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The Arab Spring in the Long Run

It was hoped that the Arab Spring would bring freedom and democracy to the Middle East and North Africa. However, continued unrest in Libya and Syria points to a potentially bleaker future for the region.

By Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou for ISN

The first phase of what has come to be known as the Arab Spring was, for all intents and purposes, over by the summer of 2011. Six months after an accelerated chain of events was set in motion from the Tunisian countryside, state-society relations and political dynamics across the Middle East and North African (MENA) region have been profoundly reordered. In quick succession, well-established and solid political institutions were deposed in Tunisia and Egypt followed a few months later by the overthrow of Libya's Muammar Gaddafi and Yemen's Ali Abdullah Saleh. After years of political repression and state brutality, fear had seemingly changed sides. Many authoritarian states across the MENA region were now on the defensive and looking for ways to avoid being the next regime to collapse under pressure from popular uprisings.

While the opening months of the Arab Spring culminated in the overthrow of leaders (who had collectively been in power for 125 years), what followed in all countries was a period of political uncertainty. Widespread enthusiasm for the democratic future of the MENA region was gradually replaced by skepticism towards projects aimed at transforming societies and implementing unprecedented political change. Yet hasty assessments of the political future of a number of states often overlooked the complexity and unpredictability of the transition from authoritarian regime to fully-fledged democracy. Accordingly, as the revolution moment dissipated – whether successfully in Tunisia, ambiguously in Egypt, violently in Libya, or painstakingly in Yemen – the longer-term nature of the transformations began taking shape.

As the hopeful Arab Spring gave way to the uncertain Arab Autumn, the political dynamics of the MENA region were made increasingly complicated after the stalled revolutions in Bahrain and Syria. The cycle of mass uprisings leading to new power configurations that began in Tunisia began to lose steam. In its place came the emergence of ad hoc opposition movements that provided opportunities for increasingly lengthy regime push-back, most notably in Syria. In doing so, the final outcome of the political unrest that that continues to engulf two of the most volatile regions in the world may have similarities with the Middle East's not-too-distant past. Specifically, the Arab Spring is on its way to producing two power transformations of lasting consequence: the Lebanonization of Syria and the Iraqization of Libya.

Division and Disorder for Libya

Muammar Gaddafi's seven-month resistance against the National Transitional Council and other actors sent an important message to the leaders of the MENA countries. Whereas regimes leaderships witnessed the downfall of Tunisia's Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak with a palpable sense of political paralysis, Gaddafi demonstrated that resistance to political change was an option. True to his self-style autocratic rule, Gaddafi engaged in a violent and suicidal fight-to-the-finish which pitted him against the vast majority of Libyans. As Gaddafi inevitably became a figure of national hate, he provided Libya's opposition movement with a center of gravity that propelled it forward in spite of poor organization and external dependence. After his eventual downfall, he also stripped it of a tangible common purpose. As a result, post-Gaddafi Libya continues to lack a coherent project for societal and political rejuvenation.

Instead, Libya has entered a cycle akin in many ways to what Iraq has experienced since the United States invaded the country in 2003 and the subsequent death of Saddam Hussein – prolonged periods of social and ethnic division and disorder. Even before the fall of Tripoli, the Libyan opposition rested upon shaky foundations that were at best supported by the overarching objective of removing Gaddafi from power. However, upon losing the one element that provided the opposition with a sense of cohesiveness, the various factions reverted to their atomized identities. Ironically, this resulted in the perpetuation of a dynamic that Gaddafi had cultivated over his four decades of rule – namely, the prevention of state-society symbiosis.

Currently Libya is engulfed in a naked struggle for political power. Yet in sharp contrast to Tunisia and (perhaps to a lesser extent) Egypt, the fight for power in Libya is not being expressed through political parties or structured civic movements. Instead, Libya is being divided along a complex mixture of ethnic and regional lines. In addition to the reaffirmation of tribal affinities, these include urban center affiliations (with at least four key hubs: Misrata, Zentan, Benghazi, Tripoli), and wider regional perspectives (Cyrenaica, Fezzan, and Tripolitania). When combined with the influence of Islamist militants such as Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Libya's political landscape emerges as having much in common with the factions that dominated Iraq in the mid-2000s. Similarly, insecurity has been on the rise in Libya due to the large number of weapons in circulation throughout the country, the frustrated expectations of many revolutionaries and the absence of a strong government. Accordingly, leadership was a problem for Libya prior to the Arab Spring and remains so in the aftermath.

Syria's Violent Future

As Iraq's recent (and as-of-yet unresolved) period of political unrest is being replayed in Libya, the violence and instability that plagued Lebanon for most of the 1970s and 80s may come to pass as the future of Syria. Misreading Gaddafi's - and indeed Ali Abdallah Saleh's - resistance as a potential game changer Bashar Al Assad embarked upon fully-fledged conflict with large segments of Syrian society. Integral to his attempts to safeguard the Ba'athi regime he inherited from his father has been the full use of Syria's well-organized internal security apparatus. And while it remains to be seen whether Al Assad will survive the political upheaval, Syria is now a state that needs to take into account that large sections of society have been violently pitted against each other.

Accordingly, Syria is today beginning to experience a similar process of societal fragmentation that was typically associated Lebanon for so many years. Indeed, just as Lebanon had - in the aftermath of Syria's 1975 intervention - lapsed into state collapse, outside interference by regional powers and intervention by international actors, Syria is currently following a similar trajectory. Al Assad's full use of the instruments of state power seems set to continue for the foreseeable future. As a result, the ongoing political unrest is likely to engulf even greater numbers of the Syrian population. Moreover,

the Syrian crisis continues to impact upon the geopolitical calculations of external actors as diverse as the United States and the Arab League and overspills into neighboring states such as Turkey and Lebanon.

An Uncertain Future

The social, economic and political problems that Libya and Syria continue to face demonstrates that jury is still out on what shall be the final and enduring legacy of the Arab Spring. It is encouraging that political transformation is forging ahead peacefully and positively in the likes of Tunisia and Morocco. However, it remains to be seen whether Egypt or Yemen will make a similarly peaceful transition to democracy. By contrast, Libya and Syria may offer an altogether different – and perhaps unexpected - outcome of the Arab Spring. Transformation in both countries may result in political and societal fragmentation associated with events from the Middle East's not-so-distant past. If so, the Arab Spring's original promise of better governance and political freedom may become a dim and distant memory.

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