

The Enduring “Arab Spring”: Change and Resistance

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Ten years ago, the Arab Spring uprisings brought down four long-standing authoritarian rulers. The uprisings (in the early 2010s) had been driven by a desire to replace tyranny, crony capitalism, and corruption with an order that was transparent and accountable, and provided for popular participation. However, rather than ushering in the wide-ranging reforms that were being demanded from the street, West Asia has been engulfed in several conflicts as the forces of counter-revolution attempt to maintain the existing political and economic order. In order to stem the tide of change, Saudi Arabia has sought to mobilise domestic and regional support by accusing Iran of harbouring hegemonic designs in the region, and is challenging Iranian influence in Syria and Yemen.

However, the Arab Spring events have also thrown up competitions within the votaries of political Islam, in which Turkey and Qatar are ranged against Saudi Arabia, backed by the UAE and Egypt. The “second wave” of the Arab Spring uprisings in four countries in 2018–20, which led to the fall of four more rulers, suggests that the popular struggle for reform in West Asia remains resilient and is likely to be a long-term revolutionary process.

We are now commemorating ten years of two events that took place in Tunisia, which began innocuously but, within a few weeks, had cataclysmic effects across West Asia and North Africa, and continue to reverberate today in regional and global affairs. These region-wide reverberations are referred to collectively as the “Arab Spring”.

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Through January–March 2011, there were major uprisings in six countries - Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain - and public agitations in many others during this period: Morocco, Algeria, Jordan, and Kuwait. They led to the fall of four potentates: Zine el Abedine Ben Ali of Tunisia; Hosni Mubarak of Egypt; Ali Abdullah Saleh, President of Yemen; and Muammar Gaddafi, the Libyan head of state for over forty years.

Counter-revolutionary initiatives in different countries ensured that no more leaders would fall and that states would revert to the earlier authoritarian order that has characterised West Asia over the previous century. However, it soon became clear that the forces unleashed by the Arab Spring uprisings have not withered away. In 2018-20, four Arab countries witnessed large-scale street demonstrations-in Sudan, Algeria, Lebanon, and Iraq-calling for a complete overhaul of the political, economic, and social order. These demonstrations led to the departure of four rulers: the Presidents of Sudan and Algeria, and the Prime Ministers of Iraq and Lebanon.

Ten years after Mohamed Bouazizi immolated himself, the spirit of the Arab Spring remains vibrant and is robustly confronting authoritarian rulers of the region.

Socio-economic Malaise

The unexpected origin, spread, and dramatic effects of the Arab Spring uprisings have encouraged a continuous investigation of factors that had led to these developments. While different studies tend to emphasise one particular factor or the other, the consensus is that they resulted from a deep and sustained social and economic crisis across the Arab world.

The first alarm bell rang many years earlier, when the ‘Arab Human Development Report’ (AHDR) was published in 2002. It was prepared under the auspices of the UNDP and the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development. It highlighted three ‘deficits’ in the Arab world: freedom, status of women, and the state of the knowledge society. These deficits were examined in greater detail in subsequent reports. Thus, the AHDR-2004 looked at the deficit relating to freedom and good governance and called for the full engagement of all Arab citizens in comprehensive reform to spearhead a human renaissance in the region.

These reports were largely ignored, and the region continued to be governed on the basis of the existing ‘social contract’ between ruler and citizen. This entailed the state providing employment to the citizen in the

public sector, access to free education and health facilities, and subsidised food and fuel. In return, the citizen gave the ruler loyalty and obedience, which included bestowing on the latter full authority over political and economic decision-making, the acceptance of non-transparent and non-accountable use of state resources by the ruler and his coterie, and the avoidance of dissent at all times. This social contract was kept in place through the coercive force available with the state¹.

An overview of the economy of West Asia-North Africa (WANA) countries reveals that, by 2010, economic conditions had been deteriorating for some time. Over the previous three decades, the GDP across the region had averaged 3 percent, while the rest of the developing world had grown at 4.5 percent. In the same period, the GDP per capita had grown at 0.5 percent, as against 3 percent for the rest of the developing world².

Under the influence of the IMF, the WANA countries began to implement "neoliberal" economic policies - that is, policies where the state's role in the economy would be minimal, and market forces would dominate. This approach in effect meant that market-oriented policies would be imposed on economies firmly controlled by governments, with rulers exercising monopoly control over all aspects of their economies. This combination of state monopoly and neoliberal policies institutionalised two features in the Arab economies: crony capitalism, in which economic policies would be moulded to benefit the ruler and his immediate coterie; and attendant corruption that would characterise all economic decision-making³.

There were other problems as well. All the WANA countries experienced a "youth bulge", the result of low mortality and high fertility rates, so that young people constituted between 29-35 percent of the populations in different WANA countries. Across the region, they were also 25 percent of the unemployed in each country. Those who were educated formed a large part of the unemployed youth, while the less educated sought a place in the informal sector, with low wages and squalid living and working conditions.

Observers have also pointed to the food crisis that impacted harshly in the WANA region on the eve of the uprisings. By 2010, all Arab countries were food importers. Food prices began to rise globally from 2007, so that by 2011 they had doubled in international markets, leading to bread riots in several Arab countries⁴. Before the uprisings, one-fifth of the Arab people lived below the poverty line, and spent more than half their income on basic food⁵.

Through the 2000s, it became clear that the old social contract was no longer sustainable, largely due to the high fiscal outlays for public sector employment and subsidies. A combination of demographic challenges that had engendered unemployment, the food crisis, and rising poverty, coupled with the rulers' resort to coercive force in several cases, led to a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction, and what Elena Ianchovichina has called the loss of 'subjective well-being'. She argues that the breaking of the social contract led to the Arab Spring uprisings⁶.

Commentators tend to dispute Ianchovichina's analysis when she says that "the protestors ... were mostly middle-class young people"⁷. Gilbert Achcar has pointed out that, while some people of middle-class background did join the uprisings, "the vast majority in the streets and squares belonged to middle- and low-income urban layers, working-class and unemployed", and that trade union mobilisation played a major role bringing popular unrest on to the streets⁸.

The Arab Spring Uprisings

While specific developments in each country were the result of its unique political situation, there are several similarities that link them with a "unifying thread"⁹. All of them called for "bread, freedom and social justice". Again, almost all the demonstrations, involving hundreds of thousands of protestors, were peaceful, despite bringing together diverse participants—men and women, Muslims and Christians, Islamists and secularists, lower and middle classes, and urban and rural communities. At times, the protestors were deliberately provoked by thugs sent by regimes to disrupt their gatherings, insult women, and divide them on communal or class lines. But they maintained a remarkable unity despite such provocations.

The uprisings had different trajectories in different countries.

- In two countries, Tunisia and Egypt, political change, marked by the departure of the ruler was orderly (in Egypt in the initial stages) in that it was negotiated between the demonstrators and the effective authority in the country: the armed forces.
- In two countries, Libya and Yemen, though their situations were different, the popular protests led to a regime change, followed by nation-wide civil conflicts that have persisted to this day, largely due to the interventions of external players.

- In two instances, Bahrain and Syria, the demonstrators were harshly put down by security forces, with regional players being actively involved- in one case, Bahrain, to support the ruling regime, and in the other instance, Syria, to overthrow the regime (and, later, others to back the regime as well).

An interesting aspect of the Tunisian scenario has been the role of the country's Islamist party, Ennahda, and its leader, Rachid Ghannouchi. During Ben-Ali's rule, Ennahda had been banned and Ghannouchi exiled to France, where he acquired a well-deserved reputation as a major intellectual of political Islam.

Ghannouchi returned to Tunis from exile in France after Ben-Ali's departure, and soon led his party to victory in the national elections. However, recognising the complexity of national issues and his party's lack of experience in governance, Ghannouchi accepted the setting up of a government of technocrats, and later backed the finalisation of a democratic constitution that makes no reference to Sharia in shaping legislation, and gives full rights to women and minorities. In 2016, Ennahda abandoned its affiliation with political Islam.

While developments in Egypt were initially similar to what had occurred in Tunisia, their paths soon diverged, and Egypt took the route of violence and reversal to autocracy. Despite the electoral successes of the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood, the political transition to civilian rule was difficult, even painful. The army retained effective authority, while the distrust between the Brotherhood and the military deepened, as did the divide between the government and the people, who had expectations of quick reform.

The President from the Brotherhood, Mohammed Morsi, failed to understand both the power-lust of his generals and the visceral hostility to the Brotherhood government from the Gulf sheikhdoms, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The latter viewed the Brotherhood's grassroots politics, that sought to blend Islam with western-style democracy, as a threat to their monarchical order. It is now known that they funded the popular opposition to the Morsi government. This was done through an organisation called *Tamarod* which organised demonstrations across the country, with an estimated 10 million joining the protests on 30 June 2013.

The Army Chief and Defence Minister, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, presented Morsi with a 48-hour ultimatum to resign, and then took over the government through a coup d'état on 3 July 2013, bringing to an end Egypt's first attempt at a democratic order.

The Gulf Monarchies

As Egypt slid into domestic discord and authoritarian repression, it was the Gulf monarchies that played a central role in confronting the Arab Spring uprisings.

The six monarchies of the Gulf, collectively partners in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), are founded on the pre-oil tribal formations that accept the legitimacy and pre-eminent status of the ruling family. The rulers provide domestic and external security and welfare to their nationals, while the latter give them loyalty and obedience. The “social contract” in the GCC order has meant provision by the state of education and health services, and employment with state institutions.

The capacity of Gulf rulers to sustain the social contract has been largely facilitated by the availability of oil revenues. Thus, despite challenges thrown up at the monarchies during the early days of the Arab Spring uprisings, the GCC states had substantial funds immediately available to reaffirm the social contract by co-opting potential dissidents. This was largely due to the continuous rise in oil prices from 2009 to 2013: \$ 62/ barrel in 2009; to \$ 77 in 2010; to \$ 109 in 2012; and \$ 106 in 2013. Hence, not surprisingly, “the preference of states across the GCC was to buy their way out of trouble rather than to confront it head-on”¹⁰. Thus, on the back of high oil prices, the GCC states could not only purchase the obedience of their subjects through heavy financial outlays, but could also provide financial support to other monarchies, such as in Oman, Jordan and Morocco.

Only Saudi Arabia, with its large population and its lead role in regional affairs, faced serious concerns. The fall of Hosni Mubarak took away the kingdom’s strategic partner, while the electoral success of the Muslim Brotherhood was viewed as a political challenge. In this background, the demand for reform in Bahrain, and the empowerment of the majority Shia population that any reform would entail, was a source of great alarm. It led to swift Saudi armed action on 14-15 March 2011 to disrupt the protestors, and the later harsh crackdown on dissent.

The twin concerns emanating from the Brotherhood’s ascent to power in Egypt, and the reform movement in Bahrain, imparted to the Saudi rulers a deep sense of strategic vulnerability vis-à-vis Iran, and goaded them to challenge Iran’s expanding influence in the region. This approach facilitated the shaping of the Saudi-Iran competition in a sectarian framework. It also later led to Saudi support for regime change in Syria, Iran’s long-standing regional ally, as well as a military assault on Yemen against the Shia Zaydis, represented by the ‘Houthi’ militants who were seen as surrogates of Iran.

Sectarianisation of West Asian Competitions

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and its occupation of that country till 2011, gave a central place to sectarian identity in shaping not just Iraqi but also, West Asian politics to a great extent. As Fanar Haddad has noted, from 2003, "sectarian categories [in Iraq] had gained unprecedented relevance and an outsized ability to colour social and political perceptions"¹¹. Within a year of the US attack, King Abdullah of Jordan said in an interview that West Asia was witnessing the emergence of a "Shia crescent", that started from Iran and stretched to the Gulf, and then went on to the Mediterranean¹².

The monarch's allusion was clearly to an aggressive Iran that, in his view, was poised to dominate the regional order by overturning existing Sunni regimes with the help of local Shia populations in different countries. Subsequent events appeared to affirm the validity of King Abdullah's concerns. During the US occupation, the Iraqi political order was firmly shaped on a sectarian basis: politics in Iraq, defined under US tutelage, "elevated sectarian identity into the primary characteristic and chief organising principle of politics in Arab Iraq"¹³.

Hence, not surprisingly, the country's politicians sought Iran's help to support their interests and ambitions. Besides its ties with Iraqi politicians, Iran further consolidated its influence in the country with the mobilisation of Shia militia that fought the Americans and the jihadi extremists of 'Al Qaeda in Iraq' (AQI) that had emerged to combat Shia empowerment.

Iraq's legacy of the sectarian divide fed into the existing security concerns and vulnerabilities of West Asian rulers on the basis of the threat from the "Other" sect: the Shias in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia; and Sunnis in the case of Syria. Thus, the Zaydi demand for political and economic participation in Yemen, the cross-sectarian demand for reform in Bahrain, and the Shia protests against discrimination in the Eastern Province were seen by Saudi Arabia as Iran-sponsored machinations towards asserting its regional hegemony. This perception justified for Saudi Arabia its military deployment in Bahrain to end the reform movement, the armed assault on Yemen, and the harsh action to put down the Shia demonstrations at home.

This approach reverberated in Syria as well. Syrian politics was already "sect-coded" in that the 'Alawi'¹⁴ identity of the Al-Assad family, and its core support base had shaped political and economic patronage in Syria since 1970, when Hafez al-Assad became President. The 'opposition' to al-Assad

rule had come earlier, in the 1980s, from the (Sunni) Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, thus providing a sectarian binary in a state that was avowedly Baathist and, therefore, secular. Hence, Bashar al-Assad had little difficulty in describing the early Arab Spring uprisings in Syria as “a Sunni-centric, extremist, Islamist, anti-Syrian plot orchestrated by foreign powers”¹⁵.

This sect-based discourse worked for the other side as well: Bashar al-Assad’s Sunni-centric opponents saw, in the early Syrian uprisings, an opportunity to roll back Iranian influence not just in Syria but in the region in general.

These sect-based perceptions relating to regional political competitions led different nations to see in Syria and Yemen either a threat or as an opportunity for their own interests. This is what has made these conflicts so prolonged and so destructive and, seemingly, incapable of resolution.

Besides the lethal sectarian conflicts that the Arab Spring has unleashed, the competitions within Sunni political Islam have also been a major feature of the West Asian landscape after the uprisings.

Competitions within Political Islam

Political Islam is the effort to imbue a political order with the values and principles of Islam. It has three broad expressions: one, Wahhabiyya, the ideological foundation of Saudi Arabia, that is ‘quietist’ in that the ruler is the repository of all political authority while his people owe him loyalty and obedience; two, the activist Muslim Brotherhood that is a grassroots movement whose political platform seeks to blend the tenets of Islam with the principles of Western-style parliamentary democracy, with a constitution, political parties, free elections, human rights, and equal rights for women and minorities; the third expression is referred to as “Salafi-jihadism”, that draws from its reading of Islamic texts and commentaries the authority to use violence to defend the faith and its adherents¹⁶.

The Arab Spring uprisings have generated two broad ongoing competitions within political Islam: one, between the Gulf monarchies (mainly Saudi Arabia and the UAE) and the authoritarian republics (mainly Egypt) on one side *versus* Brotherhood-affiliated groups and regimes in the region. This is because the Brotherhood, with its affiliation with Islam, its accommodation of democratic norms and institutions, and its popular activism, is viewed as a threat to the authoritarian rulers. Hence, not surprisingly, the coming to power

of Brotherhood-affiliated parties in Tunisia and Egypt in the early weeks of the Arab Spring was seen as a grave challenge to the authoritarian rulers in the Gulf and Egypt, and led to their cooperating to bring down the Brotherhood government in Egypt, and establishing the tyranny of Field Marshall Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.

The second competition within political Islam is between established governments in West Asia of all hues and the forces of jihad, represented by the transnational organisations-Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, and their diverse affiliated entities.

Monarchies versus the Brotherhood

As in the inter-sectarian conflict, Saudi Arabia is again at the centre in the fight against the Brotherhood. Here, its principal allies are the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt, which are ranged against a coalition of Qatar and Turkey. Qatar is the outlier in Gulf affairs since its views are rarely in sync with those of its partners. Qatar's rulers are staunch supporters of the Brotherhood in Egypt and its various affiliates in West Asia. In an attempt to get it to correct its positions, Saudi Arabia and its allies cut diplomatic ties with Qatar in June 2017, and subjected it to an onerous logistical blockade. This continued for over three years, till it was unexpectedly relieved, largely at Saudi initiative, in November 2020, though there is no indication of any change in Qatar's policies.

In the pursuit of its agenda, Qatar has been working closely with Turkey. When the blockade was initiated, Turkey (and Iran) backed Qatar with immediate supplies. More importantly, in the face of a possible threat of regime change coming from Saudi Arabia, Turkey placed its troops in Doha to protect the ruler and his family.

Turkey's ruling party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), is an Islamist party, which has been in power since=2002. Its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan has shaped his politics on political Islam. He has linked this with the glory of Ottoman rule which, in his view, reflects Turkish military and political successes, and with the sultan as caliph, its spiritual leadership of the Muslim world.

Erdogan poses a doctrinal and military challenge to Saudi Arabia by painting the kingdom as "Wahhabi" and, thus, rigid, doctrinaire, and the source of extremist thought. He projects Turkey as modern, moderate, and democratic (though his rule is being increasingly viewed as authoritarian). He has

complemented Turkey's doctrinal claims with a region-wide military outreach - Turkish troops are today deployed in Qatar, Syria, Iraq and Libya, even as its navy is challenging the littoral states in the East Mediterranean.

These deployments are a mix of security concerns and Islamist interests. In Syria, Erdogan has positioned Turkish troops around Idlib to protect the Islamist militants from different groups, including Jabhat Nusra, in the hope that they would join a Turkish-sponsored militia that would ensure Turkey's interests against Assad and the Kurds, over the long term.

Turkey's interests and actions in Libya are overtly Islamist. Here, Turkey is backing the Tripoli-based 'Government of National Accord' (GNA), that is influenced by the Brotherhood, against the Tobruk-based 'House of Representatives' (HOR), whose military forces are backed by Egypt and the UAE. Erdogan has also used his links with the GNA to obtain a maritime agreement that gives Turkey control over large areas of the waters of the eastern Mediterranean.

Jihad in Regional Confrontations

The US assault on Iraq, and the subsequent empowerment of the majority Shia population, led to a lethal jihadi movement in Iraq, headed by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian national who was a veteran of the Afghan conflict in 1989 and then again between 1999-2001. Zarqawi initially affiliated his organisation with Al Qaeda, and called it 'Al Qaeda in Iraq'. After he was killed in 2006, his successors renamed the body the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), emphasising its independence from Al Qaeda, and its aim to set up an 'Islamic state' in Iraq. After several setbacks, it was rejuvenated in 2010 under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Baghdadi consolidated the ISI in the Sunni-majority Anbar province and then, in a dramatic move in June 2014, took Mosul, Iraq's second city after the capital. He declared the territory under his control the "Islamic State", and a "caliphate" under his leadership.

Within two years, the Islamic State had territory across Iraq and Syria which was the size of the UK, a standing military force of 200,000, a functioning government, and revenues of several million dollars per month. It attracted about 30,000 militants from outside Iraq and Syria, including several neighbouring Arab countries, North Africa, Central and Southeast Asia, and even Europe. By 2018, the 'state' was destroyed by government forces in Iraq, and by Kurdish fighters armed and trained by the USA in Syria.

The "Second Wave" of Arab Spring Uprisings

From December 2018, just when it appeared that the Arab Spring uprisings had been effectively put down with brute force, with only Tunisia, with a democratic constitution showing any sign of real change, a "second wave" of uprisings occurred in four other Arab countries—Sudan, Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon. According to Asef Bayat, these uprisings affirmed that "the Arab Spring did not die",¹⁷ while Dalia Ghanem of Carnegie Middle Centre described them as "a new season of discontent"¹⁸.

The ignition for these uprisings was the same as before: the deep socio-economic malaise, crony capitalism and corruption, and the sustained failure of the rulers to provide employment and basic services to their people. These fresh uprisings took place in diverse national contexts, but it soon became clear that the protestors had learnt important lessons from the earlier uprisings - not to call off the demonstrations till real change in the political order had been obtained and, at all times, to remain peaceful and united despite provocations from the rulers.

The protests began in Sudan in December 2018, following a government decision to triple the price of goods at a time when the country was suffering an acute shortage of foreign currency and inflation of 70 percent. President Omar al-Bashir, who had been in power for more than thirty years, initially used force to quell the demonstrations. In the face of continued agitations, the armed forces stepped in on 11 April 2019, and declared that the President had been overthrown and was under house arrest. Sudan now came to be governed by the 'Transitional Military Council' that was made up of the country's senior military officers. Despite the coup, the protests continued with a massive sit-in in front of the army headquarters, demanding: "Freedom, peace, justice."

These agitations were spearheaded by the "Sudanese Professionals Association" (SPA), an umbrella association of 17 different Sudanese professional groups and trade unions. Despite a massive show of force by the armed forces and the killing of about a hundred protestors, the SPA called on the demonstrators to follow the method of nonviolent resistance "in all [their] direct actions, towards change". The protests came to an end when the "Forces for Freedom and Change"—an alliance of groups organising the protests and the Transitional Military Council—signed the July 2019 Political Agreement and the August 2019 Draft Constitutional Declaration; government now came to be controlled by the 'Sovereignty Council'. The council has eleven members—five military, five civilians, and one elected

jointly by the other members. The council will be headed by a military officer for the first 21 months, and a civilian for the next 18 months.

The new Prime Minister, Abdalla Hamdok, an economist who worked previously for the UN Economic Commission for Africa, was sworn in on 21 August. On 3 September, Hamdok appointed 14 civilian ministers, including the first female foreign minister and the first Coptic Christian, also a woman.

In Algeria, popular agitations, referred to as “Hirak”, began in February 2019 to protest the announcement of President Abdelaziz Bouteflicka that he would be seeking a fifth term in office. Under popular pressure, Bouteflicka stepped down on 2 April 2019, and many of his immediate associates were tried and jailed. But Hirak’s demands now expanded to a complete overhaul of the political order that had been controlled by the armed forces and marked by corruption, nepotism and repression, and its replacement by a genuine democratic system. However, against Hirak’s wishes, the army pushed for presidential elections that brought Abdelmajid Tebboune, an old Bouteflicka associate, to high office.

Taking advantage of a suspension of the demonstrations in March 2020 due to the pandemic, Tebboune appointed a body of experts to frame a new constitution. A national referendum to approve this document was held on 1 November 2020. The turnout for the referendum remained modest at best: just 24 percent of an electorate of 25 million voted, of which 66 percent approved the constitution.

Tebboune was anxious to declare that Hirak had completed its mission. The preamble of the constitution said that it was a reflection of the “will of the people” expressed through its “authentic blessed Hirak” which had “put an end to [past] errors”. However, the constitution has not impressed the votaries of change. It was not prepared by an elected constituent assembly and it retained a powerful presidency by giving it substantial executive, legislative, and judicial powers.

Popular protests against corruption, violence, and poor public services rocked Iraq from July 2018, beginning in Baghdad and Najaf, and then spreading to other provinces in late September 2019. After a short lull, protests started again on 1 October 2019, escalating into calls to end the existing political system, that is based on an ethno-sectarian “spoils’ system”, and its replacement by an authentic democracy, as well as the restoration of Iraq’s sovereignty by ending foreign interference in Iraqi affairs. Violence by security forces, backed by Shia militia, and sharp criticism from Grand Ayatollah Ali

Sistani, in October 2019, led to the resignation of Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi and his cabinet.

Mustafa Al Kadhimi became Prime Minister on 9 April 2020, after three previous candidates failed to obtain a parliamentary majority. Kadhimi has promised parliamentary elections in June 2021 under new electoral rules that will provide for single-member constituencies. But he has not yet won the backing of Iraq's politicians who have benefitted from the old corrupt order.

Lebanese affairs are controlled by an oligarchy of the country's political and business elites who, as a commentator has recently noted, "have divided the country's public and private sectors between themselves and created a system in which they can extract rent on virtually any economic activity"¹⁹.

On 17 October 2019, the first of a series of mass civil demonstrations erupted in Lebanon. They were initially triggered by planned taxes on gasoline, tobacco, and online phone calls such as through WhatsApp; but they quickly expanded into a country-wide condemnation of sectarian rule, the stagnant economy, unemployment, endemic corruption in the public sector, and the failures of the government to provide basic services such as electricity, water, and sanitation.

As a result of the protests, Lebanon entered into a political crisis, with Prime Minister Saad Hariri tendering his resignation and echoing the protestors' demands for a government of independent technocrats. On 19 December 2019, former Minister of Education, Hassan Diab, was designated the next Prime Minister and tasked with forming a new cabinet.

Through 2020, the country's economic situation worsened. In June 2020, the outgoing economy minister, Raoul Nehme, announced that 60 percent of Lebanese would find themselves below the poverty line by the end of the year. In July 2020, the price of food items and non-alcoholic beverages increased by 24 percent compared to the previous month, and by more than 330 percent compared to July 2019.

On 4 August 2020, an explosion at the port of Beirut destroyed the surrounding areas, killing more than 200 people, and injuring thousands more. Less than a week after the explosion, on 10 August 2020, the Prime Minister resigned. Since then, government formation has not been possible due to the splintered nature of Lebanese politics that is based on a confessional-sectarian distribution of seats in the assembly, and is divided between nineteen political parties, with each potential coalition partner demanding specific cabinet positions.

The “second wave” of the Arab Spring uprisings ended in early 2020 due to restrictions imposed by the pandemic. The uprisings led to the departure of four incumbent heads of state or government, but did not achieve fundamental changes in the national order that had been demanded by the protestors.

Conclusion

Ten years after Bouazizi’s self-immolation and the departure of Tunisia’s President, an overview of WANA reveals a dismal scenario. Major states-Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Libya-have experienced extraordinary violence, with no end in sight for the ongoing contentions, several hundred thousand persons have been killed, millions have been displaced, and the states are going through severe humanitarian crises. In this scenario, it is easier to speak of an Arab “winter of despair” rather than of an Arab Spring.

The authoritarian Arab regimes in power have shown an extraordinary capacity for survival. They have used different instruments and approaches for co-option and, more frequently, coercion, the abuse of human rights at home, and a cynical use of sectarian sentiments to mobilise support. They have also exhibited their great propensity for violence against fellow Arabs - against sectarian enemies, and those from rival expressions of political Islam. The last decade has confirmed that the existing political order cannot be reformed; it has to be rooted out if real change is to occur.

And yet, this authoritarian order lacks inherent resilience. As Marc Lynch has noted, “as long as such regimes form the backbone of the regional order, there will be no stability”²⁰. This is largely because, despite the coercion and violence, the sources of popular discontent remain as before. By around 2030, WANA will need 60-100 million new jobs. Egypt alone will need to create 3.5 million new jobs over the next five years. This is clearly beyond the capacity of the regimes in place, so that, as Paul Aarts has said, “an army of long-term unemployed people will come into being” who will, in all likelihood, be seen as a threat to incumbent regimes²¹.

The last decade in WANA has also suggested that political Islam, in all its three expressions has eroded considerably in appeal. Saudi Arabia, for instance, has understood the limits of maintaining a coercive and intrusive order on the basis of an avowed “true” Islam, and is presently seeking to anchor royal legitimacy in moderate Islam and appeals to nationalism²².

The Brotherhood in Egypt, presently underground and in exile, is in the throes of internal introspection, with at least some of its intellectuals looking

to reshape its entire ideological base with fresh ideas that address issues of concern to developing countries—issues such as ethno-nationalist, communal and sectarian divisions, neoliberal economic policies and inequality, food security, environmental degradation, etc. As Abdullah Al-Arian has astutely observed, “the more politically successful Islamists become, the more likely they are to shed any vestiges of their core identity”²³. Ghannouchi of Tunisia has declared that the Ennahda is no longer an Islamist party.

Popular opinion remains supportive of the Arab Spring uprisings. An Arab opinion poll of 2016 showed that most Arab people had positive attitudes: Egypt (78 percent); Tunisia (71 percent); Saudi Arabia (55 percent). They also had very positive attitudes toward democracy: 77 percent wanted to have a democratic order in their own country, while 72 percent thought democracy was better than its alternatives²⁴. A later 2019-20 Arab opinion poll again showed that 76 percent preferred a democratic government; 58 percent felt the uprisings had been positive events, and only 30 percent believed that, with the victory of the ruling regimes, the Spring was over²⁵.

There is, therefore, little reason for pessimism. The Arab Spring uprisings are not a single movement, with a single-point programme. They are, as Gilbert Achcar has said, “a long-drawn revolutionary process” that is seeking a total overhaul of the Arab order²⁶. Marc Lynch has reminded us that democracy was just one demand of the demonstrators. Their struggle, he says, was one that had gone on over generations to reject a regional order that was mired in corruption, and had failed both politically and economically. In that sense, the two waves of the Arab Spring “have profoundly reshaped every conceivable dimension of Arab politics, individual attitudes, political systems, ideologies, and international relations”.

The first wave of Arab Spring uprisings created “a culture of political activism and dissent”; the second wave has affirmed that the movements for change are founded on a wide but cohesive support-base. They are now better-organised, with leaders and a programme, as well as agitators who are patient, persistent, and unafraid.

The third wave of the uprisings could be with us sooner than we expect.

Notes:

¹ Elena Ianchovichina, “Eruptions of Popular Anger: The Economic of the Arab Spring and its aftermath”, MENA Development Report, World Bank, Washington DC, 2018, p. 12, at <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/251971512654536291/eruptions-of-popular-anger-the-economics-of-the-arab-spring-and-its-aftermath> assessed on January 14, 2021

- ² James L. Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 11
- ³ Gelvin, p. 18
- ⁴ Gelvin, p. 22
- ⁵ Ali Kadri, “A Depressive Pre-Arab Uprisings Economic Performance”, in Fawaz Gerges, *The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 90
- ⁶ Ianchovichina, p. 12
- ⁷ Ianchovichina, p. 14
- ⁸ Ashley Smith, “After the pandemic subsides, we may see a third wave of the Arab Spring”, Truthout, 17 January 2021, at <https://truthout.org/articles/after-the-pandemic-subsides-we-may-see-a-third-wave-of-the-arab-spring/> assessed on January 20, 2021
- ⁹ Fawaz Gerges, “A Rupture”, in Gerges, op. cit., p. 4
- ¹⁰ Mehran Kamrava, *Inside the Arab State*, London: Hurst and Company, 2018, p. 173.
- ¹¹ Fanar Haddad, *Understanding ‘Sectarianism’: Sunni-Shi’a Relations in the Modern Arab World*, London: Hurst and Company, 2020, p. 219
- ¹² Haddad, p. 228
- ¹³ Haddad, p. 275
- ¹⁴ The Alawi of Syria are a secretive, esoteric sect that were recognised in 1974 as a community of Twelver Shiite Muslims through a fatwa issued by Musa al-Sadr, the leader of the Twelver Shia in Lebanon.
- ¹⁵ Haddad, p. 258
- ¹⁶ For details see, Frederic Volpi (ed.), *Political Islam: A critical reader*, Oxford, UK: Routledge, 2011.
- ¹⁷ Ibrahim Chalhoub, “The Arab Spring did not die: A second wave of Mideast protests”, AFP, 30 November 2020, at <https://www.enca.com/analysis/arab-spring-did-not-die-second-wave-mideast-protests> accessed on January 20, 2021
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- ²⁷ Marc Lynch, *op. cit.*
- ²⁸ Maha Yahya, “The Middle East’s Lost Decades”, *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2019 at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2019-10-15/middle-east-lost-decades> assessed on January 12, 2021

