the pioneering use of social networking and IT technology as well as non-violent public protests served as a precedent and inspiration for the Arab protests.

The Driving Factors

The drivers⁴ of the Arab Spring were: the mobilized masses, enabled and assisted by technology and youth, the role played by the military and regime security forces, and intervention by outside forces. Technology enabled citizens to challenge repressive security

² Toby Dodge, 'From the "Arab Awakening" to the Arab Spring; the Post Colonial State in the Middle East', *After Arab Spring: Power Shift in the Middle East*, London School of Economics, London, May 2012, p. 10.

³ George Lawson, 'The Arab Uprisings: Revolutions or Protests?', *After Arab Spring: Power Shift in the Middle East*, London School of Economics, London, May 2012, p. 14

⁴ Allen Keiswetter, 'The Arab Spring: Implications for US Policy and Interests', Middle East Institute, Washington DC, 13 January 2012, available at <http://www.mei.edu/content/arab-spring-implications-us-policy-and-interests>, accessed on 25 September 2012.

forces. The power of the internet moved the collective psyche of the people and helped them muster the courage to stand up against the dictators. The refusal of the army in Tunisia and Egypt to act against the demonstrators served as a catalyst for the early exit of the regimes.

Major Trends

The easy part may well have been the success of the people in overthrowing the dictators but the hard part has, however, only just started. As the people are discovering, it is indeed hard to usher in democracy in a region where political freedom had been stifled for decades and where alternates for governance have to be built from scratch.

The countries affected by the Arab Spring can be classified into three groups; firstly, where the overthrow of the old regime has successfully occurred as in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya; secondly, where the struggle is uncertain as in Syria, Yemen and Bahrain; and thirdly, countries across the Arab world from Morocco to Saudi Arabia and Jordan where the Arab Spring has caused governments and rulers to adjust course for survival.

Among the Arab Spring nations, Tunisia is the only country where the present government looks stable. The country has come through the Arab Spring's first electoral test with an election on 23 October 2011. It has an elected Constituent Assembly, a president from the secular parties and an Islamist prime minister. Yet, just below and occasionally above the surface as well of this orderly and well managed process, there is an occasional spark of tension. The ideological divide between the secular and Islamist parties is omnipresent and surfaces often in interviews or even casual conversations.

In Egypt, post the ouster of Mubarak in February 2011 and after a prolonged period of uncertainty, parliamentary elections were finally held in January 2012 in which the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party emerged the winner; the other Islamist party that did very well was the Salafist's Al Nour Party. In the subsequently held presidential polls in May and June, the Muslim Brotherhood's candidate Mohamed Morsi won. Morsi has immediately set about putting things in order by reclaiming the presidential powers from the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), overturning the controversial "Supplementary Constitutional Declaration"⁵ and ordering Parliament to reconvene (which had been dissolved under a court order in May). He even ordered the retirement of SCAF chief Field Marshall Tantawi and his chief of staff Lieutenant General Sami Annan.⁶ Egypt has thus set course towards the transition to democracy. The formulation of the constitution

⁵ Muhammad Shukri, 'Q&A: Egypt's new constitutional declaration', *BBC News*, 18 June 2012, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-18494178>, accessed on 29 September 2012.

⁶ 'Egypt leader Morsi orders army chief Tantawi to resign', *BBC News*, 12 August 2012, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-19234763>, accessed on 29 September 2012.

as well as the devolution of powers between the President and Parliament will dictate how well Egypt matures into a democracy.

In Yemen, a deal brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) removed President Saleh from the presidency in February 2012. The new president, Abd Rabboh Mansour Hadi, is still coming to grips with a war-torn nation. Be it the Al Houthi rebels in the North or the Al Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in the South, the Hadi Government has its hands full. It is still not clear whether the GCC plan will produce a more stable equilibrium. Hadi will be limited to two years in office, during which time he is meant to oversee the drafting of a new constitution, restructuring of the armed forces and preparing for a new, genuinely multi-party election. The opposition groups and tribal leaders do not seem too enthusiastic and remain wary of efforts to centralize power and dilute their traditional authority. All this in the backdrop of a simmering Southern Secessionist Movement! Present indications are that Yemen is heading towards a situation of total internal strife and civil war.

The Syrian crisis has been the bloodiest so far. Syria has also split the international community down the middle with the US-Saudi Arabia led group on one side and the Russia-China-Iran led group on the other. Ever since the uprisings began in the Southern city of Daraa in March 2011, all attempts including a six point peace plan⁷ by the UN have failed to bring an end to the crisis. As per UN estimates, more than 10,000 people have been killed in Syria.⁸ Thousands of people have crossed over into Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, sparking off a humanitarian crisis.

President Assad too has suffered setbacks. There have been some major defections including the head of the Republican Guard Major General Manaf Tlas, Prime Minister Riad Hijab as also a number of Syrian envoys in foreign countries. In addition, a number of Syrian envoys overseas were expelled after the Houla massacre on 25 May 2012.⁹ On 18 July, the Defence Minister and a number of high ranking officers including President Assad's brother-in-law were killed in a suicide attack in Damascus.

Russia and China have repeatedly shot down UNSC proposals on Syria. Egypt tried to take the initiative in September 2012 to form a Quartet of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran and

⁷ 'Kofi Annan's six-point plan for Syria', *Al Jazeera News*, 27 March 2012, available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/03/2012327153111767387.html>, accessed on 30 September 2012.

⁸ 'Syria: UN humanitarian chief urges avoidance of civilian casualties in Aleppo fighting', *UN News Centre*, 29 July 2012, available at <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=42584&Cr=Syria&Cr1#.UGx0JJjMiHM>, accessed on 03 October 2012.

⁹ 'Houla killings: UN blames Syria troops and militia', *Guardian News*, 16 August 2012, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/aug/15/houla-killings-un-blames-syria-troops>, accessed on 24 September 2012.

Egypt for finding a solution to the crisis, but nothing has come of it till now.¹⁰ The Syrian opposition remains fragmented despite an umbrella of Syrian National Council,¹¹ while Al Qaeda has found a new battleground in Syria. All this undoubtedly presents a conundrum for the international community. The tools available for dealing with the Syrian crisis are limited. Military intervention would be extremely risky and given the potential for civil war in Syria and an expanded conflict region-wide, it would be highly inadvisable.

Libya under Gaddafi presented a different challenge as compared to Syria. Unlike Syria, in the case of Libya, international opinion was generally oriented towards the ouster of Gaddafi. Even the Arab League came on board to levy sanction and authorize military action. The challenge for Libya has been the transition to the post-Gaddafi era. There were no political institutions in Libya. The problem has been compounded by the country's historical ethnic, tribal and regional splits especially between the ancient regions of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica.

The Transitional National Council (TNC), formed in March 2011 under Mahmoud Jibril, has handed over power to the newly-elected assembly on 8 August; this election saw the victory of the liberal coalition under the National Forces Alliance and led by interim Prime Minister Mahmoud Jibril. The Libyan government now has its task cut out. A constituent assembly of 60 members is to be named for drafting a new constitution, while the various ethnic groups and tribal factions are accommodated into the national mainstream. In the meantime, the killing of the US ambassador on 11 September 2012 during the course of nation-wide anti-US riots has exposed the limited control of the government.¹²

One of the most significant consequences of the Arab Spring has been the rise of the Islamists in the region. For many decades, Islamist movements were brutally suppressed by the region's dictators. Now, they have emerged as a major political force in Tunisia and Egypt. In Libya, too, Islamists under the banner of the Muslim Brotherhood stood second in the recent elections. There is also a widespread expectation that as and when regime change occurs in Syria, the Muslim Brotherhood could be a prominent part of the new system.

Even in countries that have not undergone regime change, Islamist actors appear to be formidable electoral forces. In Morocco, the King was forced to allow the Islamist Justice

¹⁰ Vitaly Bilan, 'The "Islamic Quartet" and Syria', *New Eastern Outlook Journal*, 19 September 2012, available at <http://www.journal-neo.com/node/118841>, accessed on 23 September 2012.

¹¹ Julian Borger, 'Syria crisis: west loses faith in SNC to unite opposition groups', *Guardian News*, 14 August 2012, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/aug/13/syria-opposition-groups-national-council> accessed on 25 September 2012.

¹² 'US ambassador killed in the line of duty', *Fox News*, 12 September 2012, available at <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2012/09/12/us-ambassadors-killed-in-line-duty/>, accessed on 27 September 2012.

and Development Party (PJD) to form a new government. In Jordan, the Islamic Action Front has pressed for political reform and even raised the idea of a constitutional monarchy. Even in Kuwait, which was not directly affected by the Arab Spring, Islamist and conservative tribal candidates performed well in the most recent parliamentary elections in February 2012.

Islamists are therefore here to stay, at least for the foreseeable future. But their rise has thrown up several questions:

- Questions remain about the ultimate goals of Islamist parties. How they will evolve once in power, and whether they will be open to strong relations with the West. In the case of Egypt, questions about the Islamists' willingness to abide by the peace treaty with Israel and, more broadly, how they will deal with Israel, a country they normally label the Zionist entity, also loom large.
- The second challenge is posed by the emerging deep division between Islamist and secular forces in countries undergoing transitions. The secular elite being marginalized by the rise of Islamist parties is the one that Western governments had befriended and supported in the past. How the Western world now deals with the Islamists is a diplomatic puzzle that will unravel over time.

Effect on Regional Balance of Power

The Arab Spring has ensured that the region would never remain the same again. Although no major geo-political realignments have occurred so far, it is clearly evident that the new political dispensations will not be forced to follow the "Accepted Order" laid down by the West for long. Despite championing the cause of democracy in the world, the United States and other Western countries found it convenient to deal with dictators. The newly formed regimes, most of them Islamists, could be difficult to deal with.

The emerging political order in West Asia is also marked by considerable shifts within individual countries as well as at the regional level. Among the regional powers, Turkey, Egypt and to some extent Iran seem to be raising their stakes while Israel and Saudi Arabia have been caught on the wrong side of emerging equations.

Israel has been hit the hardest by the Arab Spring. It lost its time tested ally in Mubarak who had ensured peace in the region. With Mubarak gone, the 1978 peace treaty now hangs in the balance although Egypt has not yet indicated whether it will be abandoning it. The Sinai Peninsula, the buffer between Egypt and Israel, has suddenly erupted post Arab Spring. Egypt has also decided to reopen the Rafah crossing into the West Bank.¹³

¹³ 'Egypt reopens Rafah crossing after Sinai attack', RT News, 26 August 2012, available at <http://rt.com/news/egypt-opens-rafaq-crossing-574/>, accessed on 30 September 2012.

Further, with civil war raging in Syria, Israel fears that Assad would finally be forced out. It would again threaten to disturb the fragile peace on its eastern borders. Jordan could go the way of Islamists any time which could spell more trouble for Israel. The Palestinians could also find motivation from the Arab Spring and launch a non-violent campaign which Israel could find difficult to handle.

Turkey has taken Arab Spring as an opportunity to project itself as a regional leader, an able interlocutor and a model of Islamic Democracy. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan visited Egypt, Libya and Tunisia in September 2011 as a show of solidarity to the new emerging order. Post the Gaza Flotilla incident of May 2010,¹⁴ Turkey is seen to be back on the Arab side. It has also been mending its ties with Iran steadily. Frequent visits by Turkish and Iranian Presidents to each other's capital have taken place since 2009. Turkey has even offered to be the interlocutor on the Iran nuclear issue and finds common cause with Iran in fighting the Kurds. With Syria, Turkey finally broke off ties once the bloodshed and the flow of refugees became intolerable and it is presently aiding Syrian rebels fight the Assad regime.

In Egypt, President Morsi has indicated that his country is on the path to regain its stature in the Arab world. In his maiden speech at the UN General Assembly on 24 September 2012, he voiced his support for Palestinian nationhood, expressed concern over the Syrian crisis and called upon Israel to join the NPT.¹⁵ With Iran, Egypt is on a path to mend ties and forge a strategic partnership. The passage of Iranian warships through the Suez Canal, the first ever visit after 1979 of an Egyptian President to Iran in August 2012 (to attend the NAM summit), President Morsi's call for a strong relationship with Iran¹⁶ and recognition of Iran's important role in the region as a major player are all indicators in this regard. Egypt also seems keen to forge close ties with Turkey. In his address to the Turkish AKP Party Major Congress on 30 September 2012, Morsi hailed the Turkish model of democracy and called for stronger (strategic) ties between the two countries.¹⁷

¹⁴ *Report of the Secretary-General's Panel of Inquiry on the 31 May 2010 Flotilla Incident*, September 2011, available at http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/middle_east/Gaza_Flotilla_Panel_Report.pdf, accessed on 2 October 2012.

¹⁵ 'In first address to UN debate, Egypt President highlights Palestine issue as key concern', *UN News Service*, 26 September 2012, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,,EGY,,5065a8dc2,0.html>, accessed on 4 October 2012.

¹⁶ Yasmine Saleh, 'Egypt's Mursi says Iran is vital to ending Syria's crisis', *myMOinfo.com*, 22 September 2012, available at <http://www.mymoinfo.com/Egypt-s-Mursi-says-Iran-is-vital-to-ending-Syria-s/9050096?newsId=167234>, accessed on 1 October 2012.

¹⁷ 'Seeking to boost alliance, Turkey, Egypt criticize Syrian regime, support Palestinians', *Washington Post*, 30 September 2012, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/thousands-gather-for-turkish-ruling-party-congress-seeking-to-build-on-decade-long-success/2012/09/30/6cd2996e-0acf-11e2-9eea-333857f6a7bd_story.html, accessed on 2 October 2012.

Iran has tried to make the most of the Arab Spring. It has drawn parallels with its own 1979 Revolution and has called for Islamic awakening¹⁸ in the region and overthrow of the Zionist regime. On the other hand, by supporting the rebels in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Bahrain but siding with the Assad regime in Syria, it has also highlighted the skewed sectarian loyalties of the conflict owing to geopolitical alignments. Despite the initial rhetoric against Muslim Brotherhood at the start of the Arab Spring, Iran is looking to forge strong ties with the new Egypt. Iran's ties with Turkey have been on the rise and they have found common cause on many an issue. Turkey breaking off with Israel and Turkey's attempts to mediate on the Iranian nuclear issue have only helped the cause.

Saudi Arabia has managed to survive the Arab Spring both internally and within the region. Despite the economic measures to appease the population at home coupled with the brutal crackdown on further protests, Riyadh knows that it is living on borrowed time. The next round of protests or Arab Spring Part-2 may prove fatal for the Saudi family. It has taken a lead in countering the Syrian regime, which it sees as an opportunity to break the spread of Iran's influence across the Levant. That challenge is set to have important ramifications for Saudi Arabia's future regional role.

Recent developments have given rise to a number of questions.

- Will a troika of Egypt-Turkey-Iran emerge?
- Will Turkey regain its leadership role in the region?
- How will Israel and Saudi Arabia emerge from the Arab Spring shocks?
- How will the Syrian crisis affect the regional power equation?
- How will US, Russia and China reconfigure their strategies in the region?

Looking into the Future

The political churning unleashed by the Arab Spring has brought to the fore fresh concerns in the already complex security scenario in the region. However, almost two years later, the Arab Spring still presents a muddy picture. Just when it seemed that the Arab Spring was almost over and the region (except Syria and Yemen) was entering a phase of political transition, a flurry of developments in the first week of October 2012 has once again brought the region back in focus. Parliaments have been dissolved in Jordan and Kuwait, the Prime Minister dismissed in Libya, unrest in Iran over currency devaluation, fallout between two

¹⁸ Elad Benari, 'Iranian Calls for 'Islamic Awakening' to Destroy Israel', *Israel National News*, 17 May 2012, available at http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/155896#.UG0cb65wn_d, accessed on 30 September 2012.

political heavyweights in Israel resulting in the announcement of early elections and Turkey is threatening military action against Syria.

Some of the issues are, however, quite clear. The Arab Spring has given hope to millions across the region that meaningful political change is a distinct possibility, elections are further likely to empower Islamist parties in the region and the advent of democracy could give rise to Arab governments likely to be more independent of US influence.¹⁹ The Arab Spring has also given rise to the possibility of realignment in the regional balance of power. The long-term prospect also includes the possibility of a freer West Asia and North Africa. Revolutions are over, now is the time for reforms. Perhaps, the Arab Spring would fully succeed when Refolution²⁰

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¹⁹ Allen Keiswetter, note 4.

²⁰ John Keane, ‘Refolution in the Arab world’, *Open Democracy*, 28 April 2011, available at <http://www.opendemocracy.net/john-keane/refolution-in-arab-world>, accessed on 4 October 2012.