

THE ARAB SPRING:
PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

EDITED BY
ŞENER AKTÜRK
TAREK CHERKAOUI

TRT WORLD
research centre

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Foreword

Mehmet Zahid Sobacı
TRT, Director General

As the world, and our region in particular, continue to reflect on the historical significance of the events that came to be known as the Arab Spring, *The Arab Spring: Past, Present, and Future* offers a deeply reflective exploration of its historical roots, its successes and failings, and its consequences for the region today and in the future.

In the course of the last decade, the Middle East has witnessed profound change. While some of those changes have undoubtedly given cause for hope, an honest and sober assessment of the present situation across the Arab Spring geography will inevitably conclude that, taken as a whole, the events of the last decade have left the region in a more challenging and difficult state than when they began. Thus, it is arguably more important than ever to undertake an accounting of the past decade in order to understand how and why the countries that experienced the so-called Arab Spring, in all its various phases and forms, are where they are today. As several chapters in the present volume point out, the effects of the Arab Spring as well as its historical antecedents continue to impact the region, more often than not, for the worse. It is for precisely this reason that the contents of this edited volume continue to be relevant, particularly as the region continues to grapple with shifting regional dynamics and an emerging international scene characterised by multipolarity and the return of great power politics.

The present volume has brought together a diverse array of scholars and researchers from around the world to explore and examine both the historical and present implications and ramifications of the Arab Spring on the strategic, political, and diplomatic dynamics of the Middle East. The authors who contributed to this TRT World Research Centre publication, co-edited by Prof. Şener Aktürk and Dr. Tarek Cherkaoui shared their

expertise in exploring topics ranging from macro-level reflections on the successes and failures of the last decade in the region, to longue-durée historical perspectives, including an attempt to situate the Arab Spring in its world historical context. The volume also includes numerous chapters exploring country-specific dynamics from Syria and Libya to Lebanon and Algeria.

Through its broad range of topics, breadth of perspectives, and diversity of voices, the present volume presents a significant contribution to the scholarly literature on the contemporary Middle East in general and the Arab Spring in particular. It is my sincere hope that the chapters included in this volume will not only broaden the intellectual horizons of their readers, but also open avenues for further discussions amongst academics, researchers, analysts, and policymakers as the region continues to struggle with numerous challenges and underlying grievances exacerbated by acute global instability resulting from, in no small part, the ongoing Russian war on Ukraine. I am proud of the work that continues to be thoughtfully undertaken by our colleagues at the TRT World Research Centre on this project and beyond and hopeful that the present volume will serve to enrich the scholarly discussions for years to come on some of the most critical aspects of the legacy of the Arab Spring.

Preface

Şener Aktürk
Tarek Cherkaoui

Major parts of this book project were completed in 2021 as part of a long-term project spearheaded by the TRT World Research Centre. This also means that many chapters were completed during the second year of the pandemic, which was an unprecedented experience for many people around the world, which includes our contributing authors. First and foremost, we thank the eleven contributing authors who responded positively to our invitation and submitted their chapters under time pressure in such unpredictable times. We also thank them for responding positively and promptly to all feedback throughout the production process. In addition to being a contributing author, Michael Arnold carefully proofread and commented on all the chapters. We would like to thank also the senior management of the Education and Research Department of TRT (current and former) for allowing us to conduct this project commemorating the 10th anniversary of the Arab Spring.

The Middle East in general, and the specific countries and the processes that are discussed throughout this book, underwent major changes during the writing and production of this book, which undoubtedly posed formidable challenges for our analyses. This is the well-known risk of examining ongoing processes, but a risk that we have taken nonetheless, and one that makes many of our conclusions necessarily provisional. Our only major regret is that, despite having invited more women than men to participate in this collaborative endeavour, our contributing authors include only one woman.

Looking at the past, present, and equally importantly, the future of the Arab Spring, this edited volume provides reasons for cautious optimism

despite broken promises, betrayals, mass suffering, and international apathy that the chapters of this book record and explain from different angles. The catastrophic destruction of the Second World War gave birth to the most impressive scheme of regional integration in Europe, which finds its institutional embodiment in the European Union. We hope that the current doom and gloom in the aftermath of the first Arab Spring will motivate and enable similar, if not even more robust forms of peaceful cooperation, prosperity, and reconstruction in the region.

Notes on Contributors

Şener Aktürk is a Professor in the Department of International Relations at Koç University. He is a scholar of comparative politics, with a focus on comparative politics of ethnicity, religion, and nationalism. After completing his BA and MA at the University of Chicago and his PhD in political science at the University of California, Berkeley, he was a postdoctoral fellow at the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies and a Visiting Lecturer at the Department of Government at Harvard University. His book, *Regimes of Ethnicity and Nationhood in Germany, Russia, and Türkiye* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), received the 2013 Joseph Rothschild book prize from the Association for the Study of Nationalities. His articles were published in *World Politics, Perspectives on Politics, Comparative Politics, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, Post-Soviet Affairs, Mediterranean Politics, Social Science Quarterly, European Journal of Sociology, Nationalities Papers, Problems of Post-Communism, Turkish Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, Osteuropa, Theoria, Ab Imperio, All Azimuth, Insight Türkiye, Turkish Policy Quarterly, Central Eurasian Studies Review, Perceptions,* and various edited books. He is the recipient of the Peter Odegard Award, Marie Curie International Reintegration Grant, Baki Komsuoglu Social Sciences Encouragement Award, Kadir Has Social Sciences Prize, TUBA Young Scientist Award, BAGEP Science Academy Award, and TUBİTAK Incentive Prize.

Michael Arnold is an analyst and researcher focused on the geopolitics of the Middle East. His work focuses on great power competition in the Middle East, modern Arab and Middle Eastern political and social history – with a particular focus on Lebanon -, the nexus of religious and political authority in the Arab world and the history of Islamic thought. He is currently a researcher and editor at the TRT World Research Centre and a PhD candidate in Arab and Middle East history at the American University of Beirut.

François Burgat is a political scientist and Arabist, Emeritus Senior Research Fellow (Directeur de recherches émérite) at the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) posted at IREMAM (Institut de recherches et d'études sur le monde arabe et musulman) in Aix-en-Provence. Former head of the French Centre for Archaeology and Social Sciences in Sanaa (CEFAS 1997-2003) and of the French Institute in the Near East in Damascus (Ifpo 2008-2013), he has also been the Principal Investigator of the European Research Council (ERC) Research Program "When Authoritarianism Fails in the Arab World" (WAFAW 2013-2017). His latest book is *Understanding Political Islam* (Manchester University Press 2020). He is also a member of the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR).

Ali Bakir is a research assistant professor at Qatar University's Ibn Khaldon Center for Humanities and Social Sciences. Before joining Qatar University, he worked as a senior adviser at Qatar's Embassy in Ankara, head of the Gulf Studies Unit at the Middle East Studies Centre (ORSAM), senior researcher at the Centre for Middle Eastern and North African Studies of the International Strategic Research Organisation, and a researcher and senior editor at (AIWA) Group for defence and economy. As a political analyst and consultant, Dr. Bakir has more than a decade of professional experience working with senior officials, decision-makers, and stakeholders for governmental, non-governmental, and private sector institutions. He had his education, fieldwork, and work experience in several countries, including Kuwait, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Türkiye, and Qatar. Bakir is specialised in geopolitics and security trends in the Middle East. His areas of expertise include IR, Middle Eastern Politics, Great Power Politics in the Middle East, and Foreign Policy Analysis. He focuses on issues such as Turkiye's foreign and defence policies, Turkiye- Arab/Gulf relations, as well as small states' foreign and defence policies – Qatar-. Bakir has been featured as an expert at various international conferences, panels, and workshops, including those held by RAND, Carnegie Endowment-MEC, Brookings-Doha, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, and Friedrich Naumann Foundation, among others.

Richard Falk is Milbank Professor of International Law Emeritus at Princeton University and is currently Chair of Global Law, Queen Mary University London, and Research Fellow, Orfalea Center of Global Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara. His most recent book is *Public Intellectual: The Life of a Citizen Pilgrim* (2021). He served as UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Occupied Palestine for the Human Rights Council from 2008-14. He is currently completing a book with Hans von Sponeck devoted to a realistic approach to strengthen the United Nations. Falk also serves as Senior Vice President of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, was co-founder with David Whyte of the Centre of Environmental Crime at Queen Mary, and is acting as co-director with Augusto Lopez-Clarros of a project on Global Governance in the contexts of weaponry and dispute settlement. He published a book of poems in 2015 entitled *Waiting for Rainbows* and is currently working on a new collection. Falk's views on contemporary global issues can be found on his blog, -Justice in the 21st Century,' <richardfalk.wordpress.com>. Furthermore, an edited book of essays evaluating his work has been recently published under the title *Justice and World Order*.

Nur Günay got her bachelor's degree from the Department of International Relations at Dokuz Eylül University. She is currently pursuing her master's degree at the Turkish National Police Academy, Department of International Security. Mainly focusing on Syria and Iraq, Günay has carried out studies on terrorism, counterterrorism, and Türkiye's Middle East policy as well. She works as a researcher in projects carried out within the scope of security studies of various governmental agencies.

Mujeeb R. Khan is an American Muslim who was a Fulbright Research-Scholar in the Persian Gulf and has published widely on the politics and history of the modern Muslim World, drawing on field work conducted in Arabic, Turkish, Serbo-Croatian-Bosnian, and Hindi-Urdu. He holds advanced degrees in Political Science from the University of Chicago and UC Berkeley. His latest scholarly publication was the framework chapter in the main English language academic work on the Gulenist Coup attempt: "Türkiye's July 15 Coup: What Happened and Why?" University of Utah Press, 2018, which he helped organise and edit. From 1992-1995 he also helped organize opposition to the genocide of Bosnian Muslims in the US, Türkiye, and the Persian Gulf, which he alludes to in his current chapter.

M. Tahir Kilavuz is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Marmara University. His research interests include authoritarianism, regime change, religion and politics, and survey analysis, both in the MENA and in the cross-regional setting. More specifically, he examines the durability of authoritarian regimes and transitions both to other types of dictatorship and to democracy, with a particular emphasis on how institutions shape and constrain the behaviour of political regimes and the masses. He received his PhD in Political Science from the University of Notre Dame in 2019 and MA from Koç University. He also served as a post-doctoral research fellow at the Belfer Centre's Middle East Initiative at Harvard University.

Idlir Lika is an Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Ibn Haldun University. He received a BSc from Middle East Technical University, an MA degree from Bilkent University and a PhD in International Relations from Koç University. Lika specialises in comparative politics of ethnicity and nationalism with a regional focus on Southeast European / Balkan countries. The article version of his dissertation "Nationhood cleavages and ethnic conflict: a comparative analysis of postcommunist Bulgaria, Montenegro and North Macedonia," published in *Mediterranean Politics,* was selected as runner-up for the 2021 "Richard Gillespie Mediterranean Prize". His research has been published in top area studies journals such as *Mediterranean Politics*, *Problems of Post-Communism* and *Ethnic and Racial Studies*.

Ziad Majed is the Elliott E. Burdette Professor at the American University of Paris. He teaches History, Politics and International Relations and writes on Lebanese, Syrian, Palestinian and Arab affairs as well as on regional political transitions and crises. After graduating in Economics from the American University of Beirut, he obtained a Master's degree in Arabic Literature, then a PhD in Political Science from Sciences Po Paris. Majed has been involved since 1994 in research work and reform campaigns related to political processes, civil society causes in Lebanon and other Arab countries. For the last twenty years, he has been regularly publishing articles and papers in Arabic (in Now Lebanon, Al-Quds al-Arabi, Al-Hayat, Aljazeera Centre for Studies, the Journal of Palestine Studies, Daraj and Megaphone) and in French (in L'Orient Littéraire, Mediapart, Le Monde, L'Express, Libération and AOC). He is a board member in Lebanese and French cultural institutes, and a lecturer at international festivals and annual conferences. His books include "Syrie, la révolution orpheline", published in Arabic, French and - in an updated version - in German, and "Dans la tête de Bachar Al-Assad" (with Subhi Hadidi and Farouk Mardam-Bey) in French.

Ömer Özkizilcik is an independent foreign policy and security analyst based in Ankara. Ömer Özkizilcik's main focus is on Turkish foreign policy and the conflict in Syria. He has extensive studies about the non-state armed groups in Syria and the policies of different stakeholders in Syria. Furthermore, Özkizilcik also publishes research about counter-terrorism and military operations. In addition to publications, he regularly contributes to different media outlets. Ömer Özkizilcik has worked at the security research department of the SETA Foundation in Ankara and the Middle East Foundation in Ankara. He also worked as the editor-in-chief of Suriye Gündemi.

Ferhat Polat is a recipient of the prestigious Chevening Scholarship (2021-2022) and an MA candidate in Middle East Studies at the University of Exeter. He is also a Researcher at the TRT World Research Centre, specialising in North African geopolitics and security and focusing on Libyan affairs. Skilled in international relations, policy analysis, governance, and project management, he is regularly invited as a commentator on news channels. He has written a number of essays and articles on geopolitical issues, which have been published in various respected journals, newspapers, and digital outlets.

Tarek Cherkaoui is the manager of the TRT World Research Centre. Dr. Cherkaoui is an expert in the field of strategic communications analysis. He is the author of "The News Media at War: The Clash of Western and Arab Networks in the Middle East" (I.B. Tauris, 2017). Dr Cherkaoui holds a PhD in media and communication from the Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand. His broader research themes include international relations, strategic communications, public diplomacy, and media-military relations—specifically within a Middle Eastern context.

Introductory Chapter

The Arab Spring: Patterns and Predictions

Şener Aktürk
Tarek Cherkaoui

We are delighted to introduce this edited volume, the result of a collaborative work of twelve scholars working on various aspects of the Arab Spring, offering different perspectives, insights and interpretations, and reflecting different disciplinary, methodological, and theoretical orientations. Our contributing authors hail from Canada, France, Qatar, Türkiye, and the United States, and they include distinguished senior scholars as well as junior researchers, many of them with numerous publications and fieldwork in the Middle East, North Africa, and/or the Balkans. Moreover, for a collaborative effort of this kind, we are extremely grateful to the contributing authors for their prompt and positive responses throughout this process.

The chapter structure of the current book follows a thematic and geographic logic, comprising five chapters dealing with the Arab Spring in numerous countries from a comparative political historical perspective and seven chapters focusing on the repercussions of the Arab Spring in specific countries or regions. The first four chapters offer comparative historical evaluations of the Arab Spring on its 10th anniversary. These four chapters are followed by three chapters focusing on Syria, which may be considered a kaleidoscope of the Arab Spring, reflecting multiple domestic and international patterns and actors, including the direct military intervention of at least half a dozen regional and global powers. The chapters on Syria are followed by chapters on Libya, Algeria, Lebanon, and the Balkans. The twelfth and final chapter is another comparative historical chapter seeking to assess the world-historical significance of the Arab Spring.

More than ten years after it began, there are numerous thought-provoking questions about the Arab Spring, which include but are not limited to the following: Why did the Arab Spring produce so few democracies? Were external or internal factors more responsible for this alleged "failure"? What is the future of the popular democratic opposition movements in the countries that underwent major uprisings followed by violent repression by reinvigorated authoritarian regimes? What may be the future role of the Arab opposition in exile? Are there any non-Arab countries that are likely to provide a major external push for democratisation in the Middle East and North Africa in the near future? What are the international ramifications of the Arab Spring's alleged "failure" in its first decade? Did this process strengthen or weaken the position of the United States, France, Russia, Iran, Türkiye, and the United Kingdom in the Arab world? What is the future of the Arab Spring in its second decade and beyond?

In the opening chapter of the book, François **Burgat** offers ten important lessons about the Arab Spring. In terms of "timescale," Burgat reminds us that "France took nearly three-quarters of a century to complete the transition from an absolutist monarchy based on divine law to a secular Republic that is more-or-less inclusive and remains thoroughly imperfect," and thus, it is immature to declare the Arab Spring a "failure" merely a decade after it began. Second, in an ontological intervention, he asks why this phenomenon has been labelled as the "Arab" Spring, even though Arabness as an ethnocultural or nationalist factor was not the main motivation or the main discourse of legitimation of these revolutionary protest movements. If anything, any emphasis on ethnic and linguistic identities served to split the revolutionary movements along Arab and non-Arab (e.g., Berber, Kurdish) fault lines, and hence has been utilised by the counterrevolutionary actors, with catastrophic success in Syria, for example. These revolutionary protest movements could have been alternatively labelled as Islamic (or Islamist) and democratic, instead of, or at least in addition to, being "Arab." Third,

the limits of legitimacy and power gained through electoral democracy ("ballot box") were tragically exposed, especially in Egypt, where the "deep state" usurped even the very limited, circumscribed executive power that was briefly conceded to the country's first and only elected president, the late Mohammad Morsi. Fourth, the numerous coalitions of the Islamists with various leftist and secular factions collapsed in the face of the Islamists' landslide electoral victories in contrast to the relative electoral insignificance of the Arab left, such that "the great symbols of Egypt's historic left and civil society—Samir Amin, Alaa el-Aswany, etc.—spectacularly fell into the lap of authoritarianism." Fifth, the "omnipresent diversity" of Islamism(s) was observable in every country affected by the "Arab" Spring, wherein "the vocabulary of opposition was displaced from ethnic Arab nationalism towards Muslim religious belonging." Sixth, the international actors quickly and decisively weighed in *against* the Arab revolutionaries, and played a critical role in suppressing and subverting these anti-authoritarian uprisings. Seventh, for one such key international actor, France, the persistent if not obsessive rejection of "political Islam" seems to be the underlying pattern of policies adopted toward the Arab Spring. Eighth, "ethnic or confessional sectarianism," whether in the guise of Sunni-Shiite or Arab-Kurdish strife, has been a key tool of the regimes seeking to suppress the Arab Spring, rather than an emancipatory discourse in support of its proto-democratic ethos. Ninth, the Arab Spring demonstrated once again that the so-called "jihadi" variety of extremism has been intertwined with foreign interventions, and such extremism almost always exploits, if it is not directly a result of, lack of substantive political representation by certain segments of society. Tenth and relatedly, the responsibility for these failures of political representation in various Middle Eastern societies lies primarily with local actors, which, perhaps unsurprisingly, were also the ones mobilised to suppress the Arab Spring uprisings.

In his reflections on the Arab Spring ten years after, Richard **Falk** (Chapter 2) also notes "the apparent failure of the First Arab Spring," with the implication that a second, and hopefully more substantively successful, Arab Spring may be expected in the coming years. On the other hand, he critically notes that both the deep problems that prompted the first Arab Spring are even deeper a decade later, and that global changes (such as the effort to lessen the dependence on fossil fuels) and newer structural challenges (such as climate change) further disadvantage the countries of the Middle East and North Africa. Falk further notes a previously unthinkable development, namely, the open collaboration of a number of Arab states, spearheaded by the United Arab Emirates, with Israel, without any comprehensive solution to the plight of the Palestinians either within the occupied territories or in the diaspora. Falk also draws lessons from the post-revolutionary experiences of the Soviet Union and Iran for the Arab revolutions. A particularly useful lens through which to analyse the Arab Spring is the framework of comparative revolutions, especially since these developments are known as the Arab revolutions to many of the actors who participated in them. Comparative historical study of revolutions is arguably one of the most developed thematic subfields of social sciences, an area of study that also benefited from the study of Middle Eastern and North African cases in the past [1]. It is indeed useful to approach the allegedly failed Arab revolutions in their first decade by using comparative political historical lessons from such studies, while also amending the shortcomings of such studies based on this experience. For example, most contributions in this volume undoubtedly highlight the critical importance of international actors in shaping the trajectory of the Arab revolutions very soon after they began.

In analysing the first decade of the Arab Spring, Mujeeb R. **Khan** (Chapter 3) adopts a long-term perspective in "The Two Hundred Year Crisis 1821-2021: The Fragmentation of the Ottoman State, Ongoing Western Imperialism, and the Tragedy of the Modern Muslim World,"

which is perhaps unsurprisingly the longest chapter of the current volume. With reference to the French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius, Khan critically notes Obama's refusal "to enforce his own chemical weapons redline in August 2013" as a critical turning point, "which gave Vladimir Putin the greenlight to capture Crimea a year later." In another critical observation, Khan argues against Gary Bass's claim that humanitarian interventions were "universalized" despite having their origins in Western interventions on behalf of Ottoman Christians, since the current plight of Muslims across the world, from Palestine and Syria to Myanmar and Xinjiang amply demonstrate that Western powers do not intervene to protect Muslims from mass killings. Not only that the Western powers do not intervene to protect Muslims, Khan argues, but they have been actively abetting and collaborating with repressive regimes committing mass atrocities against Muslim populations. In addition to the more general diplomatic and political role that the Western powers played in rolling back the Arab Spring in Egypt, Syria, and elsewhere, Khan also gives the examples of Australian and U.S. generals employed by the United Arab Emirates to command their military forces, which have been accused of war crimes in Yemen. The failed coup in Türkiye is also discussed as part of the counterrevolutionary effort to defeat and silence the supporters of the Arab uprisings against authoritarianism, since Türkiye remained as the most prominent supporter of popular democratic rule in Egypt, Libya, Syria, and elsewhere in the Arab world, long after the United States and other major Western powers abandoned such a goal even at the rhetorical level.

In "Revisiting the Arab Uprisings on their 10th anniversary: Reflections on the internal dynamics and foreign interventions" (Chapter 4) Ali **Bakir** seeks to explain why the Arab Spring produced so few democracies, if any, which is in many ways the main question for most if not all contributions to this volume. He critically notes that after a brief upsurge of democratic optimism in the early 2010s, the "counter-

revolutionary forces such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the Assad regime in Syria, Libya's most potent warlord Khalifa Haftar, and Iran seemed to have the upper hand." Bakir also emphasises, however, that there has been a second wave of uprisings, observable in 2018 and 2019, when "Sudan, Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon, witnessed massive protests demanding change," which is a cause for cautious optimism. These second-wave protests also had significant results in that the leaders of Algeria and Sudan, Abdelaziz Bouteflika and Omar al-Bashir, who have been in power for roughly two and three decades, respectively, both left power albeit under different circumstances, and the protests also led to somewhat less dramatic changes in the configurations of power in Iraq and Lebanon. Relatedly, it is also noteworthy that both the first and the second wave of the Arab Spring resulted in the removal of leaders in Arab countries of North Africa (Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Sudan), but no such change in leadership occurred elsewhere in the Arab world, namely, in the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula, including the Gulf. Bakir notes that ten years is too short for a definitive assessment, and that these uprisings were "half-revolutions" in the sense that they had very much non-violent beginnings (unlike most paradigmatic cases of revolutions in history) and did not achieve (nor even seek) very radical transformations. He further emphasises the critical role of the "unholy alliance" that brought powerful domestic and international actors together to defeat and suppress the Arab uprisings.

The volume contains three chapters specifically addressing the trajectory of the revolutionary uprisings in Syria. In "The Betrayed Revolution in Syria" (Chapter 5), Ziad **Majed** focuses on the suppression of the revolutionary uprisings in Syria, and narrates the story of Syria's betrayed or orphaned revolution in "nine summer upheavals," beginning with the summer of 2011, when the "signs of armed struggle appeared - following the defection of soldiers who refused to shoot their own people." In the following summer (2012), the opposition took control of eastern Aleppo and southern and northeastern suburbs

(Ghoutas) of Damascus, the capital. After the regime continued to lose significant territories to the opposition, the summer of 2013 appears to be the critical turning point for the worse, when the Assad regime used chemical weapons in the suburbs (Ghoutas) of Damascus, thus crossing the only red line drawn by the Obama administration, and killing more than 1,500 civilians. Despite the massacre in Ghouta, and despite their previous declarations to the contrary, the Assad regime met with no military response from the United States or France, which could have deterred its atrocious transgressions in the future. The summer of 2014 witnessed another insidious turn of events with the meteoric and enigmatic rise of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS/Daesh), which splintered the opposition, capturing much of eastern and northern Syria that was previously controlled by the opposition. This strange development also created the reason, or at least the pretext, for Western actors to intervene in Syria, not to support the opposition but in the name of fighting terrorism, all the while supporting an allegedly Kurdish socialist armed group, the PYD-YPG, which was also an occasional collaborator of the Assad regime. The summer of 2015 was the most critical turning point in terms of the military balance, since the Assad regime, whose territorial control was reduced to almost 20% of the country at that time, was buttressed by the massive military intervention of Russia, which started in September. By the end of 2016, Russian and Iranian forces managed to defeat the opposition and capture Aleppo, the second largest city and a potential de facto capital of the opposition in the north, and by the end of 2017, the United States handed over Raqqa, the Syrian capital of ISIS/Daesh, to the YPG-PYD after a massive aerial bombardment that killed thousands of civilians in what must surely be recognised as a major war crime. In 2018 and 2019, Russian and Assad-regime forces supported by the Iranian and other foreign Shiite militias continued to attack and capture remaining pockets of the opposition in the south (such as Deraa) and even in the north. The fifth of Majed's five observations with regards to the violence and impunity of the Syrian war is that "this war could never have been

waged with such savagery without the support of Iran and Russia, and without the procrastination of the Western and Arab powers." The Assad regime is undertaking a vicious and relentless sectarian cleansing and demographic engineering through new legislation such as Law 10, the significance of which Majed discusses.

What remains of the Syrian revolution? Ömer Özkızılcık and Nur **Günay** discuss the origins, evolution, and future prospects of what may be called "Free Syria" in their incisive contribution, "From a Nationwide Revolution to a Limited Self-Governance: The national and international ramifications of the 'Syrian revolution'" (Chapter 6). Their chapter departs from their consequential observation that, at present, there are not one but three distinct political models and territorial entities in Syria: "A Russia and Iran-controlled Assad regime, a US-backed and Russia-protected self-declared autonomous administration of the YPG, and the Türkiye-protected Syrian Interim Government (SIG) as well as the region of Idlib." Iranian and Russian intervention was decisive in handing over the majority of Syria's territory and its population to the Assad regime. "The first significant military victory to which Iran contributed was the capture of Qusayr from the opposition in June 2013," as Özkızılcık and Günay note, and "with the capture of Qusayr, the course of the war changed in favour of the Assad regime." Iranian intervention and tens of thousands of Shiite foreign fighters that Iran brought into Syria were not enough to prop up the Assad regime in the face of overwhelming popular resistance, and the regime invited the Russian military to suppress the Syrian revolution. The United States, likewise, intervened not to support the Syrian opposition fighting against the Assad regime, but to support the YPG-PYD, which did not and does not fight the Assad regime and rather occasionally collaborates with the regime. Finally, Türkiye was the last regional power to intervene in Syria, in late 2016, but also the first power to intervene in support of the Syrian opposition. Thus, there has been a third zone, very much understudied and lesser known by the international public, represented

by the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), which Özkızılcık and Günay discuss as a promising alternative model for Syria.

"Operation Peace Spring and the Battle for a Free Syria" (Chapter 7) by Şener **Aktürk** focuses further on the Free Syria zone in northern Syria, and specifically discusses the third and possibly most consequential expansion of this zone as a result of the Operation Peace Spring undertaken by the Syrian National Army (SNA) and the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) in late 2019, with the very short (roughly week-long) combat phase completed in October 2019. He emphasises that the operation had overwhelming support among the Arab majorities in the Eastern and Northern Syrian regions targeted (parts of the Aleppo, Hasakah, and Raqqa governorates), and it even had very significant support among the Kurdish inhabitants of these same regions. He attributes the local Syrian support for the operation to "Türkiye being the only state supporting majority-rule in Syria, an absolutely essential characteristic for a functioning democratic society," in stark contrast to "Iran, France, Russia, and the United States [which] militarily supported and supplied various factions that depend on small ethnic sectarian and ideological minorities." Perhaps, in part, as a result of Türkiye's support for popular democratic majority-rule in Syria, when asked which country is "having a positive influence" in Syria, a far larger percentage of Syrians think Türkiye is having a positive influence (55%), compared to those who think that Russia (14%), the United States (10%), or Iran (6%) is having a positive influence on Syria. It is particularly noteworthy and worrisome that the country that is favourably viewed by the smallest share of ordinary Syrians, Iran (6%), is also the one expanding its influence at the expense of others in 2022 as this volume was going into production.

Four country-specific chapters focusing on the trajectory of and reactions to the Arab Spring in Algeria, Lebanon, and Libya, as well as the Balkan countries including Albania, Bulgaria, and Kosovo, follow

the four comparative and three Syria-specific chapters. Ferhat **Polat**, in his "10 Years After the Arab Spring: Is a long-lasting political solution within reach in Libya?" (Chapter 8) provides a pithy summary of the first decade of the Arab Spring in Libya, followed by a critical review of the present-day dilemmas and informed speculations about the future trajectory of Libya. Many alternative measurements to assess the success and failure of the Arab Spring in different countries is possible, but one crude measure would at least include, 1) whether the autocrat in power before the Arab Spring has been removed or is still in power, 2) if the autocrat was removed, whether somewhat competitive and popular elections were held in the country after the popular uprisings, 3) whether the current political leadership of the country came to power and remained in power primarily through competitive popular elections as opposed to a non-democratic method such as a military coup. By this count, Libya and Tunisia may rank highest, with the original autocrat removed through popular uprisings, somewhat competitive popular elections held, and a current government that includes both elements that came to power through competitive elections as well as other elements that seized power through sheer force of arms (e.g., President Kais Said's suspension of the parliament in Tunisia, and the mixed nature of the current Government of National Unity in Libya). Thus, although much less studied than Tunisia from this point of view, Libya's current government still includes significant popular democratic input that became possible due to the Arab Spring, setting it positively apart from Egypt and Syria on this account and closer to Tunisia. This variation in outcomes was, of course, strongly influenced but not overdetermined by the military's response to the revolutionary uprisings either; the military forces in Libya and Yemen were deliberately fractured and divided prior to the Arab Spring by their autocrats, Qadhafi and Saleh, respectively [2], and yet the outcome in Libya has been significantly closer to a representative government legitimated through electoral input, although amidst a civil war similar to Yemen. Moreover, as Polat describes in some detail, Khalifa Haftar's counterrevolutionary

offensive against Tripoli failed despite the significant support he received from Egypt under Sisi, France, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, four major actors that also played leading roles in suppressing the Arab Spring elsewhere. Polat's chapter sheds light on the international and domestic factors that made possible such a case of limited success against all odds in Libya, while providing some thoughts on the prospects of the future unification of the country.

Algeria has been a leading Arab and African country igniting the Pan-Arab, Pan-African and other subaltern visions of an alternative world order since the 1950s, somewhat similar to but in some other ways also surpassing Egypt. Algeria can also be described as having had its own Arab-Islamic spring two decades prior to the onset of the Arab Spring with the local and national parliamentary election victories of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in 1990-1991. The second round of the parliamentary elections were cancelled with a de facto military takeover in January 1992, followed by an excessively violent crackdown on the Islamist political actors in what came to be known as the Algerian Civil War that claimed the lives of up to 200,000 people [3]. The original contradiction between an Islamic mobilization for nation-building followed by a monolingual and secularist nation-building arguably provides the historical structural cause of the vicious cycle observed in Algeria, with earlier examples of the same pattern in Türkiye and Pakistan, two paradigmatic cases of non-Arab Muslim nation-building that captivated global audiences, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, at the time of their founding [4]. The horrific backlash of the Algerian experience with an Islamist electoral victory haunted Islamists across the Arab Middle East and beyond for decades to come, being only overcome by some with the onset of the Arab Spring [5].

In "Algeria versus the Uprisings: The Algerian Regime and Opposition Dynamics during the 2010s" (Chapter 9), Tahir **Kılavuz** explains why and how the Algerian regime withstood two waves of popular protests

in the early and late 2010s, the first one associated with the Arab Spring protests in general and the second wave known as the *Hirak* protests. Empirically rich and theoretically sophisticated, this chapter also convincingly explains the variation between the mostly "failed" first wave of the protests in the early 2010s, and the relative "success" of the *Hirak* protests in removing President Abdelaziz Bouteflika by April 2019. As Kılavuz summarises, not only that "the Algerian regime's ability to use a variety of repressive and co-optative tools helped the regime respond to the challenges," but making matters worse, "the Algerian opposition have been fairly unsuccessful in channelling the revolutionary moments into tangible political change" (from the unpublished Abstract). The combination of these two factors explains the resilience of the regime in Algeria, albeit with a notable change in leadership.

Turning to the reflections of the Arab Spring on Lebanon, Michael **Arnold** (Chapter 10) discusses the popular uprising that began in the context of a deep economic crisis in October 2019, and which has challenged the sectarian political structure that prevailed in the country since its founding under French patronage in the early 20th century. He points out that Lebanon witnessed at least two earlier waves of protests during the first decade of the Arab Spring: "Organised by the group 'Laique Pride'," the protests that "came to be known as the 'Intifada of Dignity'... initiated in early 2011," were the first wave of "protests [that] failed to appeal to the wider public." The second notable protest movement was the "You Stink" protests in 2015 "that began as a response to a garbage crisis in the country and quickly expanded into a broader anti-government movement." In between these two notable protests, the devastating expansion of the Syrian Civil War had major repercussions for the Lebanese domestic political and security situation. Especially in Lebanon's second-largest city, Sunni-majority Tripoli in the north, there have been "sporadic clashes… between young men from the largely poor and Sunni Bab al-Tabbaneh neighbourhood and the largely Alawi district of Jabal Mohsen," which have been exacerbated by, but

actually predate, the Syrian Civil War, as Arnold points out. Finally, the third and final wave of protests was the so-called "October Revolution" that erupted in October 2019 following a government plan to tax the popular WhatsApp messaging service, which resulted in, among other things, the resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri and the collapse of his government. Arnold discusses many attempts to challenge the "sectarian" structure of Lebanese politics by various groups at different times and through different means. However, the results seem to have been rather modest at best.

In the last chapter focusing on a specific geographic region, "Regional reactions to the Arab Uprisings: Evidence from the Balkans" (Chapter 11), Idlir **Lika** discusses and explains the variation observed among half a dozen mostly Western Balkan states in terms of their attitudes vis-à-vis the Arab Spring. Although most Balkan states, with the notable exception of Serbia, are pro-Western in their geopolitical orientation, only Bulgaria and Kosovo "went to great lengths to support the anti-regime popular demonstrations rhetorically, subsequently developed close diplomatic relations with the post-uprising governments in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, and politically supported the armed Syrian opposition against the Assad regime." Lika convincingly explains that Bulgaria and Kosovo's particularly enthusiastic support for the Arab uprisings was still correlated to their remarkably pro-American stance even within the otherwise pro-Western Balkan spectrum. This support was most consequential in the case of Bulgaria, where "meetings were also convened to coordinate CIA and Gulf countries' covert program of supplying weapons to armed opposition groups in Syria, and Bulgaria played a critical role in this organisation due to its enormous Soviet-style weapons industry and due to its geographical proximity to Syria." Bulgaria's heavy involvement in the Arab Spring, and the Syrian conflict in particular, as such also drew the ire of the pro-Russian main opposition party, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), thus activating the domestic and international fault lines that connect competing

visions of Bulgaria's national and geopolitical identities. Once U.S. policy toward the Arab Spring radically changed under the second term of President Barack Obama, who "ended the covert weapon supply program to the FSA [Free Syrian Army] in 2014… Bulgaria also scaled back its pro-opposition rhetoric and its arms sales to the Middle East were substantially reduced," demonstrating how closely Bulgaria's policy was mirroring that of the United States. Lika demonstrates convincingly how Kosovo was also a very staunch supporter of the Arab Spring, establishing warm relations with the Morsi government in Egypt, advocating direct military intervention in retaliation for the Assad regime's chemical attack in August 2013 and drawing parallels between the Milosevic regime in Serbia and the Assad regime in Syria. Partly in return for this support, Kosovo was recognized as an independent state by the post-revolutionary governments of Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. However, similar to Bulgaria's trajectory, Kosovo also scaled back its support for the Arab Spring once the United States radically changed its policy around 2013-2014, and likewise "refrained from labelling the overthrow of Morsi as a coup and eventually established normal diplomatic relations with the new military regime in Cairo." In short, as Lika argues, both Bulgaria and Kosovo were very much "followers" of the United States in their attitudes and policies vis-à-vis the Arab Spring.

How may the Arab Spring be viewed a hundred years or more from now? Şener **Aktürk** attempts to put these developments in a comparative historical perspective in the last chapter of this volume, "Arab Spring as a World-Historical Event" (Chapter 12). Inspired by Immanuel Wallerstein's effort to contextualise the global significance of another epochal development in its second centennial, "The French Revolution as a World-Historical Event" [6], Aktürk seeks to ascertain what may be (or remain) the world-historical significance of the Arab revolutions, although speculating only a decade after these revolutions began. He suggests that it is empirically more accurate to speak of the

"suppression" rather than the "failure" of the Arab revolutions and also argues that the critical difference in the divergent trajectories of the removal of totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the failure to remove authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa has to do with the opposite roles that external interventions played in these two otherwise comparable phenomena. Relatedly, Aktürk argues that there has been a "collaborative competition between Western and Russian-Iranian axes" in suppressing the Arab revolutions, which in turn contradicted the previous image and "soft power" of Iran as a revolutionary and emancipatory actor in the region. He questions whether these developments should be called Arab or Islamic Spring in light of the hegemony of the Islamic opposition, and also critically notes the cooptation of ethnic (e.g., Kurdish), sectarian (e.g., Alawite), and ideological (e.g., liberal and socialist) minorities by the counterrevolutionary actors to prevent the emergence of popular democracy in the region, which requires "majority-rule" at a minimum. This chapter focuses on Egypt as the most pivotal case and the military coup in Egypt as the most critical turning point in the suppression of anti-authoritarian uprisings. The roles of the bureaucracy, the judiciary, and the military, as the three unelected components of government, are highlighted in the suppression of popular democratic aspirations in Egypt and beyond. Aktürk concludes by pointing to the potential role of Arab opposition(s) in exile, and the deleterious consequences of the regional and even global securitization and stigmatization of Sunni Muslim and particularly Sunni Arab identities.

The patterns that the authors critically observed and the predictions some authors expressed with cautious optimism acquired an added significance with the onset of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, when the current volume was already under production. Some commentators noted the dramatic differences in the international community's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine compared to the relative apathy towards Russia's occupation of Syria. Perhaps the most

dramatic differences were observed in the relative openness of European countries to Ukrainian refugees in contrast to the generally xenophobic and particularly Islamophobic reactions that the Syrian refugee "crisis" provoked across Europe in the previous decade. It remains to be seen whether this development, involving some of the same international actors, will have any major consequences for better or worse in the second decade of the Arab Spring and beyond.

The twelve authors who contributed to this volume, hailing from (currently) five countries across three continents with very diverse backgrounds and experiences, provide empirically rich and theoretically sophisticated analyses of the Arab Spring in its first decade from different viewpoints. Although the patterns they observe and the predictions they express may indeed be rather different, they share the belief that the Arab Spring is far from over, with its first decade only a prelude to other major developments to come. These chapters also point to the causes and consequences of the Arab Spring that go far beyond the Arab states and societies of the Middle East and North Africa. In this sense, the Arab Spring is not at all a development limited to one ethno-national, geographic, or linguistic space, but rather a global and world-historical phenomenon both in its origins and its outcomes. We hope that this volume will offer new conceptual and explanatory tools and diverse viewpoints for readers around the world who struggle to make sense of this epochal development of our times.

Endnotes

[1] Among many other examples, see the seminal work of Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

[2] According to the classification of Zoltan Barany that I build on in this paragraph, in response to the Arab revolutions, the military leaders "sid[ed] with the rebels" in Tunisia and Egypt, had "divided loyalties" in Libya and Yemen, and stuck "with the status quo" in Bahrain and Syria. Although this classification explains the existence of a civil war in three cases (Libya, Syria, and Yemen), it does not by itself explain why Libya ended up with a more favourable outcome than Yemen. Furthermore, in Egypt, where the army initially "sided with the rebels," it later launched a full-scale military coup and established a military dictatorship, whereas the fate of democratic development in the other case where the army initially sided with the rebels, Tunisia, is still unclear but not very promising. See Zoltan Barany, *How Armies Respond to Revolutions and Why* (Princeton University Press, 2016), Chapter 5, "The Middle East and North Africa, 2011," pp.133-164.

[3] Martin Evans and John Phillips, *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

[4] Şener Aktürk, "Religion and Nationalism: Contradictions of Islamic Origins and Secular Nation-Building in Turkey, Algeria, and Pakistan," *Social Science Quarterly* 96, no. 3 (2015): 778-806.

[5] See, among others, "The Ghosts of Algeria," in Shadi Hamid, *Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp.118ff.

[6] Immanuel Wallerstein, "French Revolution as a world-historical event," *Social Research* 56, no. 1 (1989): 33-52.

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Chapter 1

The Arab Spring: Some Lessons

François Burgat

Introduction

Over the course of a decade, the dynamics of transformation triggered by the wave of the "Arab Spring" have deeply affected the political stages of the Near and Middle East. The very name "Arab Spring" still stirs debate. These dynamics have affected both trajectories and respective modes of action. Through the Türkiye-Qatar vs. Arab Gulf-Israel axes, they have also affected how each national political stage fits within the regional and global stages, respectively. First, a slow shift in the balance of power everywhere became explicit. This was between, on the one hand, the so-called "nationalist" or "secular" left, and, on the other, a given component of the broad spectrum of Islamist movements. This shift clearly made the Islamists the major opposition force in the region [1]. The practical limits of election victories by the opposition over the "Deep State" also became explicit. So did the dynamics of the rise of both "jihadist" (Al-Qaeda or ISIS) and counter-revolutionary (Assad, Sisi or Haftar) extremes. These were triggered by the blatant failures of the institutions of political representation—and frequently worsened by decisive foreign interventions. The trajectories of the internationalisation of political dynamics have transformed, whether based on state dynamics "from above", or "from below" (global jihadism). Western actors had traditionally been dominant. They faded in favour of the assertion of actors long dubbed secondary (Iran, Türkiye)—or of the newcomers, leaders of new imperialist schemes, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) or Saudi Arabia. Sectarian, confessional (Sunni vs. Shia, Muslim vs. Christian) or ethnic (Kurdish, or Berber vs Arab in particular) divisions, or more broadly—

and not only in the Muslim world—the confessionalization of political identities, have unstoppably become (rather: have returned to being) an explicit component of the regional political scene—if not of the global scene.

What Timescale?

The dynamic that entered the contemporary history of North Africa and the Middle East under the name "The Arab Spring" is both structural and multidimensional. After barely a decade, how far can a scholarly assessment of it be drawn up? At the dawn of the 2020s, after the "Islamist Winter" proposed by some commentators, have we now entered the era of the triumph of the counter-revolutions? [2]. None of these arguments seems truly satisfactory. While avoiding the Franco-centrism of some of my compatriots, it bears recalling here that France took nearly three-quarters of a century to complete the transition from an absolutist monarchy based on divine law to a secular Republic that is more-or-less inclusive and remains thoroughly imperfect. It is, therefore, in many respects illusory to imagine that an authoritarian system that for 40 years had dug roots in the depths of society and the regional environment could be changed in a mere decade. As such, two tendencies have emerged. Their respective scale should not be overestimated. On the one hand, the counter-revolution embodied by Bashar Al-Assad, Abdelfattah al-Sisi and Khalifa Haftar. On the other hand, the extremist assertions of the Islamic State (ISIS), and of a purported "Islamist Winter". The regression embodied in the counter-assertion of authoritarianism is spectacular. The fleeting extremist assertion of ISIS has been very striking. Nothing, however, allows seeing, in either of these, structural dynamics liable to erase all traces of the median revolutionary moment. The "rise to extremes" of certain components of the societies of the Middle East cannot obscure the ability of these societies to negotiate, or build, constructive transactions within their midst.

A Spring? And What Kind? "Arab"? "Islamist? "Democratic"?

The label "The Arab Spring" won common currency. Given the stakes at play in such a choice, this does not prevent us from discussing both its reach—and its limitations. The first to critique the label of "Spring" are those who prefer to use the notion of "awakening" to avoid any analogy with that other generation of "Springs" that, in a structurally different configuration, led to the fall of the Soviet Union. The next critics have been those who refuse to see a positive impact on the 2011 uprising—especially, but not only, those in the camp of the counter-revolution.

The "Arab" in "Arab Spring" has above all been used to refer to the region in which these transformations were triggered. The exclusive reference to the "Arabness" of the region's peoples inevitably stumbled over the reality of their ethnic diversity. The Berbers and, even more so, the Kurds, especially the Kurds of Syria, naturally expressed reservations about feeling involved in a dynamic whose label effectively denied their very existence. This "ethnicizing" label has a second paradox. The variable of ethnic identity inevitably played its role in the unfolding of the revolutionary era. Only very rarely, however, was it the initial driving force. Each time the "national" political fabric was weakened along with the regime that had appropriated it, the ethnic variable, and the whole range of alliances tied to clan belonging, did indeed play a part in the restructuring of political identities. Taking over from the weakened national link, however, it was not the bond of Arabness that found itself front-and-centre. Rather, it was that of the (especially Kurdish) minorities, that were existentially confronted and in tension with this hegemony of Arabness. In practice, when seeking to identify the dominant vocabulary of the revolutionary era, rather than Arabism, the vocabulary of a large majority of activists proved to be that of so-called "political" Islam. The reasons for the relative retreat of the vocabulary of so-called "secular" Arab nationalism are multiple. Secular Arabism was particularly carried forward by the Baath in Syria

and Iraq, or by the populist myth of the "Gaddhafism" of the "Third Universal Theory". It was inevitably identified with the authoritarian regimes that happened to be the primary target of the Spring protests.

More structurally, especially since the spectacular defeat of Nasserism in 1967, we know (cf. *infra*: "The Collapse of the Revolutionary Lefts?") that the religious vocabulary of Islamism has asserted itself as a constantly growing alternative. Far from denying the "anti-imperialist" reach of Arab ethnic mobilization, the Islamist vocabulary reinforced it, by providing it with a yet more totalizing base than had its predecessor in Arab Nationalism. This itself often made use of Marxist or liberal concepts imported from the symbolic universe of the coloniser [3].

I have recalled the largely identity-based drivers of this dynamic of the assertion of political Islam. It must be restated that its reach cannot be reduced to the sectarian and polarising role into which (before, then after, the Arab counter-revolution) the regimes' discourse have always sought to constrain it. The core of the protestors has always sought to differentiate itself from such a role.

For these reasons, the great semantic denominator of interpreting the "Spring" era in the region's history could perhaps be considered as "The Democratic Spring of North Africa and the Middle East."

"The Ballot-Box Decides": Reach and Limitations

For decades, Western elites sought to impose the principle of "the ballot-box decides" on opposition movements in North Africa and the Middle East that were impatient to take the place of their respective authoritarian regimes. Yet it was a given that the ballot-box was systematically pre-stuffed by the dictators' stooges. By contrast, the revolutionary era largely revealed that, in reality, power was not in the ballot-box. In other words: when power has been rooted for over 40 years in the institutional, social, regional, and local fabrics, opposition forces winning an electoral majority was in no way sufficient to transfer

the levers of political, economic, and financial decision-making. To judge by the ease with which Abdelfattah al-Sisi's coup was considered in European circles as all but a "restoration of the politically-correct" order of things, one may even assert that, during the Spring era, the ballot-box was not where power truly resided for either camp. Not for the managers of the "Deep State" set on holding on to power. Nor for their Western sponsors and partners. Egypt provided an archetype of this demonstration: despite their handsome electoral majority, the Muslim Brotherhood never took delivery of the means to govern Egypt. The "Deep State's" enduring grip also revealed itself to be at work at the core of Tunisia's trajectory (and indeed in that of Yemen's Spring—albeit in a very different regional configuration). Might the transition to democracy require the use of a certain quantity of violence? Without going so far as the violence used by the French revolutionaries of 1789, this could resemble the violence that the Muslim Brotherhood proved unable to mobilize to preserve the historical destiny of their President Mohammed Morsi. He was thus imprisoned and deprived of all medical care until death, amid the approving silence of the commanding heights of the international community.

The Collapse of the Revolutionary Left?

In both North Africa and the Middle East, the Spring era of protest revealed that the generation of the leftist opposition had come to an end. Despite a few exceptions, the top candidates to succeed the defeated regimes were not the oppositions drawn from the secular Arabist tendencies, nor the Marxist left—nor, more broadly, any of those that were defined (to the external gaze at least) as, in North Africa, the "seculars" or, in Saudi Arabia, the "liberals". In the Spring's ballot-boxes, these opposition forces were overwhelmed by the various nuances of the Islamist spectrum. The Muslim Brotherhood tendency, which had embraced electoral competition for longer than its rival Salafi tendency, emerged largely victorious.

Previously, however, rapprochements between the left and Islamists had been attempted on almost every national stage [4]. At Hassan Turabi's initiative, a *Hiwar al-Qawmi al-Dini* had already been initiated in meetings held in both Sudan and Lebanon in the early 1990s. In its wake, in Rome, under the stewardship of the Sant'Egidio Catholic community, a 1995 Pact was signed between all Algeria's opposition movements. Then, in 2006, a *Liqa'Mushtarak* ("Shared Gathering") was organized in Yemen between Socialists and the Muslim Brotherhood of the Yemeni Congregation for Reform (*aka* Al-Islah). This followed on the heels of the Tunisian Pact of 18 October 2005, and the dialogue set up in Morocco between Abdessalam Yassin's Al-Adl wal-Ihsane association and the left. These bridges were built in the context of the prolonged passage through opposition shared by the left and the Islamists.

They ended, however—or nearly—as soon as the ballot-box demonstrated the Islamists' crushing majority and, as a consequence, the left's historic weakness. Tunisia became an exception through the periodic cooperation that emerged between Ennahda and one component of the left. The ballot-box had rewarded Tunisia's Islamists less handsomely than it had their Egyptian counterparts. Moncef Marzouki's election to the temporary Presidency of the Republic, and the formation of the "troika" likely enabled them to be a little less isolated than the Egyptian Brothers. In Egypt, the rift dividing the Brotherhood from the rest of the opposition proved total. So it was that the great symbols of Egypt's historic left and civil society—Samir Amin, Alaa el-Aswany, etc.—spectacularly fell into the lap of authoritarianism. The hostile consensus against the Brotherhood was easily exploited by the local and regional propaganda of the actors of the "Deep State" and of the counter-revolution. With respect to nuances and exceptions, beyond Tunisia, Iraq must also be taken into account: the legislative elections of 12 May 2018 there led to Moqtada Sadr's fleeting opening towards the Communist Party.

The Reach of the "Omnipresent Diversity" of the Islamist Trend

In the course of the "Spring", it became plain that the vocabulary of opposition was displaced from ethnic Arab nationalism towards Muslim religious belonging. This now feeds an "omnipresent diversity" in the Islamist presence in every political field in the region. This development became explicit in various ways. In Yemen, the simplifying paradigm long favoured by the West divided the political field between "the partisans of political Islam" and their "secular" opponents.

Scenarios like the crisis that has torn Yemen apart since 2015 can scarcely be analysed from such a premise. In Yemen, since the Houthi offensive, Al-Islah, close to the Muslim Brotherhood, has fought alongside Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi's legitimate government, whose partner it was in Parliament. Saudi Arabia and the UAE aim to restore this government. Logically, they should be allied with Al-Islah. Instead, their obsessive enmity for the Muslim Brotherhood means they do everything in their power to weaken it. However, in Yemen as in Libya, they have no other choice than to recruit from within the social fabric of the same "political Islam" that they claim to be fighting. Besides the southern independentists, they therefore also finance Salafi militias, to which a Saudi sheikh, Rabi' Al-Madkhali, has instilled the "Islamic" principle of unconditional submission to the ruler.

All the players on both sides of Yemen's conflict themselves fight the radical armed fringe of the Islamist spectrum: Al-Qaeda and ISIS. These two groups are themselves engaged in a violent internal armed contest. Last but not least—and even if it is not their only agenda—the Houthis themselves also play on the religious discourse of the (Shia) re-confessionalization of political identities. In Yemen, then, political Islam is tightly tied to almost all the components of the political scene. It no longer structures them or divides them in any significant way.

Granted, faced with the omnipresence of Islamist political vocabulary, some rare pockets of resistance do exist. These are, first of all, the areas where an ethnic variable (essentially a Kurdish variable) faces

the hegemony of the Arab variable. This also occurs when a regionalist identity seeks to impose itself over national ties. Hence, in order to acquire an alternative partner to the Al-Islah Muslim Brotherhood, the UAE have met with some success in supporting and strengthening the Southern Transitional Council (STC) separatists.

From a broader perspective, the "omnipresent diversity" of Islamists confirms the hypothesis that the phenomenon of so-called political Islam cannot be reduced to the emergence of a *single, unique* and *particular* political ideology. Rather, it reflects the reconnection between, on the one hand, the *vocabulary* of the inherited religious culture, that has the advantage of being endogenous and locally-produced—and, on the other, the process of production or renewal of the entire spectrum of political ideologies.

In North Africa and the Middle East in 2021, the Islamist spectrum ranges from Rached Ghannouchi, the President of Tunisia's Parliament and co-author of a very-explicitly "secular" constitution; to the sectarian successors of Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, who laid claim to the massacre of the Yezidi minority [5].

The Islamist spectrum also includes Egypt's Hizb al-Nour: Salafis, who chose to join the bloody repression led by Abdelfattah al-Sisi against the Muslim Brotherhood. The outside gaze seeks to conflate all these distinct political actors. Yes, many essential differences separate them. Against all rationality, however, the Western approach remains focused on a quest for an elusive "third force" that might "rid the region of Islamists".

The Dynamics of Internationalisation Swiftly Settled Against the Protestors

In the course of the Spring, the mobilisation of political actors in the Middle East (Iraq, Syria and Yemen) and in the West revealed themselves to be tightly interconnected. This holds true of mobilisation "from above" by both Middle Eastern and European states (in

particular Egypt, the UAE, and France). It also holds for the individual transnational commitments—so-called "jihadi" commitments—of protest mobilised "from below". Since the first anti-terrorist summit held in Sharm Al-Sheikh in March 1996, the globalisation of the so-called anti-terrorist struggle has accelerated. Simultaneously, with the birth of Al-Qaeda, first in Afghanistan, then in Iraq, Syria and Libya, an identical "globalisation of resentment" took form and fed the rise of global jihadi networks. The more states showed their weaknesses, the more they were faced with the impact of foreign interventions at both sub and supra-state levels. In Syria as in Yemen, these external variables of the national balance of power replaced the internal dynamics, largely dispossessing the peoples of Syria and Yemen, in particular, of control over their destiny.

To take one, especially key example, it is now clear that it is not Bashar Al-Assad's popularity that has enabled him to sustain himself in power. Rather, it is the balance of power that settled between the foreign actors that supported him and those that supported his opponents. Equally clear is that, after a few months of opacity and confusion (whose extreme was made up of France and NATO's going to war on the side of the revolutionary camp in Libya), this balance of power settled quite swiftly—in opposition to, and to the detriment of the revolutionary oppositions, and in favour of the authoritarian regimes they were challenging.

On the international stage, the emergence of actors long considered "second-tier" make the withdrawal of the superpowers explicit — especially that of the United States. For the first time in contemporary history, the January 2017 negotiations in Astana (Kazakhstan), led by Russia, Türkiye, and Iran, showed that an exit from Syria's globalised crisis could be largely out of the hands of the United States and Europe. Second-tier actors (Türkiye, and Iran—but also Saudi Arabia, since the arrival of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and his alliance with his UAE counterpart Mohammed bin Zayed) asserted themselves in

the field of the same practices that were long dubbed "imperialist" and reserved to the Western or Soviet Great Powers.

In the global context of the Arab Spring, it appears that, except briefly at least in the exception of Libya, internationalisation "from above" (from the state) was led in a systematically selective fashion. In the emblematic case of Syria, most initial foreign sponsors of Syria's opposition (Türkiye and the West) turned away from the mainstream of the trans-confessional opposition to concentrate on the two "parasitic" excrescences of the crisis. These were, first, for Türkiye, Kurdish mobilisation (represented by the PYD-YPG with links to the PKK) then, for the West, jihadi mobilisation (as well as the wave of migration), which very swiftly confiscated the entire understanding of the Spring.

Behind France's Archetypal Trajectory: The Obsessional Rejection of "Political Islam"

In this field, the trajectory of French diplomacy is an archetypal reference-point for successive Western stances. Twice, this moved spectacularly in opposing directions. With the exception of a fleeting moment of support for Libya's revolution—a moment whose opportunism has been clearly made explicit since—it remained essentially consistent in its support for authoritarian regimes and the various aspects of the counter-revolution they implemented.

In Paris, the very first reaction to Tunisia's protests came from then-Foreign Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie. It was renewed support for Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, who was sent a proposal for technical assistance to enable him to rationalise his repression. In both Tunisia and Egypt, France then realised that it risked finding itself on the losing side. Nicolas Sarkozy then reluctantly began a dialogue with the victors of Tunisia's and Egypt's elections. (Paris was the last European capital to congratulate Ennahda for its election victory at the Constituent Assembly elections.) In April 2011, Foreign Minister Alain Juppé declared for the first time that he was asking his diplomats to initiate relations with all components of the political spectrum, including the

Islamist movements, provided that they renounced the use of violence [6]. Riding this momentum, Nicolas Sarkozy came to the rescue of Libya's revolutionaries and, in partnership with NATO, began the military campaign that, on 20 October 2011, led not only to the fall of the regime of Muammar Gaddafi—but to his physical elimination.

This was the extent of French participation in the Arab Spring's revolutionary trajectory. As early as 2013, it became clear that President Hollande had elected to support Egypt's counter-revolution. In Syria, he *de facto* abandoned Syria's armed opposition, and went to war, not against the regime that had caused the crisis but only against ISIS: that is, against one of the consequences of that crisis. In Libya, France's about-face was more spectacular yet. After having supported the revolutionaries, Hollande's France indeed went as far as readying its forces to hit Assad in retaliation for the chemical attacks. Immediately after being "dropped" by Obama, however, Hollande, and even more so Macron after him, switched sides**.** First discreetly, then more explicitly, France rooted itself in the counter-revolutionary camp led by the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. The Arab counter-revolution's narratives then favoured two registers appealing to President Macron. Granted, as head of state, what appealed was first a straightforward crony relationship with the UAE and Egypt, great providers of state contracts, particularly of arms sales. As a candidate for re-election, however, it was the criminalization of "political Islam" in the discourse of the counter-revolution that agreed with Macron's campaign to mobilise the votes of France's far-right, which he had realised he would be in particular need of.

Very swiftly, France's diplomacy thus operated a more-or-less-discrete yet wholesale return-to-square-one and all-but-blind support for the authoritarians' hitlist against the revolutionary uprisings. France, and the West with it, only betrayed the revolutionary forces from the moment when these were identified as belonging to—or merely as associated with—the broad spectrum of political Islam. This turned them into

interlocutors that the West considered escaped its sphere of influence more systematically than others (of the left especially). As for Arab state actors, they did not let go of the protest movements for the reason implied by the narrative of the Emirati, Saudi or Egyptian leaders of the Arab counter-revolution: that the protestors were the carriers of a radical ideology. They did so for a far more straightforward reason: the popular basis of the protest movements—and, where relevant, their legalism—threatened regime power far more than did the extremist groups. Of course, after the legalist component of the Islamist spectrum won out at the ballot-box, the military breakthrough of its jihadist fringe considerably hastened this dynamic. Whether as a direct consequence of the war that France declared on the jihadist fringe in Iraq and in Syria (in the case of the Bataclan attacks), or as an expression of the divide created by part of its "Muslim policy" (in the case of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks), in the course of 2015, the attacks on French territory of this radical fringe firmly anchored this rejection within the French and broader European landscape.

Ethnic or Confessional Sectarianism: A Weapon of the Regimes, more so than their Opponents

Not only with the emergence of ISIS, the exploitation of confessional or ethnic divides progressively appeared as one variable that directly shaped the reconfiguration, both of domestic political arenas (in Syria and Yemen in particular) and of regional ones (Saudi Arabia, the UAE vs Iran). This includes, of course, intra-Muslim divides, of which the most obvious is the one that divides and—sometimes—opposes, Sunni and Shia. Sub-national ethnic or confessional identities were the natural receptacles for mobilisations where, as in Syria, the national link was weakened. With the possible exception of Yemen, however, they were never the trigger for this fragmentation. Internally, they most often emerged as tools in the hands of the authoritarian power, serving its classic end of dividing its opponents. The latter logically had the opposite interest: to reinforce solidarities between all types of political

belonging. Depending on the configuration, however, authoritarian leaders wielded the weapon of sectarianism in contrasting fashion. At first, very pragmatically, some among them withheld from wielding it (Saudi Arabia, the UAE). They then wielded it unhesitatingly (Syria, Saudi Arabia, the UAE) wherever it enabled them to increase their local or regional anchoring.

The first archetypal example is, of course, Bashar Al-Assad's Syria. From the first hours of a popular uprising that extended far beyond the borders of the Sunni community, he sought to make the uprising appear limited to that community alone. To this end, the regime used [7] explicitly anti-Sunni propaganda. Its repression also selectively targeted this specific component of political society. The archetypal Syrian example of the weaponization of sectarian divisions by the powers in place is not limited to the Spring era. In Yemen, Ali Abdallah Saleh was himself of Zaydi Shia origin, something he preferred to conceal. In 2004, he had thus chosen to "sectarianise" his Houthi opponents, stigmatising them as adepts of the pre-revolution Zaydi imamate and, as such, as "pro-Iranian Shia". Yet their denunciation of his submission to George Bush's humiliating security demands was straightforwardly "anti-imperialist". In 2006, in the wake of the Lebanese Hezbollah's victories over Israel, the self-same Ali Abdallah Saleh was indisposed by the shade cast on him by the growing popularity of the Lebanese resistance. Then already, he chose to impose a sectarian reading of Iraq's crisis. Dubbing the (very "secular") Saddam Hussein "the Sunni Lion", he blamed Saddam's execution on illegitimate actors that shared with Hezbollah the same—namely Shia—identity.

UAE and Saudi leaders themselves made a differentiated use of their Sunni identity. For a time, before they saw in it primarily a danger of democratic contagion, they supported the Syrian revolt. From their perspective, it weakened a regime whose Alawi sectarian basis had made it a client and ally of Iran. In Bahrain, by contrast, they immediately prioritised defending a Sunni authoritarian monarchy [8]. In Yemen,

in the context of the semi-regionalist, semi-counter-revolutionary push by the Houthis and their ally ex-President Saleh, Saudi Arabia also hesitated for a time. This time, however, it was in the opposite direction. They eventually prioritised their fears that the Houthis might above all be "(Shia) agents of Iran". Briefly, however, they had considered that the fall of the regime of Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi, that had emerged from the Spring of 2011, would lead to excluding the Muslim Brotherhood (here, Al-Islah) from power—and so to weakening the camp of their obsessive "internal enemy". They, therefore, did nothing to bar the Houthis' victorious push towards Sanaa before, in March 2015, they mobilised a broad "Sunni" coalition against them. At least one other example illustrates the limits of the sectarian turn inwards of the Middle East's leaders: Shia Iran untiringly lent its support to the Sunni Palestinian Hamas. It thereby prioritised its regional agenda of resistance to Israel over its (compatible) agenda of reinforcing its sectarian base in Arab lands (Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen) [9].

The Foreign Component of the Rise of Extremes

In the course of the Spring, the post-revolutionary cards were reshuffled along two very different lines. In Tunisia, and in Tunisia only, a transaction-at-the-centre occurred between the revolutionary forces and the owners of the "Deep State". Short of consecrating the establishment of an illusory "flawless" democracy, a fundamental achievement was enabled by including in political power forces that had for so long been excluded from it, and the spectacular effort at conciliation by these forces. This achievement was the ebbing of the risk of civil war—as well as a highly significant weakening of authoritarianism. In every other case, however, the persistence, the return, or the emergence of one of the "extremes", whether at the commanding heights of the state level or from a revolutionary extreme within society, produced a level of autocratic or insurrectional political violence that was largely greater than what it had been before the Spring protests began.

A specific lesson may be drawn from the relationship between the "rise to extremes" of the jihadi type and foreign interventions. The experience of the Spring confirms that the assertion of the "jihadi" extremism of protest has always relied upon the additive of significant foreign intervention. Deep dysfunctions in the internal mechanisms of political representation appear to require a dynamic of exacerbation brought on by foreign intervention. This holds in the case of Yemen, for example, since the very first (and not yet "globalised") "jihadis" of the "Marxist" South took up arms in the 1980s to resist the Soviet Union's invasive influence. It holds for Afghanistan, where jihad was very largely internationalized in reaction to, first the Soviet, then the US and its Western allies' interventions. It holds for Iraq, the US and then Iranian interventions there. It holds for the especially decisive foreign interventions in Syria, first by Iran, then by Russia. Such intervention is no longer necessarily Western, as evidenced by warrior-diplomacy from Iran or Russia in Syria, but also by the UAE and Saudi Arabia in Yemen or in Libya. In part due to the insertion of the recruits of "Global Jihad", such intervention is now, and far more decisively, attached to states.

Within this configuration of the clash of extremes, the trajectories of conflict in Raqqa or Mosul saw political forces that had long been restricted to the extreme periphery of the political spectrum become in a position to come closer to the centre of these societies, and to assert their hold over them. In any case, this decisive development was enabled by the exclusion or marginalisation by the political systems of important components of the societies concerned: Sunni Muslims in Iraq and in Syria, Shia in Bahrain or —in part at least— in Yemen [10].

The rise of extremist "revolutionary" actors prompted a powerful reactive dynamic that took the shape of an imposing international coalition. To "restore the rightful order", this coalition mobilised methods that were, in some cases, even more extreme than those of its declared opponents. The victory of the international coalition against ISIS was obtained exclusively through the use of air power. It resulted

from an absolute disproportion in the military means available to each side. It led to the indiscriminate destruction of the entire social fabric: not only the political fabric—but also the whole "urban" and human fabric of the cities that had for a time been controlled by ISIS. Absent the construction of any credible political alternative, the alleged exit from the "ISIS" crisis was thereby merely a Pyrrhic victory. Far more than they were resolved, the problems that had been born of, or expressed through, the development of the extremist component of the arenas of protest were merely dispersed in space and postponed in time.

Within the configuration of the "Tunisia-style" transaction at-the-centre, however (i.e. when the political fabric showed that it could perform credibly), the "extremists" were kept on the margins. By way of example, the people of the city of Ben Gardane, at the border between Tunisia and Libya, refused *en masse* to accept its "liberation" by ISIS brigades that came from Libya.

"Islamist Winter"—or Frozen Western Thinking?

Societies do not spontaneously resort to ultra-radical options; not in the Middle East—and not in North Africa. They do so only when they are faced with the dead-end of the complete absence of a more functional institutional alternative. As against the essentialist *doxa* that still often governs both the Western gaze and the propaganda of authoritarian regimes, nowhere is the "rise" of the jihadis "at the extremes" the logical corollary of the perversion of Islam by some of the religion's adepts. More prosaically, it results from the failure of the mechanisms of political representation of the societies in question. The responsibility of local actors should not be minimised. Yet, to this day, foreign actors play a determining role in this failure. For a long time, these foreign actors were Western. They are now "helped" by many regional actors, Russia, Iran, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt among them. This is a role that the overwhelming majority of the Western political class remains insistently incapable of facing up to.

Translated from the French original by Thomas Hill

Endnotes

[1] François Burgat, *Islamism in the shadow of Al-Qaeda,* IB Tauris, 2008; *Understanding Political Islam,* Manchester University Press, 2020; François Burgat and Mathieu Rey (Eds.), *Histoire des mobilisations islamistes,* Editions du CNRS, 2022; Anne Wolf, *Political Islam in Tunisia: The History of Ennahda* Oxford University Press, 2017; Bjorn Olav Utvik, *A question of faith? Islamists and secularists fight over the post-Mubarak state*, January 2017. *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 10(1):1-254

[2] Amin Allal and Thomas Pierret (Eds.), *Au cœur des révoltes arabes: devenir révolutionnaires*, Armand Colin, 2013 ; C. Derichs & T. Demmelhuber, "Monarchies and Republics, State and Regime, Durability and Fragility in View of the Arab Spring", *Journal of Arabian Studies: Arabia, the Gulf, and the Red Sea*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2014. Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou (Ed), *State-Building in the Middle East and North Africa: One Hundred Years of Nationalism, Religion and Politics,* IB Tauris, 2021.

[3] François Burgat, *The Islamic Movement in North Africa*, University of Texas Press, New Edition 1997, Austin; and *Face to Face with Political Islam*, IB Tauris, 2003.

[4] Jillian Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen*, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

[5] By manhandling the facts, ISIS could consider the Sunni allies of the regime in Baghdad as part and parcel of the coalition of powers against which it fought. In no way, however, could this apply to the Yezidis, who ISIS massacred on a purely sectarian basis.

[6] Reuters, "Alain Juppé propose de dialoguer avec les Frères musulmans" 19/04/2011, https://www.bfmtv.com/politique/alain-juppe-propose-de-dialoguer-avec-les-freres-musulmans_AN-201104190008.html

[7] Zaïneb Ben Lagha, Mohammed El Oifi and Burhan Ghalioun (Eds.), *Révolutions et transitions politiques dans le monde arabe,* Karthala - Université Sorbonne Nouvelle-Paris 3, 2017.

[8] Marc Valeri, "J'ai respiré l'air de la liberté. La légitimation autoritaire au Bahreïn et en Oman à l'épreuve du «printemps arabe»», *Critique internationale*, No. 61, 2013.

[9] Nicolas Dot-Pouillard and Wissam Alhaj, « Pourquoi le Hamas et le Hezbollah restent quand même alliés ? Au-delà de la crise syrienne et du clivage entre sunnites et chiites », *Orient XXI*, http://orientxxi.info/magazine/pourquoi-le-hamas-et-le-hezbollah,0831

[10] François Burgat, "Armed militancy and alternative statehood: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and revolutionary Islamism" in Mohammad Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou, *State building in the Middle East and North Africa. One hundred years of Nationalism, Religion and Politics*, IB Tauris, 2021, pp.147-163.

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Chapter 2

Ten Years After the Arab Spring: Looking Back at the Failed Aftermath

Richard Falk

Points of Departure

Looking back ten years on the apparent failure of the first Arab Spring, the situation of Arab societies in 2021 has dramatically regressed in at least two respects as compared to the conditions that prompted the unexpected uprisings a decade ago. First, the realities of poverty, gross inequality, corruption, and autocracy that motivated the populist movements have worsened in a variety of disturbing respects across the entire region, although to varying extents from country to country.

This assessment does not even take account of the violence and suffering flowing from the negative side effects of counterrevolutionary actions devoted to restoring the prior order and punishing the insurrectionary opposition. Additionally, political turbulence in several countries in the aftermath of the uprisings produced massive internal and international displacement of peoples that often resulted in a second experience of misery for those fleeing combat zones beset by civil strife and foreign intervention. The Arab Spring, despite its initial inspirational display of unarmed protesters demanding freedom, human rights, and accountable democracy, soon thereafter became the proximate cause of this tragic sequel in several countries. Ten years later, there is very little of a positive character that remains of what seemed for a brief interlude to be a liberating moment for a series of societies enduring dysfunctional and repressive governance.

Secondly, although not the fault of the disappointing sequel to the Arab Spring, current regional and global conditions have given rise to a different apolitical set of challenges in the Middle East that make

the earlier political quests for more humane and equitable state/society relations seem less capable of reigniting the spirit of 2011 in the near future. These new conditions include a growing awareness that the MENA region is particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change. It has been further stressed in recent years by the effects on oil and gas pricing due to global undertakings to lessen dependence on fossil fuels as rapidly as possible by hastening societal shifts to renewable sources of energy. The urgent priority of lessening the adverse consequences of global warming is likely to become even more preoccupying for societies struggling to manage ecological agendas, while diverting attention from the revolutionary agendas that animated the Arab Spring.

As well, nothing has been done in the Middle East or by geopolitical actors to reduce the dangers of war and instability associated with confronting Iran by recourse to coercive diplomacy, including threats, assassinations, and harsh sanctions. In fact, the Palestinian people have been thrown to the wolves while Israel is given the economic and political benefits of normalisation with Arab governments without fulfilling the international consensus of achieving a prior negotiated peace with the Palestinians.

Accentuating these concerns are serious prospects of destabilising shifts in regional and global alignments that may give rise to making the Middle East once again, as during the Cold War, a site of struggle between global rivals, in this instance, the U.S. versus China and Russia. The diminishing role of the United States in the region coupled with the increasing relevance of China and Russia as well as the wider potential implications of Israel's increasingly normalised relations with Arab countries, which has included making Israel an acknowledged partner in Saudi-led anti-Iranian and anti-Turkish coalitions. Such collaboration with Israel without achieving a genuine peace agreement with the legitimate representatives of the Palestinian people, including those in foreign refugee camps or involuntary exile, was unthinkable

a decade ago. The 'normalisation accords' initiated in 2020 at the end of the Trump presidency have also had the effect of widening the gaps between the pro-Palestinian views of Arab peoples and the elites that govern in the Middle East. Such shifts tend to validate the views of those in opposition that the political leadership of many Arab countries is illegitimate as well as incompetent, corrupt, and repressive. In effect, a legitimacy hangs over those governments that have tacitly or avowedly abandoned the Palestinian struggle for the sake of making common cause with the Israelis against Iran, as well as to benefit from trade, investment, and access to arms markets.

Despite these developments, if we look forward in time, there seems to be a set of conditions that will, in due course, give rise to a revival of activist displays of radical political discontent in several Arab countries. Recent political challenges to the status quo mounted in Algeria, Sudan, Lebanon, Iraq, and occupied Palestine have already foreshadowed such a future. Although the outcome of these challenges has been confused and unresolved, and far less dramatic than the Arab Spring, their occurrence reveals vitality in civil society as well as fissures at national subnational levels of governance that amount to an early warning system of political volatility throughout the region.

There are also a variety of indications that the failures of the First Arab Spring have prompted adjustments in the outlook of democratising activist thought and practice. It may also be relevant that the U.S. appears, at least temporarily, to have been weary of its engagement in regime-changing 'democracy-promoting' interventions in the Middle East being inhibited, at least temporarily, by its notable failures in Iraq, and, more recently, in Afghanistan [1]. Such wariness of military engagement on the part of the U.S. within the region takes some account of the fact that the most elaborate U.S./NATO attempts to alter the orientation and leadership in countries such as Iraq and Libya were costly and failed to produce the political results that were invoked to justify the interventions in the first place.

A major reaction to the removal of despotic leadership in several countries produced a collapse of national governmental capabilities to sustain order, producing a dispersal of power within the borders of states, notably Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Iraq. The weakening of governing capacity of the state bureaucracies led to persistent violent strife and chaos as well as death and devastation, and massive internal and cross-border displacement of populations. These chaotic circumstances on the ground have contributed to the acute economic and political misery of Arab populations, prompting rising opposition that is leading governments in the region to rely on ever more oppressive measures of political control that seem to be generating large-scale resentment and alienation throughout the MENA region, contributing to chronic chaos in several states.

The picture that emerges from looking back ten years, combined with an attempt to sketch the present and near future of Arab political development, is a bewilderingly contradictory configuration of great complexity, diversity of national circumstances, and radical uncertainty, especially pertaining to geopolitical intrusions in MENA. Going forward, the absence of any positive model in the region upon which to construct a visionary future seems to make unlikely large-scale recourse to oppositional action.

The search goes on to develop a politics of action that combines fairness in the economic sphere with dignity and participation in the political sphere. This is likely to remain a haunting challenge for those social forces committed to drastic change. The experience of the Arab Spring suggests that even a popular movement strong and determined enough to remove long-entrenched political leaders from the pinnacles of state power for alleged abuses of power, incompetence, and corruption may not have the knowhow, capabilities, and sustainable support to create a stable aftermath to the seizure of state power consistent with its revolutionary goals and expectations. More concretely, it has become questionable whether a freely elected national government can give

rise to a resilient enough constitutional democracy to be hospitable to various forms of political, ethnic, and geographic pluralism that are characteristic features of many MENA states.

Such a generalization applies whether emergent post-uprising leadership is of a secular or more Islamist variant. The dilemma of the aftermath becomes so daunting, and perhaps paralysing, when it is realised that all of the available governance options in the Middle East have so far led to disappointing experiences if evaluated from the perspective of *order* (stability, national unity, territorial reach) and *justice* (equitable representation, rule of law, human rights, social protection, ethical norms, public approval by free elections.

The Tunisian 'Exception' is Threatened

For most of the decade it was widely held that Tunisia alone seemed to have escaped the fury of either an autocratic backlash or the agonies of prolonged domestic strife. Some attributed Tunisia's comparative success to the Bourguiba legacy of stable if authoritarian governance combined with a strong labour movement and a relatively weak military, as well as the moderation, flexibility, and skilful leadership of Islamists during the early aftermath after the dictator was deposed.

It came as a shock in an already dreadful year that this apparent 'Tunisian Exception' no longer exists, following President Kais Saied's dismissal of the government and freezing of parliament by decree on July 25, 2021. In subsequent months, what appeared as a power grab or political coup taking the form of an opportunistic version of anti-democratic autocratic tendencies began superseding Tunisian constitutionalism. Kais Saied, elected Tunisian President in 2019, became the architect of what appears to be a resolute effort to establish a new political order. He invoked emergency powers to suspend Parliament, dismiss the elected Prime Minister and later other ministers, issued repressive decrees in an avowed adoption of illiberal governance, stressing a strong turn against political Islam in particular, which helps explain the supportive response to Saied's moves by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. These

abridgements of constitutional government were denounced by secular and religious opposition figures as a coup, perhaps most significantly by Rached Ghannouchi head of Ennahda, an internationally known and respected Muslim-oriented socially conservative leader of the principal opposition grouping in the country that has ruled in Tunisia since 2011 in collaboration with a succession of coalition partners. Ghannouchi is presently unpopular, perhaps unfairly, blamed for Tunisia's economic and political troubles.

It seems worth recalling that the spark that started the Arab Spring in December 2010 was struck first in Tunisia when a frustrated young fruit-seller, Mohamed Bouazizi, in a remote interior city of the country set a self-immolating fire that led to his death. This was quickly followed by mass demonstrations throughout the country, driving long-time despot, Zine Abidine Ben Ali, from power and into exile. A relatively bloodless and quick victory for the Tunisian people that fanned the flames of revolutionary ferment throughout the region confirmed the exciting realisation that a mobilisation of popular discontent could achieve transformative political results without a shot being fired. What came to be known as 'the Jasmine Revolution' in Tunisia challenged prior ideas about Arab political culture, suggesting that the perception of passivity and acquiescence had misjudged relations between state and society throughout the Arab world, and what happened in Tunisia could happen elsewhere in the region. When Egypt followed the Tunisian experience with its own dramatic uprising, and likewise achieved what months earlier would have been thought to be an unthinkable political victory, it was widely believed that the revolutionary tide had turned irreversibly and without limits in the Middle East.

When, in the years that followed, countries where the most politically ambitious uprisings took place reverted to their prior autocratic governance patterns or endured strife and chaos, Tunisia stood out by comparison, seeming to possess the political infrastructure to support a long-lasting and durable transition to a sustainable form of constitutional democracy.

Yet, after a decade of relative moderation and stability, although periodically marred by repressive moves, especially directed at the secular left, attributed to the experimental embrace of a pluralist democracy and socio-economic moderation, Tunisia has stumbled badly. The turn from democracy may have, to a degree, been prompted by acute economic troubles that were widely attributed by Tunisians to the ineptness of the elected government as well as reflecting a political impasse regarded by many as caused by the irresponsible tactics of the Ennahda-led opposition forces. The abridgement of constitutionalism by President Saied took advantage of this mass discontent on the part of large segments of the public, and for the time being, seems to enjoy widespread domestic support, including from many that had successfully demonstrated in 2010 against Ben Ali. Some observers have interpreted this latest chapter in the Tunisian narrative as demonstrating once more the inability to achieve a sustainable democracy in the Arab World due to the character of Islamic political culture and historical experience, reinforced in recent decades by the regressive effects of geopolitical intrusions as well as interactions with a neoliberal world economy. Others see this latest phase of the Tunisian story as suggestive of continued unresolved national tensions arising from the secular/religious divide. This circumstance is further aggravated by societal contradictions, driven toward extremes by gross class inequalities. Additionally, anti-democratic regional forces played a destabilising role. Regional anti-democratic pressures overcame strong funding support from the EU to encourage a transition to democratically oriented state-building based on the hope that Tunisia would adopt a neoliberal economic approach to development. In the background, also, were Western and regional concerns that a genuinely democratised Tunisia would strengthen pro-Palestinian and Islamist activism throughout the region.

It remains possible that democratic legitimacy will be restored in Tunisia, although it presently does not seem likely as Saied's autocratic moves appear to enjoy sufficient domestic approval, regional support, and global indifference to be insulated from political challenge in the

foreseeable future. Moreover, secular autocracy has been receiving vital economic and political support from rich countries in the region that are themselves worried about their own political survival if confronted by domestic uprisings. The Gulf monarchies, in particular, seem fearful of continuing threats of populist challenges being mounted against their governments, especially by populist Islamist movements in the region, above all by the Muslim Brotherhood and kindred movements.

The end of the 'Tunisian Exception', if this is what the national destiny turns out to be, is likely to be interpreted as the final defeat of the strivings of the Arab Spring for greater freedoms, a more equitable approach to social and economic policy, and a political leadership made accountable for corruption as well as breaches of law and ethics. This Tunisian drama could also be interpreted as underscoring the need to renew the popular struggle for humane politics in the Arab world. This could take the form of efforts to correct the flaws of the Arab Spring or even start over by planning a Second Arab Spring, perhaps better conceived of as 'the Arab Summer.' Such a sequel should not be regarded as pointing to a repetition of the 2010-11 uprisings but a differently contextualised and executed political uprising more capable of safeguarding revolutionary accomplishments, which would almost certainly be again challenged during the aftermath. It may be that the collapse of Tunisian democracy closes one chapter in the struggle of liberation-from-within, which has turned out to be more problematic than the anti-colonial phase focusing on liberation-from-without [2].

Learning from Lenin and the Islamic Republic of Iran

A strand of revolutionary thought and practice has long been attentive to overcome the dilemma of the aftermath: theory-oriented practitioners have understood that being too soft emboldens and increases vulnerability to counter-revolutionary activism, often dooming transformational aspirations, while being too hard sacrifices core humanistic promises. Liberal thought has particularly stressed that being too hard on suspected present opponents or former adversaries

distorts and, in the end, betrays the humanistic promise at the core of most revolutionary movements. There are few genuine success stories of safeguarding the political victory in the midst of struggle, and still managing to uphold the humanistic promises that motivated many of the most ardent participants in a revolutionary movement.

Several twentieth century movements, especially in Cuba, China, and Vietnam arguably come closest to maintaining political leadership and ideological coherence in the face of intense counter-revolutionary provocations. These governments were able to put in place promised socio-economic policies and programmes that greatly benefitted the most deprived segments of the population. There was a political price to be paid. These countries rejected democratic pluralism and political rights associated with Western constitutionalism, which was never widely sought in the non-West and certainly not achieved [3].

Famously, Lenin insisted, "you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs." I interpret Lenin's words as suggesting that any comprehensive challenge to entrenched state power must be prepared to deal harshly with the defenders, allies, and beneficiaries of the old order. Put differently, revolution is not for soft-hearted accommodational politics or those committed to nonviolence. Lenin was calling attention to the historical experience of past movements, which confirmed the view that those facing a drastic political challenge will almost always fight back with no holds barred to retain their privileged status, material benefits, and in some cases, their ideological beliefs. This pushback of the old order must be neutralised or else it will either retake power or produce prolonged strife. This revolutionary imperative seems especially compelling if the motivating grievances are internal, involving systemic abuses of state power, bureaucratic corruption, and former elites are viewed as responsible for criminal abuses of human rights as well as the persistence of extreme poverty, gross inequality, and sub-national separatist tendencies.

After years of intense combat, the U.S. accepted defeat in Vietnam, and more recently Afghanistan, as further pursuit of its aims in both countries became too costly given the geopolitical interests at stake. Significant segments of the citizenry, eventually a majority of the political class shaping foreign policy, turned against these campaigns in distant societies largely on the basis of a cost-benefit political assessment [4]. If the principal grievance is directed at alien or colonial rule, as was the case throughout the colonised world after 1945, it is less likely to generate strong efforts to reverse an anti-colonial outcome during the aftermath period unless religious or ideological issues became paramount, as was the case in Iran and Cuba [5].

It is true that nonviolent movements have mounted some successful campaigns, for example, most notably Gandhi against the British Empire in India and the anti-apartheid movement against white supremacist control of South Africa. However, in such cases the transformative process was cut short because of the secondary nature of socio-economic goals in tandem with the strength of embedded material interests of displaced elites. The South African case is particularly illuminating as Nelson Mandela willingly reassured whites that socio-economic interests would be safeguarded if they dismantled apartheid and agreed on majority rule, racial equality, and democratic pluralism. In this respect, South Africa was the scene of a remarkable, and unexpectedly smooth *political* transition but at the cost of embedding *socio-economic* injustice. In a sense, the scope of revolutionary goals was circumscribed, with political liberation treated as an unconditional priority, which can be viewed either as a prudent compromise that avoided the 'Aftermath Dilemma' or an unsavoury concession to the white settler minority that had exploited the labour and resources, yet managed to hold onto to its ill-deserved wealth despite the transition to inclusive constitutionalism.

In contrast, the Soviet Union and Iran implemented their very different revolutionary victories by being ruthlessly attentive to the politics of the aftermath, and both political systems survived despite the zeal

and resolve of their unrepentant internal and international enemies, although the Soviet Union eventually collapsed from internal political decay in the early 1990s. The revolutionary circumstances of the two countries were, of course, grossly dissimilar, but what was strikingly similar were the role of strong leaders in each who succeeded in implementing their uncompromising visions in the face of sustained and intense opposition within and without their countries. In the Soviet instance, the costs of achieving stable political rule involved drastically downgrading the emancipatory socio-economic promises of socialism. In the Iranian case, the costs are still being calculated as regional and global counterrevolutionary energies have not relented, and a regime of prolonged international sanctions, abetted by separate U.S. sanctions, is responsible for causing much of the suffering of Iran's civilian population. Additionally, there is little doubt that hardship, austerity, and distinctly theocratic forms of intolerant rule is an outcome of transformed state/society relations in Iran. Yet, both the Soviet and Iranian revolutionary seizures of power succeeded in withstanding formidable challenges mounted by their enemies in the course of the long aftermath [6]. It seems probable that these revolutions would have collapsed in the manner of Egypt 2013 had they not effectively neutralised their real and suspected adversaries with uncompromising tactics. It is not useful to speculate about whether these political movements might have emerged and evolved more humanely had they not faced such determined hostile challenges after their taking control over the governance of their respective countries, or whether a different style of leadership could have both survived while also having been less inhumane.

These questions of revolutionary dynamics have long intrigued scholars. In *The Anatomy of Revolution*, Crane Brinton argues that a real revolution unleashes a clash of elites that results in extremist outcomes that betray the humanistic motivations of its original founders, factions of which end up bitterly fighting with one another to determine who will lead the politics of the aftermath [7].

Hannah Arendt in *On Revolution* insists that the relative success of the American Revolution as compared to the French and Russian revolutions was due its moderation as a result of its goals being limited to the political sphere, delinking from the British Empire. This narrow sense of purpose was complemented by a prudent failure to make any serious commitments to rectify deprivations and exploitation in the economic and social spheres. Arendt's argument being that anti-colonial unity was an achievable goal, whereas radical economic and social goals would almost certainly have given rise to bloody class warfare with suppressive results. It is possible to view the American Civil War as the unfinished agenda of the American Revolution, which did, after all, proclaim to the world that it was an exceptional society (``a shining city on the hill'') as well as being the first country to achieve political independence from European colonialism. This claim of exceptionalism should have never achieved credibility, except as a self-glorifying myth, given the failure to challenge slavery or make amends for the treatment of native American communities. That is, Arendt got the American Revolution wrong, or put differently, that she failed to treat the state-building aftermath as integral to the revolution. In effect, overcoming the most severe social and economic injustices resulting from ethnic and economic exploitation that could be denied and were deferred, but not indefinitely [8].

Reverting to the Arab Spring, the economic, social, and political grievances were the essence of the movement, and hence could not be put on hold for very long. Expectations of an immediately more equitable, less corrupt performance by the post-revolutionary leadership was imperative if political legitimacy and stability were to be sustained as most vividly. This pattern was significantly illustrated by the course of developments in Egypt since 2011. It turned out not sufficient to rid Egypt of its durable dictator, Hosni Mubarak, even if viewed at the time of the uprising as the greatest triumph of the Arab Spring. There quickly emerged in Egypt the conviction that more needed to be done in a hurry by way of expanding freedoms, instituting socio-economic reforms,

and improving the material living conditions of ordinary Egyptians. This combination of an agenda that attacked class interests at home with externally facilitated counterrevolutionary tendencies in the strong Egyptian armed forces and state bureaucracy resulted in reversing the early successes of the Arab Spring in Egypt and elsewhere in the region.

It would appear as though those in the Arab World who think of the Arab Spring as having initiated a process that goes on despite its setbacks believe that the movement will revive to see another day. Those who interpret the Arab Spring in these processive terms believe that the liberating mission of the Arab Spring has not been permanently discredited and defeated despite the ordeal of the aftermath. In effect, the setbacks witnessed during the last decade are temporary bumps in the road that will lead in coming years to the fulfilment of a broadly conceived liberating agenda. It is a matter that goes to the root of any inquiry as to what went wrong, which is the complement to this consideration of how the regimes in Moscow and Tehran managed to survive to shape the trajectories of their two countries for decades. The Soviet Union did collapse and was replaced by a reconstituted Russia and by a series of restored independent sovereign states along its borders. It remains a question whether this should be understood as a disruption of a long transition process or as the collapse of the successor Communist system, or some combination. It is possible to construe this internal collapse as the disastrous outcome of the long-deferred failure of the Soviet leadership to manage the performance dimensions of the aftermath. Conceptually, it is a matter of whether the Arab Spring or the Russian Revolution should be viewed as an *event* bounded in time or a *process* that endures however long the aftermath is deemed to last, encompassing the interval required to complete the transition to a new political order as envisioned and promised by the revolutionaries [9].

Learning From the Past: Looking Back After Ten Years [10]

With the passage of time, it has become more difficult to comprehend the wild excitement generated by the Arab Spring as it unfolded in 2010-2011. During this early period, many observers were amazed by the changes unfolding before their eyes. It seemed to many that the uprisings were achieving something remarkable - the liberation from the tyranny of several important Arab countries brought about by spontaneous nonviolent protests of enraged and engaged citizenries. This unfolding narrative was widely welcomed as the political wave of the future, which could not and would not be reversed. Emphasis was placed on the pivotal role played by youth in these spontaneous surges of energy and commitment, which was viewed as a new kind of populism. The media focus was placed on Egypt as the exemplary site of struggle, which inspired the world by its nonviolent discipline and by its success in inducing Mubarak to yield to demands in the public squares of Cairo during days of demonstration that he step down from the pharaonic heights after managing almost 30 years of political dictatorship. In 2011, the spirit of Tahrir Square was portrayed as more than the central Egyptian site of struggle between the emergent new and the discarded old in a single country or even the region. Tahrir Square inspired copycat demonstrations around the world calling for similar national risings and even proclaiming ‘a global Tahrir movement.’

Yet there were almost immediate signs of trouble. The Gulf monarchies were active in their efforts to contain, and if possible, reverse these developments. Behind the scenes, their leaders criticised the West, especially the U.S., for abandoning their ally in Cairo. Other Arab leaders fought back violently against signs of unrest, most controversially Syria. Neighbouring governments to Syria, notably Türkiye, broke with Basher Al-Assad, regional actors unlawfully intervened on behalf of the Syrian opposition on largely sectarian grounds internal to Islam. There was also the example of the abrupt fall of Qaddafi in Libya when confronted by a UN-backed NATO military intervention in 2013. It was assumed that what happened in Libya so effortlessly would soon happen

in Syria. Turkish high officials were among those who miscalculated, speaking with confidence about the imminent fall of the regime in Damascus, welcoming the tide of revolutionary change in the region, and convinced of its durability.

A decade later, we are faced with unravelling the puzzle of why these hopeful democratising responses among progressive observers so quickly proved dramatically mistaken, and for the societies directly affected, tragically wrong. After a period of properly managing an apparent transition to democracy in Egypt, the electoral success of the Muslim Brotherhood and allied Islamic parties, sent shock waves through Egyptian secular elite circles. Gulf monarchies fearful of their vulnerability to Islamic populism in their own countries were on edge. The early results of the Arab Spring, especially in Egypt, unsettled the nerves of the Israeli political leadership and its allies that sensed that democracy would bring with it, enhanced global solidarity with Palestinian resistance and aspirations. In other words, the pre-Arab Spring regimes and regional structures were more resilient than initial appearances suggested. The fall of reigning despots turned out to be the beginning of the story, not its ending. Also relevant was the play of geopolitical forces, which despite advocating democracy, were ambivalent about its emergence. Arab secularists and the Atlantic Alliance partners were upset by indications of far greater Islamist political strength among the Arab populace than had been anticipated. These new apprehensions were reinforced by the hostility of activists to neoliberal globalisation and U.S. foreign policy priorities in the region. This featured support for the Gulf monarchies, given Washington's ideological bonding with neoliberal globalisation and its sense of dependence on regional energy resources. In the short run, the politics of the region turned out to be a power game in which the counterrevolutionary side proved far more adept and better endowed in relation to internal and regional capabilities, as well as extra-regional intrusions of influence.

What also became apparent in the aftermath was the diversity of national conditions that led to very different responses to the common motif of populist uprisings against abusive states. In some instances, these uprisings offered sub-national movements an opportunity to demand autonomy arrangement or even secession, thereby revealing fatal weaknesses of some national governance capabilities as soon as the autocratic leader was driven from power. In different ways, Yemen, Libya, and Syria all displayed coercive dispersals of power within their respective territorial boundaries, assertions of minority ethnic and tribal identities, prolonged strife, and widespread resistance to arrangements to restore pre-uprising institutional unity at the former political centre of the country.

Another consideration was generally overlooked. The European statist template imposed on much of the region after the collapse of the Ottoman and French empires after World War I did not, in many instances, give rise to natural political communities [11]. Even before the Arab Spring uprisings exposed the tenuous reality of twentieth century states in the Middle East, the regime-changing intervention in Iraq of 2003 that drove Saddam Hussein from power resulted in the eruption of long-suppressed internal strife and strong displays of tribal disaffection with European styles of state centralism. In retrospect, it became widely understood that Iraqi political unity rested in the past on coercive autocratic practices. Iraq's pre-intervention nationwide stability could not be rebuilt on the basis of liberal premises of Western democracy, but only by the resumption of autocratic styles of governance [12].

In these instances of underestimated resilience of the existing order, several overlooked factors became apparent during the stormy aftermath that followed the removal of the autocratic face of the regime as in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya. Among these factors was the underestimated alienation and resolve of various forms of sub-nationalism (Syria, Libya, Yemen, Iraq) to break away from the existing territorial state. Also important were the underappreciated capabilities and ruthlessness

of governments in response to mass uprisings along with their resolve to maintain or restore previously repudiated patterns of governance as in Syria, and Egypt. Regional and extra-regional commitments to sustain, restore, or remove aligned political elites facing internal threats affected Saudi Arabia, UAE, Iran, Russia, Israel, Türkiye, United States, France, and the UK. An account should be taken of popular disaffection arising in reaction to the inexperience, incompetence, and disappointment with the performance of new leadership as was the case in Egypt and more recently, Tunisia. A central question posed is whether activists and advocates of greater democracy and socio-economic justice in the Arab World can learn from their disappointments of the last ten years to be more effective in pursuing their goals, especially with respect to overcoming the dilemmas of the aftermath. To some extent, the learning process must proceed mainly on a state-to-state basis as the diversity of national conditions makes regional and civilizational generalisations of limited applicability. It must also be remembered that learning is a two-way street, and that the temporarily displaced elites of ten years ago have 'matured' to become either harsher or more accommodating so as to avoid future insurrectionary political challenges to governmental legitimacy and homeland stability.

Despite the relevance of national specificities, it is possible to cautiously offer an overview of what can be learned from this past. The most encouraging reflection would be the appreciation that popular mobilisation is a powerful tool against systemic abuses of state power, yet the results of even successful uprisings will fall short of what is hoped for unless the dilemmas of the aftermath are effectively addressed. The challenge in some instances may quickly result in accommodating moves by the established order in the form of the removal of the leader, as it did in Egypt and Tunisia, but in others produce a brutal crackdown that crushes the opposition or produces prolonged violent strife with the tragic consequences of massive death, devastation, and displacement among the civilian population as in Syria. As argued here, deposing the leader does not end the struggle if the armed forces

and the state bureaucracy are not reconstituted by replacements who are loyal, capable, and reliable agents of change that can be entrusted with overseeing a transition to a new political order during the period of the aftermath. The contrasting experiences of Iran and Egypt are instructive, and in some ways counterintuitive, in the sense that the overtness of the Islamic character of the Iranian revolution would seem more threatening to the regional and global order than was the moderate and essentially liberal enthusiasm shaping expectations ten years ago in the streets and public squares of Egypt and Tunisia. Does this suggest that future challenges depend on having strong enough leadership to protect the new political spaces against internal and external opponents resorting to subversion, destabilisation, and outright intervention? Or, depending on circumstances, does success depend on effective political and cultural performance by those who took charge of the governance process after the old leadership was forced to give up power? A haunting question is whether the new leadership proves able to deliver better socio-economic results without unduly disrupting and agitating societal class structures.

These are questions that cannot be definitively answered, but certain lessons can be drawn. The participants in the spontaneous uprisings that constituted the Arab Spring were understandably proud of the fact that their movements had no leadership hierarchy or charismatic personalities who could take over or even speak authoritatively for the movement. The downside was that there were no policy guidelines as to the reshaping of performance. The demands put forward by the uprisings were essentially procedural, removing the dictator, and selecting new leadership by way of free and fair elections. The structural infrastructure of the state, especially its armed forces and intelligence services were naively trusted as neutral intermediaries that could be trusted to support a democratic transition. This seemed, at first, to be working in Egypt and Tunisia, at least until the socio-economic grievances and secular/religious polarisation came to the surface.

Iran managed this transition effectively because it recognized that its movement was substantive more than procedural in the sense that Ayatollah Khomeini would replace the Shah, break with secularism and the U.S., and reinvent and reconstitute the Iranian state after getting rid of the monarchy and driving many in the country's elite into exile. It became obvious that the essence of the struggle was to construct a new Islamically oriented Iran that fervently professed the belief that Iran's true political community was 'Islamic' rather than 'Arab' or even 'Iranian' [13]. Although the Islamic Republic established back in 1979 has endured, it has paid, and is continuing to pay, a heavy price by way of regional and global hostility, including sanctions, threats, massive and acute impoverishment, and covert efforts by external actors to destabilise the governing process. Moreover, the daily lives of Iranians have been strictly regulated, and the political process is dominated by theocratic rule. It raises a normative question that underlies thoughts about what political future is possible and desirable: has the course taken by Iran been worth the societal price? Would Egypt be better off if it had, from the outset, adopted a more coercive Islamic orientation than the Morsi leadership elected to govern in the 2012 national elections?

Triggering events are unpredictable, and so the future is essentially unknowable. What we do know is that the socio-economic-political conditions are as bad or worse throughout the region than they were a decade ago. Furthermore, in the present context societal conditions have further deteriorated due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the worsening of the impacts of climate change. Signs of new anti-government discontent among both the public and elites has erupted in a variety of radical national movements, including Algeria, Tunisia, Lebanon, and Sudan. Serious persisting instabilities are evident in several other countries in the region including Yemen, Syria, Libya, and Iraq with no end in sight. Could possible geopolitical extra-regional realignments make a difference by imposing an artificial stability on the region of a sort similar to what seemed to sustain the internal stability of MENA states during the Cold War? Would stabilising the current status quo be seen as

beneficial given the levels of impoverishment that exist? In the present context an important development may be the diminishing prospects of further warfare between Israel and its Arab neighbours. In place of this central regional stress pattern there are many who believe that regional stabilisation and resulting moderation will result. If this does not happen, then new conflict configurations are likely such as an Arab-Israel anti-Iran alliance with the U.S. standing behind, giving strategic weight while China and/or Russia flex their geopolitical muscles in the hopes of striking a balance.

A Concluding Observation

Looking back at the Arab Spring uprisings, it becomes obvious that MENA countries failed to overcome the dilemma of the aftermath, leaving an impression that internal democratic liberation to construct systems of governance that follow the Western model cannot be achieved given present class structures, sub-national primary identities, and regional/global balances of power. At the same time, socio-economic-political conditions across the region remain intolerable for many people, leading many to seek a better life abroad or sink into despair at home. The looming uncertainty is whether revolutionary conditions exist, and whether the revolutionary imagination of militants can develop ways to overcome the dilemma of the aftermath if they succeed in gaining power in the first instance.

It should not be forgotten that entrenched elites in the Middle East and North Africa and continuity over any plausible alternative. These elites are currently prepared to sacrifice reformist goals that might moderate the sharp edges of repressive state policies and practices in accord with liberal values. Thus, the Arab Spring gave rise to a legacy of concern about threats posed both by political Islam and by left secularism that greatly diluted liberalizing goals and agitated fears of extremism among the middle classes and elites in MENA countries.

Endnotes

[1] U.S. state-building failure in Afghanistan is exerting a relevant cautionary pressure on American foreign policy in the Middle East, although this could change quickly were Israeli security to be jeopardised or China became seriously engaged in the region.

[2] Settler colonial states are the most resistant to liberation as the instances of Algeria, South Africa, and Israel manifest in different ways. Settler colonial projects, such as the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand that succeeded achieved political independence from the mother country after marginalising or even eliminating the resident native population.

[3] See Richard Falk, "Was China's Amazing Rise Due to 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics' or Capitalism with a Chinese Communist Façade? Or a little of Both?" *Transcend Media Service*, 27 Dec-02 Jan 2022.

[4] Colonial occupation and regime changing interventions do not touch on ultimate issues of security, which involve the defence of the homeland or territorial sovereign rights. Overseas possessions or military operations tend in the end to reflect cost/benefit calculations, allowing defeat to be accepted more easily than if the homeland is encroached upon, which likely remains a ticking time bomb.

[5] Another factor of relevance concerns the presence of unrepentant exiles from elite backgrounds as was the case for both Cuba and Iran, whose counter-revolutionary leverage was particularly evident in the United States, influencing the politics of internal elections and also of foreign policy.

[6] This resilience was exhibited by developing formidable military capabilities making overt forms of intervention too costly to undertake, combined with reconstituting a strong state that implemented the will of the revolutionary leadership. Neither country attempted to gain international legitimacy by adopting the pluralist democracy template prevailing in Western Europe and North America, but rather used their ideological identity to expand their influence beyond their territorial borders.

[7] Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution* (W.W. Norton, 1938) assumes that the struggles during the aftermath are almost always won by the ultimate leader or the most extremist faction of the revolutionary leadership. On occasions, such a leader may be overthrown by an internal coup due to a mistaken trust that the old order will be faithful to the constitution or obedient to the elected leadership during the period of transition. This way of overcoming the dilemma of the aftermath was the 1973 fate of Salvador Allende in Chile and in 2013 of Mohamad Morsi in Egypt.

[8] Arendt, *On Revolution* (Penguin Books, 1963). It is my view that Arendt influentially misconstrued revolutionary experiences in France, Russia, and the United States because of her liberal bias that privileged constitutional moderation over the imperatives of socio-economic radical reform. The major anti-systemic bias of liberalism is expressed by the aphorism declaring 'politics as the art of the possible.' Yet, the glory of revolutionary thinking is to make 'the impossible' happen.

[9] Mikhail Gorbachev could be viewed from this perspective as a belated attempt to undo the excesses of the aftermath due to the approach of Stalin, as some put it, saving socialism as Franklin Roosevelt had saved capitalism in the U.S. by borrowing from the theory and practice of socialism, or at least social democracy, in his efforts to mitigate the impacts of the Great Depression on working people in America.

As for the length of the aftermath, it is helpful to recall the response of Chou En Lai, the Foreign Minister of Chinese Communist Government, to the question put to him by the famed French art historian and political figure, André Malraux: "Do you consider the French Revolution a success?" The legendary Chinese diplomat coolly replied, "it is too early to tell." Perhaps, observers will be posing a similar question about the Arab Spring in coming decades.

[10] My earlier efforts to interpret the events of 2010-2011 in the MENA region involved a co-edited subsection of the *Third World Quarterly* titled "Five Years After the Arab Spring," 37(12): 2252-2334; my contribution was titled "Rethinking the Arab Spring: uprisings, contradictions, chaos and global reverberations," at 2322-2322.

[11] For influential exploration of the nature of community in the context of national diversity see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections of the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 1963)

[12] The U.S. Government apparently expected to be greeted as liberators in Iraq as they were in Germany and Japan after World War II. Instead, despite the removal and later execution of a hated and feared dictator, Saddam Hussein, there were immediate expressions of national resistance and sub-national demands for self-determination. The U.S./UK occupiers of Iraq failed to grasp the differing national moods of Germany as compared to Iraq, which resented foreign intervention as much or more than domestic dictatorship. In this sense, the post-colonial atmosphere prevailing in the Global South has put the brakes on the viability of geopolitical interventions emanating from the Global North, as the Soviets discovered in Afghanistan and the U.S. should have discovered in Vietnam.

[13] Ayatollah Khomeini was acutely conscious of defending Iran against a repeat of the 1953 coup that restored the Shah to power with the help of the U.S., especially the CIA. He was also wary of basing political legitimacy on nationalist grounds, conceiving of the fundamental political community in the Middle East as 'Islamic' and borderless rather than that of the nation state, which he regarded as something imposed on the region by European colonial ambitions after World War I and resumed after World War II during the Cold War.

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Chapter 3

The Two Hundred Year Crisis 1821-2021: The Fragmentation of the Ottoman State, Ongoing Western Imperialism, and the Tragedy of the Modern Muslim World

Mujeeb R. Khan

2021 represented a portentous milestone in the history of the modern Middle East. The fifth anniversary of the attempted July 15 Coup in Türkiye and the tenth anniversary of the Arab Spring were interlinked with the twentieth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks as well as the thirtieth anniversary of *Operation Desert Storm*. However, to fully understand their portent and provenance, one must move beyond what the *Annales* School of Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre, and Fernand Braudel termed *histoire evenementielle* or history of events, and consider the *longue durée* (long-term) over the last two centuries, which has tragically structured and shaped systemic despotism and underdevelopment and crisis and carnage in the heart of the modern Muslim World.

In this vein, it has also been two centuries since the birth of the Ottoman Eastern Question and genocidal ethnic cleansing in modern Europe and the Middle East commencing with the ethnic cleansing of Ottoman Muslims and Jews in the Greek Morea in 1821 and subsequent Western imperial intervention on behalf of their co-religionists. These events also catalysed desperate attempts at reform and modernisation, commencing with the *Tanzimat* under Sultan Mahmut II. A century later, the Eastern Question would spark WWI with the assassination of Arch-Duke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo and reach its denouement with the Sykes-Picot-Sazanov partition of the Middle East and the Turkish War of Independence ending in 1923.

The Western imperial fragmentation of the Ottoman State and continual intervention to preserve this state of affairs would structure ongoing structural-systemic regional conflict over the course of the century till today. This should be apparent by just considering the unending devastation in the Levant, Fertile Crescent, and the Persian Gulf whose origins lay in the British division of Iraq to control oil resources in the North and South and the establishment of a Hashemite Sunni dynasty along with an "independent" Kuwaiti Shaykhdom to cut off Mesopotamia and Basra province's outlet to the sea. In Palestine, the Balfour Declaration of 1917 would grant the creation of a "Jewish Homeland" and eventual state in a territory where native Jews only comprised 5% of the population. Similarly, France in its Greater Syrian Mandate pursued a flagrant policy of *Divide et Impera* by creating a *Grande Liban* that included the cities on the Mediterranean coast where the Maronite Christian population was a minority, and separate Alawite and Druze states to subdue the Sunni Arab majority. Finally, mother nature and colonial cartography conspired to leave the vast natural resource wealth of the region in the sparsely populated deserts of the Persian Gulf, separated from major indigenous population centres, thus ensuring mammoth plunder and underdevelopment and devastating Western military interventions to keep oil despots on their thrones.

The haunting spectre of the past continues to manifest itself in the present. M.S. Anderson in his diplomatic study of the Eastern Question dates its advent from 1774 with Catherine the Great's conquest of Crimea.[1] As former French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius noted in his valedictory address, it was President Obama's feckless betrayal of the Arab Spring and Syrian Uprising by refusing to enforce his own chemical weapons redline in August 2013, which gave Vladimir Putin the greenlight to capture Crimea a year later.[2] Putin, in turn, seeking to increase leverage against Western sanctions, decisively intervened in Syria, causing a massive refugee flow into Europe, which he further exploited by funding racist anti-liberal fascists from Pegida in Germany to the National Front in France. [3]

Derailing Democracy and Development in the Muslim World: The Leading Role of the West

The 2011 Arab Spring mobilised millions of citizens in the MENA region to revolt and demand a representative and accountable government. The region lagged behind in the "Third-Wave of Democratisation", which started in Southern Europe in the mid-1970s and spread to Latin America and Eastern Europe following the end of the Cold War.[4] For Neo-Orientalists and Neo-Conservatives like Bernard Lewis and Fuad Ajami, the answer for this democratic and developmental deficit lay in the internal shortcomings of Islamic cultures and societies and conveniently not in two hundred years of Western imperial conquests and capitulations.[5] Variants of the Oriental Despotism thesis popularised by Karl Wittfogel during the Cold War go back to Machiavelli's *Prince* and Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* and were originally meant to be a mirror to critique shortcomings in Western states rather than a genuine critical engagement with the Eastern "Other".[6] Nonetheless, they have been immensely influential in reifying flawed East-West binaries even in recent literature on the subject. There is an inherent flaw with such neo-Orientalist culturalist/institutionalist explanations asserting sweeping unmodulated causation for East-West divergence spanning millennia. As in the ostensible strait jacket of Islamic law and *awqaf* or religious endowments or the hoary "closing of the gates of *ijtihad*" it is that it wilfully chooses to overlook the decisive and ongoing role of Western imperialism in accounting for the origins and sustenance of this "great divergence".[7]

The Early Roots of Democracy and Development in the Muslim World

Until 1750, Kenneth Pomeranz in *The Great Divergence* points out that most of the global economic production was found in China and the Indian subcontinent.[8] This would quickly change with the rise of the industrial-technological revolution in Britain in the early 19th century, which, in turn, was propelled by earlier Western imperial expansions

and would accelerate total Western domination of the globe by the end of the century. Contra the Western cultural exceptionalist thesis propounded by thinkers from Max Weber to David Landes, a nascent industrial and technological revolution took place simultaneously in the Ottoman Egypt of Mehmet Ali Pasha fuelled by the lucrative cotton surplus and state centralization and extended to armaments factories, foundries, and textile mills and the creation of a very effective modern military.[9] As in the rest of the Ottoman Empire, it was very deliberate Western imperial conquests and capitulations which were designed to snuff out this early industrial/technological development that accounted for failure and not atavistic Islam.[10]

Similarly, the well-worn debate of whether Islam is compatible with democracy was actually settled in the 19th century in the Ottoman State with the *Tanzimat Fermani* or reform period (1839-1876). This was seen in the sweeping legislation of the *Gulhane Sherif Edict* and *Hatt-i-Humayun* granting equal citizenship regardless of religion or race and in the abolishment of slavery in 1856, ten years before the US. These secular Ottoman reforms granting rights of equal citizenship regardless of race or religion actually preceded that in most Western countries and colonies where forms of Apartheid were firmly entrenched. France, for example, granted French citizenship to Algerian Jews in the *Cremieux Decree* of 1870, but the majority Muslim population remained subjugated under the *Code de l'Indigenat*.

In the arena of Constitutional government, as Roderick Davison in his classic study makes clear, the Ottoman State also preceded many Western governments.[11] The First Constitutional period and parliament lasted from 1876-77 and was abruptly and deliberately cut short by the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-78, which led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Ottoman Muslims and the ethnic cleansing of millions more. The Second Constitutional period and parliamentary rule lasted from 1911-13 and similarly just as the Ottoman state was undergoing rapid political and socio-economic development, it was subjected to

massive military aggression first by the Italians and secondly by the Holy League of Balkan Christian states with full Russian and tacit British, German, Italian, and Austro-Hungarian support. Iran faced the same fate during its Constitutional Revolution of 1905-07 and there was clear premeditation in Western imperial determination to prevent these large Muslim states from consolidating strong political, economic, and military institutions. Anglo-Russian collusion led to the de-facto partition of Iran from North to south.[12] Thus, it should be clear that the most decisive variable in explaining the democracy and developmental deficit in Muslim countries is directly tied to massive Western and Russian military invasions and occupations, which continue in one form or another until today.

Identity Matters in International Politics: Realist and Constructivist Approaches to the Ottoman Eastern Question

There was a strong impetus for Ottoman reform which was directly linked to Western pressure and the championing of Christian minorities most vividly seen during the Greek War of Independence 1821-29. Even as Western colonial powers engaged in the brutal subjugation of racial and religious "others" around the globe, they sounded a steady drumbeat concerning the alleged civilizational shortcomings of the Ottoman State and the imperative for reform in order to be accepted into the Concert of Europe, which sought to maintain a balance of power, particularly concerning Russian expansionism in relation to the Ottoman Eastern Question and the attendant Great Game in Central Asia. This discussion broaches the oft-debated paradigms of realist versus ideational/constructivist approaches in international relations theory. The modern Ottoman Eastern Question is particularly relevant here as it underscores both the saliency and shortcomings of both approaches, which are still relevant in explaining contemporary international relations. Realist balance of power considerations certainly played a major role in Western state-centric approaches to the Ottoman Eastern Question, but at critical junctures they also were eclipsed by the logic of identity and domestic politics and also the failure of Western liberal

universalism in accounting for calamitous Western policies in the MENA region.[13] In contrast to allied Western-Russian intervention in support of Greek independence at the Battle Navarino in 1827, a clear realist balance of power imperatives led to British and French intervention in support of the Ottomans during the Crimean War of 1853-56. In turn, the sweeping early modern Ottoman reform efforts highlighted previously were motivated by gratitude for this Anglo-French support to push back Imperial Russia and by the genuine desire and belief it would lead to being fully accepted into the European society of states.[14] However, just as modern Türkiye has faced numerous obstacles preventing its ascension to the EU while less politically and socio-economically developed former Eastern Bloc countries like Romania and Bulgaria were readily embraced, the Ottomans could not really overcome exclusion without shedding their nominally Muslim heritage and identity.

Even today, this "civilizational" criteria of belonging and explicit Turkish exclusion have been repeatedly underscored by French leaders who see themselves as leaders of the Pan-European project from the late Valerie Giscard d'Estaing to Nicolas Sarkozy and Emmanuel Macron. Macron has made no secret of his ambitions to reassert French quasi-colonial control in the MENA via authoritarian rulers, ranging from Generals Sisi and Haftar to UAE ruler Muhammad bin Zayed (MBZ). In this vein, he and many others in the French establishment have repeatedly expressed religious and civilizational solidarity with Greece and Armenia who they have cast as kindred frontline states menaced by Türkiye's resurgent leadership in the Muslim world. To the great consternation of Poland, Ukraine, and the Baltic States, and echoing racial-civilizational chauvinists like Steve Bannon and Tucker Carlson, Macron has also gone to lengths to specifically underscore that, unlike Türkiye, Russia is *très profondement* a part of European Civilization and hence a natural ally.[15]

This logic of ideational variables and identity constructs trumping realist balance of power politics was most vividly and tragically seen

during the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-78. Russia had instigated the war by encouraging Balkan Christian rebellion in Ottoman Bosnia and Bulgaria as a pretext whose ultimate aim was the capture of the "Second Rome," Constantinople, and the Straits. British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli clearly viewed Russian expansionism and the "Great Game" as the main longstanding threat to the balance of power and the British Empire in the East, but he was unable to offer effective support to the Porte because of the incendiary anti-Turkish campaign launched by his bitter and fervently Evangelical rival, William Ewart Gladstone. Gladstone and the nascent British tabloid press greatly exaggerated Ottoman reprisals against Bulgarian Christians at Batak while completely ignoring the much larger ones against Ottoman Muslims, as was the case in 1821 Greece and is the case today in the Arab-Israeli and anti-PKK conflicts. [16] Terming the Turks "that one great inhuman species" and calling for their expulsion "bag and baggage" from Europe, Gladstone prevented Disraeli from effectively supporting the Ottomans while subjecting him to anti-Semitic innuendo for his "pro-Turk proclivities" in the bargain.[17]

The massacre of hundreds of thousands of Balkan Muslims during this war and the ethnic cleansing of five million more to Anatolia, along with earlier campaigns in the Morea, Crimea, and the Caucasus, would prefigure the twentieth-century genocides of Hitler and Stalin. [18] They would also underscore the still prevalent contradictions between Western claims of universal values and human rights and their particular identities and interests in approaches to the non-Western world. Thus, Gary Bass in his book *Freedom's Battle*, is right to point to Western interventions on behalf of Ottoman Christians as the origin of the concept of humanitarian interventionism but he is wrong to claim it was ever universalised, as his own examples from the Greeks to the Maronites and the Armenians show it never extended to the dismal fate of Ottoman Muslims, a double standard still prevalent today as seen in Bosnia, Palestine, Syria, Libya, Egypt, Bahrain, and Yemen.[19]

Western complicity in the ethnic cleansing of Ottoman Muslims, in turn, led to the emergence of Pan-Islamic solidarity amongst vast colonised Muslim populations particularly in British India and the Malay Archipelago. The British Empire blamed the 1857 Indian Uprising on the Muslim population and exiled the last Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar to Burma. This led many South Asian Muslims to identify with the Ottoman State and Sultan-Caliph as a *schicksalsgemeinschaft* or community of fate particularly with the spread of print capital in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Indian Muslim medical missions began to arrive to assist the Ottomans during the Balkan Wars of 1912-13 and this solidarity would grow into the Khilafat Movement, the hitherto largest anti-British colonial movement in South Asia, inspiring even Gandhi and his future struggle. Leaders of the movement like the Ali brothers were not really motivated by a romantic attachment to the Ottoman Dynasty or even the office of Sultan-Caliph recently renovated by Sultan Abdul-Hamid II. Rather, they had a very sophisticated understanding that the modernizing and militarily proficient Ottoman State was the last embodiment of Muslim state power in the international system and its extinction would lead to the subjugation and even extermination of Muslim populations worldwide and the desecration of their holy places. Tragically, the events of the last century and ongoing persecution and genocide against Bosnian, Rohingya, Uighur, Palestinian, Chechen, and Kashmiri Muslims shows how prescient they were.

The Khilafat Movement did play a vital role in assisting the *Milli Mucadele*, or the Turkish War of Liberation, of 1919-1923. This was not only in considerable sums of money sent to the nationalist cause with which Ataturk would later open *Türkiye İş Bankası*, but more importantly preventing the deeply Turko/Islamophobe British Prime Minister David Lloyd-George, (who modelled himself on his idol Gladstone), from militarily intervening on behalf of the invading Greek armies. The movement would fizzle out when Ataturk abolished the Caliphate in 1924 and undertook a radical program to deracinate the

nation from its Seljuk and Ottoman Islamic heritage. However, the embers of the Pan-Islamic movement never died, giving birth to the nation of Pakistan and reaffirming bonds with a Turkiye reconnected to its historic leadership role in the Muslim World and newly reconciled with her Selcuk-Ottoman Islamic heritage.

For the Turkish political establishment, 1992 promised to be an auspicious year. The Cold War had recently ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall and a newly inaugurated European Union at Maastricht seemed to beckon. Furthermore, President Turgut Ozal overrode considerable domestic opposition to play a vital role in Operation Desert Storm which the Bush Senior administration promised would inaugurate "a New World Order". However, no sooner than these lofty proclamations were made, both the Turkish political establishment and wider public were deeply shocked to see the return of genocidal ethnic cleansing against Ottoman Muslim linked populations in Bosnia, Azerbaijan, and Chechnya. Even more traumatic was the growing awareness in the Spring and Summer of 1992 that, as in the 19th century, much of the Western world was indifferent or even complicit in the Serbian campaign of mass murder, rape, and the destruction of priceless Ottoman monuments in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the coterminous campaign against Azeri Turks in Nagorno-Karabakh by Armenian forces. Republican Turkey assumed it had put the trauma of 19th century Ottoman rejection and decline behind for a shining Western/European future; yet the return of genocidal ethnic cleansing on the Ottoman marches clearly indicated to paraphrase Faulkner, "The past was not past".

The genocide against Bosnian Muslims was particularly traumatic for Turkish state and society and played, as I predicted at the time, a decisive role in the reorientation of Turkish national identity and foreign policy in its aftermath.[20] This is because they were intimately linked to the highest levels of the Ottoman State for centuries. As a uniquely secular often blond-blued eyed population of European Muslims with clean-shaven Imams and vibrant female population dressed in the latest

Western fashions, they epitomized everything the Kemalist revolution was meant to achieve. Furthermore, as I underscored to gasping MPs in a special session of the Turkish Grand National Assembly's Foreign Affairs Committee in 1994, when the Serbian genocidaires were slaughtering Bosnian Muslim men, women, and children they did not call them Bosnians or even Muslims, but Turks. This was reiterated a year later as the genocide reached a crescendo with the defenceless "safe-area" of Srebrenica turned over to General Ratko Mladic by contemptuously indifferent EU/UN troops. Upon entering, Mladic announced, "Now the time has come to take revenge against the Turks".

Along with a Turkish graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who is now a widely published author on Turkey, I was in contact with leaders of the Bosnian Muslim community in Chicago including Bosnia's first Ambassador to the US Nedzib Sacirbey.[21] We became aware of the Serbian mass murder and rape campaign launched in April 1992 in real-time as it was happening and yet were astounded at the deafening silence from the US government. We would later realize that the George H.W. Bush administration was involved in a months-long cover-up led by Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger and NSC Advisor Brent Scowcroft, so as not to have to intervene and live up to the rhetoric about establishing a "New World Order". The Serbs took this indulgence and knowing silence as a signal to accelerate their genocidal campaign. For their part, the British and French governments of John Major and François Mitterrand were even more sinister, openly supporting the Serbian genocidaires, as related by White House historian Taylor Branch. Mitterrand told Clinton that they supported the Serbs because the Bosnian Muslims were "an alien presence" in Europe and British officials stressed the destruction of Bosnia was "a painful but necessary restoration of a Christian Europe".[22]

Even beyond Bosnia, ethnic cleansing and genocide against Muslims from Syria, Azerbaijan, Palestine, Burma, and East Turkistan/Xinxiang has greatly impacted Turkish foreign policy and is referenced frequently

in speeches by President Erdogan.[23] During the genocidal ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims, the Turkish Foreign Ministry released a letter the Muslims of Rangoon had sent to the British Indian government requesting intervention on behalf of Ottoman Muslims facing ethnic cleansing during the war of 1877-78.[24] Recently, as Russian, Iranian, and Syrian Arab Army forces threatened the Idlib pocket, and before unleashing its revolutionary networked drone warfare, Presidential Communications Director Fahrettin Altun announced that Türkiye would not allow another Bosnia or Myanmar to unfold along its border.

Identity matters in international politics and the persistence of certain Western approaches to the Muslim World shows that ideational factors in such cases often offer better causal explanations than realist ones based upon balance of power politics and the state as a unitary rational actor model. This was a critique I offered in a seminar with a former international relations professor Stephan Walt, who in his book *The Origins of Alliances,* purported to show that despite shared identity, endemic conflict in the inter-Arab state system showed the saliency of state-centred realist balance of threat approaches. However, I pointed out that as in Thucydides Greek city-state system or Machiavelli's Italian states, common identity in a non-democratic/consensual state system often produced extreme anxiety and rivalry amongst autocratic leaders vulnerable over issues of legitimation and appeals to identity and allegiance crossing state boundaries. This was often further compounded by external intervention whether by Persia in the Greek poleis or France and Spain in Renaissance Italy. In the absence of a successful Bismarck or Cavour, the example of the EU shows such systemic internecine regional strife is only resolved by domestic reform, the rise of representative and accountable governments, and forms of regional integration.

Walt and Mearsheimer's book *The Israel Lobby* correctly underscores that it was domestic lobbies and identity politics that led the US to a needless and disastrous invasion of Iraq in 2003, opposed at the time

by most academic experts and military strategists.[25] Their courageous Realist critiques of Neo-Conservative foreign policy interventions from the perspective of both national interests and morality have been amongst the most cogent offered. However, in their most recent books critiquing 'Liberal Hegemony', even Walt and Mearsheimer have fallen for the common fallacy of assuming that Neo-Conservative US foreign policy aimed at democracy promotion in the Muslim World, which if it had been sincere, would have actually garnered much sympathy in the region instead of hostility.[26] As this essay illustrates, however, the US from the time of Operation Ajax and the Mossadeq coup in 1953, quickly fell into the path of previous Western imperial powers and actually preferred malleable despots to democrats in the oil rich region.[27] The betrayal of the Arab Spring proved yet again that what both US Republican and Democratic establishments wanted were not genuinely popular governments but pseudo-democratic Ahmad Chalabi type clients willing to indulge Israel and the Western plunder of the resource wealth of the region.

Nor is regime security synonymous with state security. As many have noted, the Saudi single family regime, like other sheikdoms in the Gulf, prefers to keep its military forces divided and weak out of a fear of coups. Samuel Huntington notes in *Political Order in Changing Societies* "the King's Dilemma" whereby traditional absolutist monarchies plant the seeds of their own demise by modernising the very state and military institutions which end up dethroning them. Tellingly, the Muslim World is the last bastion of absolutist monarchies which survive, not because of some ancient provenance and legitimacy, but because they were put in charge of trillions of dollars in natural resource wealth in return for substantially turning over their petro-dollars and external and domestic security to Western financial institutions and militaries/ defence contractors.

The brazen nature of this protection racket and the horrific human toll it has been taking in the region is shown by US, UK, and French arms

sales. As Muslim children die of disease and starvation throughout the region and wash up on beaches like Alan Kurdi, Western leaders from Trump to Macron brag about hundreds of billions in redundant arms sales to these single-family despotisms who do not even have the pilots and personal to use them. Needless to say, these arms sales, the main external source sustaining Western military-industrial complexes, can never be used to defend Muslim populations facing genocide or ethnic cleansing from Bosnia to Burma, but only to threaten fellow Muslim countries like Iran or roll back the Arab Spring with genocidal consequences in Syria and Yemen.

As part of this protection racket, fuelled itself by militarised Western and Russian policy in the region, both Qatar and the UAE were recently compelled to buy scores of billions in incompatible and redundant US F-15/16, Euro-Typhoon, and French Rafale fighters. Similarly, a Kuwaiti MP indignantly informed me following Operation Desert Storm in 1993 that Kuwait had to not only liquidate much of its $100 billion sovereign wealth fund to fully pay Western powers the cost of the war but also had to massively purchase incompatible weapons systems to be mothballed with the air-force contract to the US, armoured vehicles to the UK, and naval contracts to France; when the Russians expected payment complaining they had not exercised their UN veto to save Saddam, they were given the contract for SMERSH multiple rocket artillery systems. Such serious fraud goes back to the most serious fraud in modern UK history, the Al-Yamamah arms deal with BAE for over $50 billion dollars in the 1980s leading to a Serious Fraud Office indictment, but the Western rule of law was once again overturned by an extraordinary intervention by the British government due to Saudi demands.

Even in terms of domestic security, the Al-Khalifa ruling family of Bahrain relied on the notorious British General Ian Henderson to stay in power and crush dissent. Similarly, the ruling Al-Nahyan family of Abu Dhabi in the UAE currently relies on Australian General Michael Hindmarsh to command its land forces and retired US Officer General

Stephen Toumajan to command its Joint Aviation Command- both implicated in war crimes in Yemen while simultaneously wearing UAE uniforms like British officers used to do in the Indian Raj.[28] The UAE led Arab Spring Roll-back operation in Libya, Sudan, and Yemen also relied on notorious mercenaries like Eric Prince and Janjaweed militias implicated in atrocities in Darfur both for regime security and power projection abroad. Prince and his Colombian mercenaries were also instructed not to recruit Muslims for domestic security because they could not be trusted to crush internal unrest. Western intelligence agencies, and particularly those of Israel and France and their affiliated cyber corporations like the NSO group, played prominent roles in the tracking, detention, torture, and even murder of leading Saudi and Emirati dissidents in coordinated actions designed to roll back the Arab Spring. It must be understood that such murderous coordination to eliminate reformist dissidents and safeguard the most venal and cruel forms of despotism has been long-standing Western policy in the region. The Israeli journalist Ronen Bergman has revealed the central role played by Israeli and French security services in the kidnapping and murder of leading Moroccan and Third World dissident Mehdi Ben Barka in 1965 and James Bill has documented how the Shah's notorious SAVAK was set up and trained by the CIA and Mossad to torture and to crush internal dissent.[29]

Rolling Back the Arab Spring: 2010-2021

The Arab Spring began in Tunisia with the self-immolation of Muhammad Bouazizi and ended there ten years later with the foreign-backed coup of President Kais Saied. Contra apologetic Neo-Conservative accounts like that of Steven Cook laying the failure of the Arab Spring on internal societal shortcomings, once again external variables were decisive in derailing democracy. [30] This is clear in David Kirkpatrick's award-winning reporting for the New York Times, which outlines in detail the conspiracy orchestrated and financed by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel to roll back the Arab Spring starting

in the strategically vital and most populous state of Egypt.[31] As soon as the country's first democratically elected leader Muhammad Morsi entered office, an orchestrated campaign was began to create fuel shortages and supply bottle-necks to "make the economy scream" in the words of Henry Kissinger who had used the same methods in the 1971 anti-democratic Chilean coup against Salvador Allende. Police forces were removed from the streets and thugs were allowed to run rampant including carrying out violent attacks against Morsi supporters.

The crony capitalist Naguib Sawiris working with the UAE ruler Muhammad bin Zayed (MBZ) created the Tamarod youth movement to call for Morsi's overthrow. Morsi was never given a chance to rule in his one-year term and his efforts to defend his government from the *faloul* or remnants of Mubarak's police state were falsely portrayed in tendentious Western accounts as evidence of his growing "authoritarianism". The coup reached its denouement with the August 14, 2013, massacre of over a thousand pro-democracy civilians at Raba'a Square. It was one of the largest massacres in modern Egyptian history and the largest massacre of pro-democracy civilians, likely eclipsing the one at Tiananmen Square. The coup and crackdown to disperse anti-coup protesters were urged on by the UAE, KSA, Israeli troika, with Israeli officials promising to protect the Junta from backlash in the US Congress.[32] Indeed, AIPAC stalwart and ostensibly liberal Democratic Congressman Elliot Engel quickly came out in support of the coup, stating that it did not violate US laws mandating sanctions on anti-democratic coups because Morsi, while freely elected, was not a democrat in spirit. Revealingly, the same sophistry was employed by another liberal Democratic AIPAC supporter Congressman Brad Sherman who along with commentators like Richard Haass justified the anti-democratic Turkish coup attempt of July 15, 2015, in identically Orwellian terms as being necessary to "save democracy".

Yet, unlike Tiananmen, which is commemorated with great solemnity in the West, Raba'a was accepted in silence by the ostensible Western

guardians of democracy and universal rights. Just two weeks before the massacre, Secretary of State John Kerry stated that the Egyptian military "was restoring democracy… and had the support of millions and millions of people".[33] American law clearly required that all aid be cut off from regimes that overthrow democratically elected governments and the US had recognized President Morsi's elections as such. From these turn of events, it is evident that the Obama Administration conveniently managed to circumvent the rule of law by having then-State Department Spokeswoman Jen Psaki state "We have made a determination not to make a determination". [38]

Former Ambassador and close Hillary Clinton and John Kerry advisor Frank Wisner Jr played a critical role in urging support for Mubarak and later in endorsing the overthrow of the Morsi government. Wisner also had very close ties to UAE Ambassador Yusuf Al-Otaiba who played a key role in the coup plotting. There is an ironic closing of the circle here as Wisner's father, Frank Sr., played a critical role in the CIA overthrow of democratically elected governments in Iran in 1953 and Guatemala in 1954 which would have disastrously redounding consequences decades hence. The US would continue to subvert democratic transitions in Algeria in 1992 and Gaza and Somalia as well with the excuse that movements which were both democratic and Islamic would lead to "one man, one vote, one time".

Democracy is an iterative process whereby rotating elections and transitions of power habituate parties to sharing power with political opponent. This very process, however, is what Western nations have repeatedly tried to throttle in its cradle in the MENA region. The reason was explained by an establishment factotum for empire, Fareed Zakaria. He wrote that free elections in the Arab World would lead not to the election of "Jeffersonian democrats" or what he called "decent" leaders like King Abdallah of Jordan, but Muslim Brotherhood leaders sharply critical of Israel and Western policies in the region.[34] This observation is revealing on two accounts. Firstly, Jeffersonian democrats were

notorious for slave holding and ethnically cleansing Native Americans and some local despots, as the *Panama Papers* reveal, run indecently oppressive and corrupt police states. Secondly, as noted, pseudo-democratic charlatans like Ahmad Chalabi aside, the West cannot accept genuinely popular and accountable leaders in the region because they would reflect fierce public opposition to Israeli Apartheid and ethnic cleansing and predatory Western invasions and economic exploitation via pliant dictators in the region.[35]

One might call it karma that Western bad faith when it comes to ostensibly universal human rights and democracy, especially in the Muslim World, has, to paraphrase Malcolm X, finally come home to roost. Many Muslims noted that Western invasions and backing of dictators has boomeranged, spawning terrorism. This, in turn, has led to the rise of national security states, right-wing populism, and White-Christian supremacism which now directly threaten democracy in the West itself. A further karmic irony is the fact that the ostensible client states of KSA, UAE, and Israel directly intervened in the 2016 US elections, far more brazenly and effectively than Russia, to help elect Donald Trump; foisting the sort of venal and violent despotism at home which the US has long promoted abroad.[36] Nor is the fallout limited to domestic politics. Just as Jim Crow Apartheid undermined America's standing at the height of the Cold War, the Iraq War and Western indulgence of Israeli Apartheid extending to even official condemnation of leading Western human rights organizations such as *Human Rights Watch* and *Amnesty International* overexposing the latter issue has engendered a distinct legitimation crisis. Official Western condemnation of Russian and Chinese transgressions against "the rules based international order" are often met with derision in the West itself.

July 15, 2016: Why did Türkiye Become a Leading Target of the Roll-Back Operation?

In response to the Egyptian coup and slaughter of thousands of pro-

democracy protesters, an outraged Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan took to waving the four fingered Raba'a salute and denouncing, "*Darbeye darbe diyemeyenler*", "Those who can't call a coup a coup", referring to the hypocrisy of Western guardians of universal human rights and democracy. Erdogan would soon find himself in the same position when faced with the bloody Gulenist coup attempt. Instead of a rousing defence of the democratically elected Turkish government and NATO ally, Secretary of State John Kerry would call for "stability, and peace, and continuity within the country' when it was not yet clear the coup would fail. Erdogan's close friend and the Arab World's first democratically elected leader Muhammad Morsi would ultimately be tortured to death by General Sisi's Junta with Western nations instead of issuing condemnations, holding summits with the murderer celebrating what President Trump would call his "favourite dictator" and France issuing him its highest award not long after. Revealingly, the Egyptian Coup led to telegrammed congratulations uniting Israel, KSA, UAE, Jordan, Syria, and Russia with notably Türkiye and Qatar the odd men out. It would be no coincidence that both would be targeted for regime change at the tail end of the roll back operation mainly due to their support of democratic transitions in the region. As my own published research makes clear, the attempted coup in Türkiye was to be the culmination of the democracy roll back operation orchestrated by Israel and some Arab despots with acquiescence in major Western capitals. [37] As I elucidated, the evidence of Gulen's central role in the bloody coup attempt is stronger than that which existed against Osama Bin Laden in the wake of 9/11, and for those who have long studied the movement its early and sustained links to Western intelligence agencies were manifest.

What is noteworthy is that until 2010, the ruling AK Party government of then Prime Minister Erdogan was extolled in Western media and political circles and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's "Zero Problems with Neighbours" approach helped soothe nascent anxieties about the Muslim identity of the party. President Obama famously

indicated that Erdogan was one of his most frequently consulted interlocutors and *Wikileaks* of US diplomatic cables revealed that in a May 2009 meeting, US Ambassador Anne Patterson concurred with her Turkish counterpart that Türkiye would be a very positive role model for Pakistan as a stable moderate Muslim democracy.[38]

However, by 2013, relations between Ankara and Washington were in free fall. Türkiye as a leading NATO ally even started to face de-facto military sanctions from the sale of used frigates to Patriot missiles, Predator drones, and basic items like JDAM smart bomb kits. What went wrong in the short three-year interval? Conventional Western media, think tanks, and even semi-scholarly accounts started to point at Erdogan's "growing authoritarianism" after the Gezi Park demonstrations and Türkiye's ostensibly assertive foreign policy in the region. However, a critically informed analysis shows these accounts to be tendentious. The rift with the US emerged over opposition to Israeli atrocities against subjugated Palestinians, and Türkiye's strident and wide support for the Arab Spring, which made Erdogan the most popular leader in the Muslim world and conversely the most threatening one for Israel and several Western establishments.

The opening rupture first happened with the 2009 Operation Cast Lead, the massive indiscriminate Israeli bombing of Gaza killing over 1,500 people, the vast majority civilians, while only 13 Israeli soldiers died. Turkish outrage was compounded by the fact that, just prior to the onslaught, Ankara was working very closely with the government of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to help Israel achieve normalisation with its neighbours, particularly Syria. The Ak Party government had achieved a historic rapprochement with the Baathist government of Bashar Al-Assad and as Erdogan and his wife had become good friends with the Syrian power couple, the border was also demilitarised for the first time. Türkiye's "zero-problems" with neighbours' policy was premised on the desire to achieve regional peace and integration which would also be conducive to much-needed socio-economic and political reforms. Turkish-Israeli relations came to a breaking point in May

2010, as Israeli forces raided the Turkish NGO ship *Mavi Marmara,* which was seeking to symbolically break the Gaza blockade, killing ten unarmed Turkish citizens and seriously injuring dozens more. Not coincidentally, it was in the immediate wake of the *Mavi Marmara* crisis that the Gulen Movement started earnestly attempting to overthrow Erdogan's government with the attempt to arrest his National Intelligence Organisation (MIT) Chief, Hakan Fidan. Independent of this, good Turkish relations with Syria and nominally Sunni Arab allies like Saudi Arabia and the UAE also quickly deteriorated following the Arab Spring of 2010-11.

Ankara's bewilderment and anger that its good intentions and efforts at easing regional tensions were reciprocated with growing hostility and resentment instead has often been misinterpreted. Veteran diplomats like Faruk Loğoğlu and Namık Tan have blamed Davutoğlu's support for Muslim Brotherhood type movements and regime change in the region for Türkiye's isolation, or what Presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalın in response has referred to as a "precious loneliness" stemming from the defence of human rights and democratization in the region. Similarly, Turkish academic critics of Ak Party foreign policy in this period like Behlül Özkan and Soner Cagaptay of the *Washington Institute*, (a direct offshoot of *AIPAC*), have tended to echo US neo-conservative canards falsely alleging that Ak Party support for the Arab Spring was not genuinely motivated by a desire to promote democracy and human rights but an attempt to install Muslim Brotherhood regimes in the region.[39]

In fact, Türkiye supported democratization in the region and not the Muslim Brotherhood per se though it did realize the reality that after decades of brutal and corrupt secular authoritarian rule, Muslim Democratic parties would win free and fair elections and naturally gravitate toward Türkiye and the Ak Party as role models. In Egypt, Erdogan actually elicited hostility from many Muslim Brotherhood supporters when he defended secularism properly understood, *"a*

secular state does not mean that the people are atheists, it means respect for all religions and each individual has the freedom to practice his own religion."[40] Erdogan ended his speech by stressing, *"The freedom message spreading from Tahrir Square has become a light of hope for all the oppressed through Tripoli, Damascus and Sanaa… Democracy and freedom is as basic a right as bread and water for you, my brothers."*

Similarly, in Syria, far from supporting regime change or opposition Muslim Brotherhood movements as often alleged, Ahmet Davutoglu made numerous desperate trips to Damascus to help the Syrian regime peacefully navigate the Arab Spring and introduce gradual reform. However, the Baathist Alawite minority regime quickly returned to type when faced with massive peaceful protests and started a genocidal campaign of slaughter against the Sunni Muslim majority beginning with the torture and murder of children in Dara'a who had scrawled anti-regime graffiti.

Thus, it was Türkiye's championing of the Arab Spring and Erdogan's growing stature with the Muslim masses which explains the country's "precious loneliness" and growing rift with erstwhile regional and Western allies, and not the claim that Türkiye's assertive foreign policy was the cause. There is a very revealing juxtaposition between Erdogan's demonisation in the West and the fact that polls show he has long been the most popular and admired political leader in the Muslim world.[41] It must be noted that Erdogan has repeatedly been democratically elected and his defence of millions of Muslim lives in Libya, Syria, Somalia, and Azerbaijan has genuinely won him deep adoration in much of the Muslim world. Furthermore, Türkiye seems to be the preferred target of all sorts of smear campaigns even though its pro-democracy stance and present-day treatment of ethnic and religious minorities is far better compared to countries that do not face the West's economic and military sanctions, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, UAE, India and Israel. In the lengthy *Atlantic* cover story on the global roll back of democracy, Anne

Applebaum manages to give a prominent place to Türkiye without mentioning the glaring example of the roll back of the Arab Spring next door by Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE with the complicity of leading Western democracies.[42]

Turkish bewilderment at how quickly their ties deteriorated after the Arab Spring extended to not only erstwhile Sunni Arab allies like Saudi Arabia and UAE, but also to NATO partners. One point that Ankara failed to appreciate was how deep the commitment of these actors was to preserve the post-Ottoman fragmentation of the region and the attendant fear and loathing of democracy, public accountability, and regional integration this fostered. Here once again, ideational factors trumped realist ones. Türkiye at this time was not seeking to be a revisionist power nor did it seek to question the legitimacy of prevailing regimes. However, the fact that Turkish democratization led to a reconnection with its Seljuk and Ottoman Islamic heritage and attendant growing Muslim and democratic soft-power with the publics of the wider region was enough to incite palpable fear and resentment amongst local despots and their Western and Israeli backers.

The Israeli, KSA, and UAE Counter-Revolution

Such collusion between Israeli leaders and Arab rulers against popular leaders and movements goes back to the heyday of Gamal Abdel Nasser and Pan-Arabism. Indeed, there is an eerie resonance between the fear and loathing directed against Erdogan for his popularity in the Muslim world and that which David Ben-Gurion, Guy Mollet, Anthony Eden, and even John Foster Dulles directed at Nasser over fears that he may take up the Green Mantle of the new Saladin and this directly led to the Suez Crisis of 1956.[43] Ben-Gurion, for his part, established a foundational doctrine for keeping the region fragmented which he termed "the Strategy of the Periphery" and that entailed alliances between the non-Arab and non-Muslim powers on the outer rim of the region including Ethiopia, as well as ironically Türkiye and Iran.[44] Here again the shift in threat perception is determined by Constructivist ideational

shifts in national identity at the establishment level, and not so much realist balance of power concerns. When Republican Turkiye officially centered her national identity on Non-Islamic foundations such as the Hittites, European Civilisation, and Central Asian shamanism, and when Iran was similarly spurning her Islamic heritage for Achaemenid and Sassanid Persia, intimate strategic cooperation with Israel was sustained despite deep public antipathy over the ethnic cleansing of mainly Muslim Palestinians and the Zionist conquests of Muslim Holy Shrines in Jerusalem in 1967. Similarly, when Türkiye and Iran were officially alienated from their Muslim heritage, they posed little threat to the legitimation of despotic Arab regimes. The present day "dual containment" of Türkiye and Iran attempted by the Israel, UAE, KSA, and Egypt axis, despite Ankara and Tehran's own differences, stems from ideational anxieties over identity and legitimation more than realist balance of power ones.[45]

Well before the Abraham Accords, a budding Israeli and authoritarian Arab alliance directed at Türkiye was seen emerging in meetings between prominent Israeli diplomat and Netanyahu advisor Dore Gold and retired Saudi General Anwar Eshki who shared a panel in June 2015 at the Council on Foreign Relations chaired by Elliot Abrams calling for a Kurdish alliance to contain Ankara. This was especially ironic given that only a few years earlier, Dore Gold had written a well-publicised book spewing venom at the Saudis titled, "*Hatred's Kingdom*." This coordination developed steam with the attempted coup of July 15 and has continued as reported by the well informed and incisive David Hearst of *Middle East Eye*. At a secret meeting at the end of July 2019 with authoritarian Arab allies, Mossad Chief Yossi Cohen declared that, "Iranian power is fragile, the real threat is Türkiye."[46] The meeting proposed several action plans including the rehabilitation of Bashar Al-Assad to serve as a bulwark and the defence of the PKK-YPG-SDF to allow them to play a similar role along the Turkish border. We shall see how this collusion dovetailed with similarly minded American officials to add fuel to the carnage in Syria.

For its part, even prior to the betrayal of the Arab Spring in Egypt, Syria, Bahrain, Yemen, Sudan, and Libya, the US had revealed the depths of Machiavellianism it was willing to plunge with the betrayal of the Iraqi uprisings it had publicly called for during Operation Desert Storm. *"On February 15, 1991, four weeks into Operation Desert Storm, President George H.W. Bush, using identical language twice—at the White House and later at a Raytheon defence plant in Massachusetts—encouraged "the Iraqi military and the Iraqi people to take matters into their own hands and force Saddam Hussein, the dictator, to step aside"*. [47] The Iraqi people, particularly Kurds in the north and Shia in the south, responded massively in uprisings which quickly saw Saddam's regime lose control over 14 of 18 Iraqi provinces. Yet, no sooner did the uprisings get going, the US got cold feet that a truly popular Shia majority government may not choose to balance against Iran. US forces deep inside Iraq refused to defend the populations subjected to massacres and General Schwarzkopf even allowed Iraqi gunships to fly over American lines to carry out the slaughter. Patrick and Andrew Cockburn in their book, *Out of the Ashes*, write that British diplomats made it clear that democratisation in Iraq would have an unacceptable demonstration effect for the single-family despotisms of the Gulf, *"No one wanted to encourage democracy in Iraq. It might prove catching. It had been a conservative war to keep the Middle East as it was, not to introduce change."*[48] It is sobering to ponder that the American betrayal here was even more sinister than that of Stalin's betrayal of the Warsaw Uprising of August 1944. After all, Stalin had never encouraged the Polish Home Army to rise-up, they just assumed he would never suddenly stop fighting the *Wehrmacht* on the Warsaw front so they could be massacred.

The Betrayal in Syria

Following the betrayal of the Arab Spring in Egypt, Washington doubled down in Syria, betraying the very public uprisings it initially seemed to encourage along with its allies Israel, the UAE, and KSA, which sought to have both Al-Assad and the opposition kill each other as they did with Iran-Iraq during their war. After the Baathist regime spurned offers for a peaceful resolution and launched a genocidal war sending millions of refugees fleeing to safety in Türkiye, Ankara decided to bring the regime down, working closely with the US. However, even before the rise of ISIS, which was directly facilitated by the Syrian regime letting the most hardened Salafi-Jihadist out of jails, Obama's feckless refusal to reinforce his chemical weapons redlines indicated the US only wanted to contain the carnage inside Syria and maintain the balanced fragmentation of the region. As in the case of Iraq, this external great power intervention ensured that even after millions of lives were lost, there was little resolution to conflicts and some of the most egregious figures were left in power. Mimicking the contempt the American architects of the so called "New World Order" showed in covering up the genocide of Bosnian Muslims, Obama absurdly termed the carnage as "rooted in conflicts that date back millennia" and dismissed Syrian opposition fighters who only took up arms after the slaughter of peaceful protestors, as "a bunch of farmers, teachers, and pharmacists". Just as American fighter jets casually watched for years the destruction of Sarajevo and other Bosnian towns at the hands of an antiquated Yugoslav People's Army (JNA), the US allowed Bashar's decrepit helicopters to barrel bomb historic cities like Homs and Aleppo into rubble while dismissing fervent Turkish calls for a no-fly zone by having General Martin Dempsey absurdly declare that it would be "too difficult and expensive" to enforce. The US intervened in Syria not to stop the genocide against the majority Sunni population, which it did not want to see empowered, but only to stop ISIS when it started to target Yezidis and Christians and posed a threat abroad. Obama's Chief of Staff Denis McDonough, who played a key role in talking him out

of enforcing his chemical weapons redlines during a stroll in the Rose Garden, openly laid out the latest Machiavellian strategy: *"McDonough, who had perhaps the closest ties to Mr. Obama, remained sceptical. He questioned how much it was in America's interest to tamp down the violence in Syria. Accompanying a group of senior lawmakers on a day trip to the Guantánamo Bay naval base in early June, Mr. McDonough argued that the status quo in Syria could keep Iran pinned down for years. In later discussions, he also suggested that a fight in Syria between Hezbollah and Al Qaeda would work to America's advantage, according to Congressional officials."*[49]

Current Biden NSC deputy advisor Brett McGurk was put in charge as Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS 2015-2018 and his tenure almost led Turkish-American relations to a breaking point. McGurk had arrived along with other planeloads of opportunists in Iraq after the fall of Saddam, and most of them had hardly any knowledge of the region's culture, language, and history. Following the well-worn wreckage strewn path of so many blitheful neo-colonial parvenus evocatively rendered by Joseph Conrad and Graham Greene, McGurk failed forward from one disaster to another without missing a promotion in the particularly American neo-conservative tradition of Denis Ross, L. Paul Bremer, Elliot Abrams, and Dan Senor. After indirectly contributing to the rise of ISIS with his unbridled endorsement of the rampant sectarianism and betrayal of the Sunni Arab *Sahwat* by Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki, McGurk went on to establish close and lucrative ties to the Saudi and Emirati ruling families. McGurk, like General James Mattis and former Defence Secretary Robert Gates, literally went on the Emirati payroll becoming a director at a Silicon Valley start-up "Primer" funded mainly by the UAE.[50] In a *New York Times* profile of the UAE leader and his project to crush democratisation in the Arab World, which entailed the massacres of tens of thousands of people, McGurk was the most prominent apologist for MBZ's agenda as reported by Robert F. Worth. He stated, *"It seemed extreme. But I've come to the conclusion that he was often more right than wrong."*[51]

It is not surprising that McGurk and his deputy, former Ambassador to the UAE, Barbara Leaf, spearheaded the Biden Administration's whitewashing of MBZ protégé and Saudi Crown Prince MBS for numerous documented wrongdoings and policy disasters. Meanwhile, the focus of McGurk's moral indignation has been Turkish President Erdogan who he insinuated was hiding ISIS leader Al-Baghdadi a few miles from the border. Finally, he also enthusiastically embraced the so-called Abraham Accords between Israel and Arab rulers as a vehicle for containing Türkiye in the region.[52]

Unsurprisingly, in Syria, McGurk mimicked Israeli, Saudi, and Emirati strategies to contain the carnage in the country while making sure it remained fragmented by assuring victory for neither side. In pursuit of this strategy, once ISIS attacked Assad-aligned PKK (*Kurdistan Workers Party*) positions in North-East Syria around Kobani, they emerged as the perfect foil for this strategy and the broader containment of both Türkiye and Iran. The PKK's Syrian branch the YPG (*Peoples Protection Corp*) and its political wing the PYD (*Democratic Union Party*) was quickly rebranded the SDF or Syrian Democratic Forces by American General Raymond Thomas, and it served as the forward air-controller for massive American air-strikes that killed tens of thousands of civilians and flattening Raqqa and Mosul. Revealingly, American airpower was never used to stop the genocidal onslaught of the Syrian regime which killed more than ten times as many civilians as ISIS. Despite long being recognized as a Marxist terrorist organisation by the State Department, the US funnelled tonnes of weapons to the YPG because its dependency on external backers and agenda to carve up existing states made it the perfect mercenary force for US, Israeli, and other forces to deploy to contain the two most powerful Muslim states in the region, Türkiye and Iran.[53]

As Turkish officials watched in alarm the massive arming of an internationally recognised terrorist organization to fight another terrorist organization, US envoys James Jeffrey and Central Command

Commander General Joseph Votel kept assuring Ankara that the alliance with the YPG was only "temporary, tactical, and transactional." Jeffrey, in further public statements, again underscored that the US wanted to maintain a significant presence in eastern Syria to interdict Iran's land corridor from Iraq through Syria to Lebanon. While Jeffrey was one of the rare American policy makers to recognise the vital role of Türkiye in the regional and international balance, Brett McGurk and Cent-Com commanders were signalling that America's newfound proxy force in the region could also interdict and control Türkiye's southern border with the Arab world as well with General Votel announcing plans to create a 40,000 strong well-armed SDF army there.

General Votel attempted to market the creation of a de-facto PKK army along Türkiye's southern border as a continuation of his *"by, with, through"* strategy of sustaining reliable proxy forces as semi-permanent boots on the ground to preserve the regional order.[54] Ankara, not surprisingly, saw the mission goal as extending well beyond just defeating ISIS and their distrust of their American partners was heightened by repeated American prevarication concerning solemn pledges that YPG/SDF forces would not be allowed to move West of the Euphrates and once they occupied the Arab majority town of Manbij they would be forced to withdraw; both pledges have yet to be met. Votel's pronouncement triggered Ankara into launching its third major operation into Syria. The first was Operation Euphrates Shield in 2016 directed against ISIS forces along the border; the second was Operation Olive Branch, which seized the Afrin pocket from YPG/SDF forces and bisected the planned PKK corridor extending along the length of the Turkish border. Finally, Operation Peace Spring was launched in 2019 for the first time targeting YPG/SDF forces east of the Euphrates, after Erdogan persuaded Trump to look the other way due to his oft-stated desire to pull America back from "forever wars in the Middle East".

Tellingly, Operation Peace Spring led to an immediate and severe backlash from Neo-Conservatives and Evangelical Christian Zionists in

Trump's base, leading him to backtrack with alacrity while threatening "to totally destroy" the Turkish economy. The prominent Evangelical broadcaster and founder of the Christian Coalition, Pat Robertson, stated that Trumps actions meant "He was losing the mandate of heaven."[55] This was notable since despite Trump's many moral transgressions including sexual assault and overt racism, leading Evangelicals refused to utter a word against him until his greenlighting of the Turkish offensive. This large, orchestrated campaign had little to do with concern for the Kurds, of course, and everything to do with Armageddon Evangelical goals of fostering a Greater Israel and building the Third Jewish Temple on the ruins of the Muslim shrines which have been there since the early 7th century. The Israel connection was made explicit at the start of Turkish operations, a senior White House official told *Newsweek's* James Laporta, *"To be honest with you, it would be better for the United States to support a Kurdish nation across Turkey, Syria and Iraq," the source speaking on condition of anonymity said, adding, "It would be another Israel in the region."*[56] Having ignored or been complicit in genocide and ethnic cleansing against Syrians, Iraqis, Yemenis, and Palestinians, much of this American media campaign bombastically accused Türkiye of ethnic cleansing and even genocide against the Kurds and it was led by Neo-Conservative establishment media figures like Eli Lake, David Ignatius, Richard Engel, and Gayle Tsemach Lemmon.[57] Reading the American press coverage of Operations Olive Branch and Peace Spring, one would have been astonished to discover civilian deaths numbered under three figures while the majority involved armed fighters on both sides in sharp contrast to American, Israeli, Emirati, and Saudi military campaigns in the region. One would be similarly astonished to learn that most refugees including Kurds, Christians, and Yezidis seeking safety headed to Türkiye and were readily accepted despite great cost.

Faced with Evangelical and right-wing Zionist pressure, Trump immediately backtracked and sent Erdogan the notorious "Don't be stupid…don't be a tough guy" letter while dispatching Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to seek a ceasefire. Once

again, this demonstrates how ideology and Constructivist ideational variables often trump Realist ones in explaining vital American policy approaches to the MENA region. Even as the United States finds its brief Post-Cold War unipolar moment completely eclipsed with the rise of Eurasia and the Sino-Russian bloc, American foreign policy has deeply alienated the whole of the vital "Northern Tier" of formerly allied Baghdad Pact/CENTO leading Muslim states from Türkiye all the way to Pakistan. This was done while ignoring the fact of how dependent client states like Egypt and the UAE have conducted massive arms deals with Russia and China while also facilitating their military entry into the MENA region. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and NSC Advisor John Bolton in pursuit of these Neo-Conservative ideological aims even collaborated with Russia against Türkiye; encouraging the Wagner/GRU led assault by Khalifa Haftar on Tripoli and turning over SDF bases in Northern Syria to Russian-SAA forces instead of their NATO ally, which has been a leading bulwark for Ukraine. The author in discussions with career State Department and Pentagon EUCOM officials has noted the deep consternation this has caused amongst those not sharing this ideological agenda and the danger it poses to the overall balance against Russia and China.

Conclusion: What is to be done?

"*What is to be done*?", was the pithy title of Lenin's 1902 tract laying out the concept of the vanguard party and practical steps for dealing with the deep political and socio-economic crisis confronting Czarist Russia. Similarly, discerning how the break-up of the Ottoman State produced an ongoing century long tragedy for the Muslim World offers us insights into practical steps for overcoming it. The Ottoman State was on the cusp of achieving Muslim modernity and successful socio-economic development in its core civilizational area at the beginning of the twentieth century as seen in railroads which connected Anatolia, Palestine, Hejaz, Baghdad, and the Persian Gulf to the outside world. [58] This connectivity has yet to be restored following the Sykes-Picot-

Sazanov fragmentation of the region. The Ottoman State was also the civilizational state par-excellence, a concept that has recently been resurrected in discussions of China, Russia, India, and the EU as the post-1648 Westphalian model of the homogeneous unitary secular nation-state has waned across much of the globe.[59] While China and India were able to emerge from Western imperialism with their continental sized state and market institutions largely intact, direct and indirect imperial rule never ended in the Muslim World as seen in the massive American, British, and French military bases that dot the region propping up single family despotisms.[60] There is, of course, as Gideon Rachman notes, a dark side to this construct as well as seen in the quasi-genocidal policies of China, Russia, and India toward those defined as outside the civilizational ecumene or even in France's Emmanuel Macron's Islamophobia at home and call for a civilizational alliance with Russia abroad directed at Türkiye.[61]

However, the cosmopolitan Ottoman State in its liberal period, like the EU in its heyday, was quite removed from this as well as from the Saudi funded Wahhabi ignorance and savagery which filled the vacuum created by its Western imperial destruction. To escape this systemic cycle of death, destruction, and despotism; the imperative for Muslims is to achieve the political, economic, and security integration of the Muslim World in the manner of the European Union and NATO.[62] The process has already began as seen in the recent Kuala Lumpur Summit to achieve Muslim Unity outside of the OIC framework that had been deliberately shackled by the Saudis, and in the creation of the Istanbul based Organization of Turkic States as a civilizational buffer between Russia and China.

Bipolarity in the international system proved to be highly destructive during the Cold War as the Middle East, along with other regions of the developing world, became a battleground for US-Soviet rivalry. American unipolarity after the fall of the Berlin Wall, however, did not produce a peace and democracy dividend here as it had in other regions

due to the ideational factors surrounding inter-connected support for Israel and oil despots that I have elucidated above. However, the rapid re-emergence of multi-polarity and great power rivalry can be very fortuitous allowing leading Muslim states to turn the tables and pursue divide and rule strategies vis-à-vis the US, China, Russia, Britain, and France and end their destructive and predatory interventions in the MENA and Central Asia. This is happening with the American "pivot to Asia" and looming massive Russian invasion of Ukraine. Already, this has derailed very determined Neo-Conservative plans for a war against Iran, and French designs for a neo-imperial division of the region including in collusion with Russia as seen in Libya. It has also forced Saudi Arabia and the UAE to suspend their anti-Arab Spring roll-back operation and seek to mend fences with Türkiye and Iran. However, the full fruition of regional integration and peace depends upon internal reform and the emergence of representative and accountable governments in the region. Following the authoritarian roll-back of the Arab Spring, this may seem a forlorn quest, however, it is vital to consider the fate of the original Springtime of Nations in Europe in 1848. The Austro-Russian led counter-revolution may have seemed to snuff out aspirations for liberal-democratic reform, but by 1870 the forces unleashed in 1848 proved irresistibly triumphant. Today, the Arab and Western backed authoritarian restoration literally rests on two teetering pillars built on sand. The Al-Saud and Al-Nahyan families face grave internal and external threats. Their eventual comeuppance and the liberation of the natural resource wealth of the region for the benefit of its people will also bring an end to two centuries of Western and Russian imperial domination and exploitation.

Endnotes

[1] See M.S. Anderson, *The Eastern Question: 1774-1923*. London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 1966.

[2] Celestine Bohlen, "Letter from Europe: A Turning Point for Syrian War, and US Credibility."

New York Times, Feb. 22, 2016.

[3] Alina Polyakova, "Why Europe is Right to Fear Putin's Useful Idiots." *Foreign Policy*, Feb 23, 2016.

[4] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.

[5] Elizabeth F. Thomson, *How the West Stole Democracy From the Arabs*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2020.

[6] Karl A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1957.

[7] Two recent examples of such flawed Neo Orientalist approaches which elide the decisive factor of ongoing Western imperialism are, Timur Kuran, *The Long Divergence: How Islamic Law Held Back the Middle East,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010; and Ahmet T. Kuru, *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment: A Global and Historical Comparison.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

[8] Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009.

[9] Max Weber. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Routledge Classics, 2001. And David S. Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*. New York: WW Norton and Co., 1999.

[10] Jean Batou, *L'Egypte de Muhammad-Ali. Pouvoir politique et developpement economique, 1805-1848. Annales,* 1991, 46-2, pp. 401-428.

[11] Roderic H. Davison, *"Turkish Attitudes Concerning Christian-Muslim Equality in the Nineteenth Century", The American Historical Review*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (Jul.,1954), pp. 844-864.

[12] I was pleased to see that the deliberate and decisive role of Western Imperialism in the interlinked derailing of democracy and development in the Muslim World from the late 19th century to today is a point also recently made by Juan Cole. See Juan R.I. Cole, "*Sanctioning Iran: A Nietzschean Theory of Negative Imperialism.*" Farman-Farmaian Annual Lecture. Amsterdam: International Institute of Social History, March, 2017. Available at https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/140741

[13] It should be underscored that I am not making a "primordialist" claim that national identities are ancient and eternal. They are indeed socially constructed and multi-valent but that doesn't make them any less "real" in specific contexts and moments in history. Secondly, certain identity constructs and meta-narratives going back to what Henri Pirenne highlights as the construction of "Christendom and the West" in opposition to Pagans, Muslims, and Jews in the 9th century Carolingian Holy Roman Empire have proven particularly salient for demagogues targeting ethnic and sectarian minorities, particularly European Jews and Muslims. Thus, it was no coincidence that the first Post-Holocaust victims of genocide on the European continent were the last surviving populations of indigenous Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo. Finally, specific national interests often presuppose particular social identities shared by influential establishments and interest groups and thus their foreign policy interventions often cannot be reduced to simply material interests centred on maximising power and wealth.

[14] On the persistent Ottoman exclusion from the European Society of States see the seminal article by Thomas Naff, 'The Ottoman Empire and the European States System' in Hedley Bull and Adam Watson (eds.),

The Expansion of International Society. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984.

[15] See Robert Zaretsky, "Ambivalence about Moscow is a French Tradition." *Foreign Affairs*, Dec. 30, 2019.

[16] Tetsuya Sahara, "Two Different Images: Bulgarian and English Sources on the Batak Massacre", in M. Hakan Yavuz and Peter Sluglett Ed. *War and Diplomacy*. Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2011. Pp. 479-510.

[17] Tal Buenos, "UK Vote: The Anti-Semitism that could have been". *The Jerusalem Post*, May 19, 2015. Retrieved from: https://www.jpost.com/Opinion/UK-vote-The-anti-Semitism-that-could-have-been-403559

[18] See Mujeeb R. Khan, "The Ottoman Eastern Question and the Problematic Origins of Modern Ethnic Cleansing, Genocide, and Humanitarian Interventionism in Europe and the Middle East." In Yavuz and Sluglett Ed. *War and Diplomacy,* pp. 98-122.

[19] Gary Bass, *Freedom's Battle: The Origins of Humanitarian Intervention*. New York: Vintage Books, 2008.

[20] Mujeeb R. Khan, *"Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Crisis of the Post-Cold War International System,"* East European Politics and Societies, (EEPS) vol. 9, no. 3, Fall 1995, pp. 459-498

[21] These experiences at the time lobbying for Bosnia in the US, Turkey, and the Middle East are discussed in the recent work by M. Hakan Yavuz. *Nostalgia for the Empire: The Politics of Neo-Ottomanism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. xiii-xvi.

[22] Taylor Branch, *The Clinton Tapes*. New York: Simon and Schuster, pp. 9-10.

[23] Pinar Bilgin & Ali Bilgiç, "Turkey's "New" Foreign Policy toward Eurasia", *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 52:2, 173-195.

[24] Arakanese/Rohingya Muslims also sent aid to the Ottomans in the aftermath of the Balkan Wars. See, for example, "Arakan Müslümanlarının Osmanlı'ya yaptığı yardımın belgesi," *Yeni Şafak*, 6 September 2017. Retrieved from https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/arakan-muslumanlarinin-osmanliya-yaptigi-yardimin-belgesi-2790970 https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/arakan-muslumanlarinin-osmanliya-yaptigi-yardimin-belgesi-2790970

[25] John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008.

[26] See John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018. Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of US Primacy.* New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2018.

[27] The definitive archival account of the Mossadeq Coup showing that it was not motivated by fear of Communism but undertaken to please British allies and share in the natural resource wealth of Iran is found in Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup: 1953, The CIA and the Roots of Modern U.S.-Iranian Relations.* New York: The New Press, 2013.

[28] Aram Rostam, "This American Is A General For A Foreign Army Accused Of War Crimes In Yemen". Buzzfeed News, May 7, 2018.

[29] See Ronen Bergman, *Rise and Kill First: The Secret History of Israel's Targeted Assassinations*. New York: Random House, 2018. Pp. 86-94. Also, James A. Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988. P. 403.

[30] Steven A. Cook, *False Dawn: Protests, Democracy, and Violence in the New Middle East*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

[31] David Kirkpatrick, *Into the Hands of the Soldiers: Freedom and Chaos in Egypt and the Middle East*. New York: Viking, 2018.

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[34] Michael Crowley, Obama and the Dictators: 'We Caved' *Politico Magazine*, Jan/Feb. 2016. Retrieved from, https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/01/we-caved-obama-foreign-policy-legacy-213495/

[35] Fareed Zakaria, "Islam, Democracy, and Constitutional Liberalism". *Political Science Quarterly*, 119, 2004. Pp 1-20.

[36] I made these points in, M. Hakan Yavuz and Mujeeb R. Khan, *"Turkish Coup, Muslim democracy, and Western Bad Faith."* Al-Jazeera. Sept. 9, 2016. Retrieved from, https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2016/9/9/turkish-coup-muslim-democracy-and-western-bad-faith.

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[45] A very revealing account of the Periphery Doctrine is offered by one of the leading Mossad officers tasked with implementing it, Yossi Alpher. Alpher relates how the alliance with stridently secularist intelligence chiefs of Iran and Türkiye was central to this as was promoting ethnic and sectarian conflict throughout the region from Kurds and Maronites

to Yemeni Zaidis and South Sudanese animists and Christians. Contra realist theories, Alpher's fascinating account also underscores my contention that domestic popular Muslim mobilization against minority anti-Islamic authoritarian establishments from Kemalists to Pahlavists led to a radical reorientation of national identity, interests, and foreign policy and not any shifts in threat perceptions and the regional or international balance of power. See, Ronen Bergman, "The Officer who saw behind the top-secret curtain." *Ynet News.com Magazine*, June 21, 2015.

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Chapter 4

Revisiting the Arab Uprisings on their 10th Anniversary: Reflections on the Internal Dynamics and Foreign Interventions

Ali Bakir

Introduction

More than ten years ago, a wave of unprecedented uprisings erupted in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Angry citizens took to the streets to challenge long-standing authoritarian regimes following the severe deterioration of the socio-economic and socio-political situation in several Arab countries. The massive protests demanded increased freedoms, social justice, and human dignity. As they were faced with repression and bloody violence, they sought to topple the tyrannical regimes. Until July 2021, it was thought that of all the Arab states, which experienced mass protests since 2011, only Tunisia had emerged as a partial success story for a democratic transition. Yet, hope faded following President Kais Saied's soft coup that barely received any criticism, let alone counter-measures from Western countries.

Less than two months following this development, Morocco's moderate ruling Islamist party, the Justice and Development Party (JDP), suffered a crushing defeat in parliamentary elections. In Egypt, where the first military coup amid the Arab Uprisings occurred, Sisi's authoritarian regime continued its crackdown on the opposition and wielded more power under his Western benefactors' watchful eyes, particularly the US. Infamous warlord Khalifa Haftar continued to disrupt the political transition in Libya following his failed military coup sponsored by countries such as the UAE, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, France, and Russia. The son of the late Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi, Saif al-Islam, announced that he would run in the next Presidential elections. Towards

the end of 2021, the Sudanese military, led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, executed a military coup against the transitional government.

In Syria - where one of the biggest humanitarian catastrophes of the 21st century occurred - the Assad regime, which is responsible for a host of war crimes, continued to engulf more lands, kill civilians, and displace Syrians. Assad has carried on his repressive actions with the support of Iran and Russia, while efforts to rehabilitate his regime have accelerated under the watch of the US Administration of President Biden. Additionally, countries under Iran's influence such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen seemed resistant to reform and change.

Regardless of how one reads these developments, there is a near-universal consensus that the massive upheavals that struck the region more than a decade ago produced few democracies, if any. The answer to the question why is not easy, but before discussing the reasons, we should keep in mind that despite the similarities among Arab states and Arab societies, there are differences that should not be ignored or neglected, given that each case has its own peculiarities.

This chapter addresses why the Arab Uprisings produced so few democracies. It examines the internal, regional, and international factors and dynamics that might have played a role - albeit to a varying degree - in shaping the course of events during and after the Arab Uprisings and undermining the process of transformation and democracy in the region. Furthermore, the chapter will look into the underlying factors behind the re-emergence of authoritarian regimes.

The first part discusses how the Arab Uprisings evolved over the last decade. The second part sheds light on the nature of the Arab Uprisings. It argues that the uprisings fell short of turning into full-fledged revolutions which might have undermined the rebels' ultimate goals. The third part discusses foreign intervention both on the regional and international level as a determinant factor. The main argument is that a conversion of interests between seemingly opposing or antagonistic

foreign actors undermined the goals of the Arab Uprisings and made it impossible for the newcomers to the political scene to produce a meaningful change towards democracy in an internal, regional, and international environment that is heavily stacked against them. Finally, the chapter concludes by addressing the issue of whether the Arab Uprisings ultimately failed and whether the re-emergence of authoritarian regimes should be considered the new norm.

Ten Years Short

On December 17, 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi, a fruit vendor in a Tunisian town called Sidi Bouzid, set himself on fire to protest against the confiscation of his goods by the police. Eighteen days later, the 26 years old died of his injuries. His death triggered an uprising that ended the rule of the country's authoritarian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in 10 days and forced him to flee to Saudi Arabia [1]. The Tunisian uprising caused a domino effect in the Arab world. People in several Arab countries such as Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq took to the streets in massive anti-regime protests, demanding the fall of their respective regimes. Although the protests did not exclude some Arab monarchies like Morocco and Jordan, these states managed to deflect the challengers without significantly altering the monarchical power.

In some cases, such as Tunisia and Egypt, the initial results were cheerful and promising. The rebels managed to achieve some of their goals in one way or another. Yet, in other cases, the brutal and bloody crackdown on peaceful protests led to mixed results. In Libya, NATO intervened against the Gaddafi regime to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1973. Ultimately, Gaddafi, who ruled Libya for almost half a century, was captured and killed by rebels in October 2011 [2]. In Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who ruled for 22 years, resigned in February 2012 [3]. Following a short transition period, the pro-Iran Houthi militia took power from the new government by force. In 2017, the Houthis killed Saleh [4].

In Iraq and Syria, the brutal force used by the regimes against peaceful demonstrators led to civil wars and the emergence of radical armed groups, including DAESH and the Iranian-backed Shiite militias. The Assad regime in Damascus tried to stop the domino effect of the Arab uprisings by using weapons of mass destruction such as chemical weapons, inviting foreign forces such as Iran and Russia, and hiring armed sectarian militias [5]. His vicious and murderous response encouraged his fellow dictators and the anti-revolutionary forces in the region to resist the change by relying on excessive force, brutal repression, and foreign forces to put an end to the upheavals. Likewise, al-Maliki's government in Iraq resorted to highly sectarian policies and outside support from Iran and the US to stay in power. His policies and the crackdown on protests led to a rise in radicalism. Afterwards, the US would seize the opportunity of the rise of radicalism and terrorism in Syria and Iraq to mend fences with Iran under the pretext of countering terrorism and using the war on DAESH as a catalyst [6].

In July 2013, a military coup led by Abdelfattah el-Sisi, the then-Egyptian defence minister, overthrew Mohammad Morsi, Egypt's first president ever to be elected by democratic and free elections. The coup - supported by an anti-revolutionary camp led by the United Arab Emirates [7] and Saudi Arabia [8], resulted in a massacre, which Human Rights Watch described as "one of the world's largest killings of demonstrators in a single day in recent history." [9]. Western countries shied away from calling the overthrow of President Morsi by the Egyptian military a "coup." The coup had severe consequences for the prospects of the uprisings and democracy in the region. Subsequently, Cairo, Abu Dhabi, and Riyadh designated the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organisation and cracked down on the group within their own countries. In the wake of the coup, the Egyptian government banned all political opposition, independent media and started mass trials of thousands of Brotherhood members, sentencing many of its leaders to death, including Morsi, who later died in prison [10]. Soon after, the Arab region witnessed a period of regression. The counter-

revolutionary forces such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the Assad regime in Syria, Libya's most potent warlord Khalifa Haftar, and Iran seemed to have the upper hand.

However, just when people started to doubt that the uprisings would deliver something meaningful in terms of changing the miserable socio-economic and political situation created by the authoritarian regimes, a second wave of uprisings erupted. In 2018 and 2019, several Arab countries, including Sudan, Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon, witnessed massive protests demanding change. In Sudan, President Omar al-Bashir, who ruled the country for almost 30 years, was ousted by the army under pressure from protestors, imprisoned, and tried. A mixed civilian-military Sovereignty Council emerged to lead a transitional period for three years. In Algeria, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who ruled for about 20 years, was forced to resign and eventually died in 2021. Although protests in Iraq and Lebanon faced strong Iranian countermeasures through its proxies, the governments of Adel al-Mahdi and Saad al-Hariri resigned in 2019 under the pressure of angry protestors. [11].

These developments breathed hope again into people betting on the uprisings as a tool for socio-economic and political change in the Arab World. Yet, others might argue that seeing the glass half full does not explain the whole picture. The year 2021 witnessed several adverse developments, including the resurgence of the Arab world's authoritarian regimes. The tyrannical and oppressive regimes re-generated themselves, producing far worse versions than their originals. In Syria, Bashar al-Assad proudly announced [12] that he won the – farcical - elections with 95.1 percent of the vote after a decade of war against the Syrian people, resulting in hundreds of thousands of deaths and more than 10 million Syrians displaced and refugees. The staged elections will theoretically allow him to stay in power at least till 2028. In Libya, the son of the late Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi, Saif al Islam, announced [13] that he would run in the presidential election, which was scheduled to be held on December 24, 2021. Additionally,

warlord Khalifa Haftar expressed similar ambitions [14]. In Egypt, imprisoning the first democratically elected president, Mohammad Morsi, for six years and ultimately causing his death was not enough for the military junta to cease its crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) or those who oppose the increasingly authoritarian rule of Sisi. The Egyptian courts continued to issue death sentences against leaders and members of the MB and in July 2021, the Egyptian parliament passed a law [15] enabling the government to sack civil servants linked to MB. In Tunisia, President Kais Saied executed a soft coup [16] against the moderate democratic Islamist party, Ennahda, led by Rached Ghannouchi. President Saied sacked PM Hicham Mechichi, suspended the elected parliament until further notice, assumed executive power, the power of public prosecution, and appointed loyal figures to several critical positions. In the 2021 parliamentary elections in Morocco, the ruling moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party (JDP) suffered a crushing defeat by two political parties close to Morocco's Royal Palace, shrinking its share of the parliamentary seats from 125 in 2016 to 12. The JDP lagged far behind its primary opponents, the National Rally of Independents (INR) with 97 seats and the Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM) with 82 seats [17]. In late 2021, the Sudanese military, led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, executed a military coup, dissolved the transitional government, detained several officials, and put the civilian Prime Minister Abdullah Hamdok under house arrest [18].

These trends suggest three things. First, the brief period that enabled the political Islamist parties in the Arab world to breathe, participate in politics, and gain power in certain cases, is over. Second, the attempts to successfully transition from authoritarianism to democracy have been heavily disrupted, leading to regression. Third, Arab dictators are back to retaining what they always deemed their private property, power. The obvious question is, why did this happen?

Half Revolutions vs Deep-Rooted Authoritarianism

Even though the Arab Uprisings have been dubbed "revolutions", they were not clear-cut revolutions. A revolution conventionally involves a radical change that often entails violence. Yet, when it comes to the Arab Uprisings, one can highlight that they neither started as a violent movement nor managed to produce radical change. This is not to underestimate the uprisings, but rather to underscore that they could not achieve a radical change due to several structural factors. Additionally, it is essential to highlight that the initial nonviolent nature of the uprisings and the deep-rooted authoritarian nature of the regimes might have prevented protesters from achieving the intended goals of radically changing the regimes and producing democratic systems.

In her book titled *Nonviolent Revolutions: Civil Resistance in the Late 20th Century,* Sharon Erickson Nepstad examined six 'nonviolent revolutions' from the 1980s, three of which succeeded and three of which failed. She identified six structural factors or conditions that are viewed as 'favourable' for nonviolent resistance movements to emerge: economic decline; a 'new' political opportunity or a 'suddenly imposed grievance'; defections from the elite; and the availability of what she calls 'free space,' where activists could organise and develop their strategy [19]. Indeed, some of these conditions were present when the Arab Uprisings erupted a decade ago. According to Nepstad, to answer why some succeed while others fail, it is necessary to focus both on structural conditions and revolutionary strategy. She also argued that the success or otherwise of the revolutionary strategy is affected by the counter strategy of the regime, both in its tactical manoeuvres against the resisters and in response to international reaction. In her words, *"no movement succeeds solely on the basis of favourable structural conditions, strategic actions are critical in determining whether resistors achieve their goals…. A chess game is not won or lost by the skill of just one player but rather of both" [20].*

Examining the Arab Uprisings, one can notice that in no one country did the rebels manage to uproot the authoritarian regime rather than merely toppling its head. This situation allowed the concerned oppressive regime, the deep state (primarily the military) or the counter-revolutionary forces to survive and develop a counter-strategy. The counter-strategy would then bank on power, resources, foreign support, and experience to self-reorganise, resist, and even assume back the power from the newcomers. In cases where the regime or the deep state could not score a victory against the rebels, it managed to enter into some form of understanding with the newcomers to gain time, undermine them from within, or employ them in a containment strategy to diffuse the angry streets. In countries where such a strategy was used, it ended up with the public being frustrated with the newcomers because they could not achieve what they promised to do in the first place.

Besides their "half-revolutions" nature, one unique feature of the Arab Uprisings was the absence of the leading figures. In other words, the uprisings were not led by the supposedly inspiring-national revolutionary figure who is always present in traditional revolutions. Instead, the middle class's angry youth and ordinary people led de-centralized mass protests against tyrannical regimes. This factor had a mixed impact on the fate of the uprisings and the post-uprising transitional period. During the early days of the mass protests, the common wisdom was that the absence of a clear leader, whether it be a known figure or a political party, was a blessing. The logic behind this judgement was that the leader usually has known ambitions, desires, and ideological orientation, which makes him vulnerable to the authoritarian regime. The concerned government can silence him easily, whether by pressuring him, seducing him, threatening him, or even killing him.

In such a scenario, the apparent outcome would have had negative ramifications on the thrust of the concerned uprising and its fate. From this perspective, the absence of a leader increased the chances of the Arab Uprisings to march steadily towards their end goal of toppling

the regimes. However, what was thought to be a blessing turned out to be a serious loophole. The authoritarian regimes utilised this loophole to manipulate the mass protests at different stages, including during the events themselves or in the post-uprisings period. At some point, the oppressive regimes argued that they had the intention of discussing a transition, but the absence of a representative leader in the ranks of those who stood up against them makes such discussions all but impossible. We have witnessed this in Egypt, Yemen, and Iraq. In other cases, authoritarian regimes set up fake oppositions and exploited secular figures and groups that are irrelevant to the masses. They even employed religion and religious figures in their grand strategy against their opponents [21]. By resorting to such tactics they aimed to de-legitimise the genuine opposition, gain time, and ultimately defuse the uprisings and foil the rebels' demands. The 2013 military coup in Egypt used this tactic when Sisi employed the Coptic Pope Tawadros II, Grand Imam of al-Azhar Ahmed el-Tayeb, Mohamed El-Baradei - a Nobel Peace Prize laureate and the former head of the U.N. nuclear watchdog agency - and some representatives of the so-called youth opposition groups who were basically steered by the military and intelligence such as Tamarod group [22]. During his coup speech, Sisi was flanked by all these figures to legitimise his cause. Once he finished, they spoke in support of the military coup.

The absence of leadership served the regimes' divide and conquer strategy. In this sense, the regimes' counter-revolutionary strategies greatly impacted the post-uprising period. With the lack of a national figure who can unite the people behind following even minor victories against the regimes, people would either turn against each other or political actors/regime decoys would hijack their efforts. However, it should be noted that the lack of leadership was inevitable. For so long, the Arab world's authoritarian regimes had a "political desertification" strategy that aimed to establish the infamous rule "either me or no one." Some authoritarian regimes allowed a semblance of an opposition to exist, such as in Egypt, while others did not allow the opposition to exist

at all such as in Syria and Libya. As a result, no politically qualified and experienced opposition existed when the uprisings broke out to assume leadership and counter the regimes' countermeasures to the uprisings. Despite the fact that Islamist parties were the most organized among opposition groups, they generally lacked serious political competence.

Furthermore, the lack of democratic culture and institutions is another crucial factor that should be cited with regards to the inability of the uprisings to produce democracies. With the lack of democratic culture and institutions, the old regimes or the deep states could create the perfect conditions to make sure that once they are not in power the situation would devolve into chaos and civil war by promoting acute polarisation, sectarianism, tribalism, radicalism, and pitting one group again the other. In Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and elsewhere, secular (liberal [23] and leftist [24]) forces preferred to support military rule rather than accept being defeated in free and democratic elections by Islamists.

In situations where the uprisings briefly succeeded in toppling the regime's head while leaving the deep state structure in place, the rebels lacked bureaucratic expertise and demonstrated poor political acumen. In other situations, the political newcomers (mostly Islamist parties) were unable to easily shift their mentality and operational mode from opposition to governing. They also lacked the flexibility to make concessions in favour of the greater good and failed - in some instances - to embrace inclusivity. As a result, they ended up taking the responsibility of fixing a situation that no one party - no matter how big and powerful - can handle due to decades of authoritarianism, repression, and corruption.

Last but not least, the gap between the high expectations and the unfolded reality negatively impacted the forces of change—the role of the "Arab Spring" term, in particular, is to be noted here. During the last 10 years, the term "Arab Spring" was widely used to dub the Arab Uprisings to the point that it became associated with the uprisings. The term "Spring" was a form of projection of the fall of the former

communist dictatorships in Eastern Europe. It had a European origin in relation to the "Prague Spring" or the Eastern European Spring of the late 1980s after the fall of Communism, when popular uprisings sought the overthrow of despotic regimes that had ruled for decades [25]. A blog post published by the UN's Alliance of Civilizations [26] noted that the term "Arab Spring," was "first used by *Foreign Policy Magazine* and then adopted by journalists and activists in the US as a way to brand the revolutions" in the Arab World. The term was misleading and impacted the people in the Arab region and around the world. It created a sense that an effortless task to uproot the deep-rooted dictators is awaiting those who revolted. It also implied that the transformation in the Arab World would be easy and swift, and the outcomes will be rosy and realised as soon as the uprisings toppled the dictators.

Such connotations impacted real-life events because they shaped the perceptions of the rebels, the public, and everyone concerned with the uprisings. Furthermore, it created a false image and raised hopes irrationally. In other words, the "Arab Spring" terminology ignored the region's complexity and underestimated the scale and scope of the authoritarian regimes. It created big expectations by promoting the narrative that this was the end of tyranny in the Arab world. When such perceptions and high expectations met with the reality in which Arab dictators resorted to ultimate power and bloody violence to crack down on the uprisings, the result was immense frustration and disappointment. In some cases, people lost their belief in the uprisings, and even the power of change.

In this sense, the term became a heavy burden on the rebels and negatively impacted their mission to change or transform their reality into a better one. The worst twist in this terminology is the fact that the counter-revolutionary forces and dictators weaponized it in the Arab region and beyond against those who rebelled -or intend to do so, to showcase that what is called "Arab Spring" is nothing but a long bloody series full of death and destruction.

The 'Unholy Alliance' vs the Uprisings

Given Western countries' long-standing championing of values such as freedom, human rights, social justice, and democracy, one could expect that they would logically support the Arab Uprisings, given that the "Arab street" were demanding nothing but their fundamental rights. However, apart from rhetorical support - which was not firm and did not last long - Western responses reflected an interest-based approach that disregarded the aforementioned values. Whenever they had to choose between their perceived interests and values, they swiftly made their choice in favour of their interests. Whether this choice was manifested in measures taken in favour of the authoritarian regimes or simply choosing not to do anything to deter these regimes or support the uprisings, it had a devastating impact on the uprisings, their prospects, and fledgling democracies.

As Riccardo Alcaro rightly put it in his work "Re-thinking Western Policies in the Light of the Arab Uprisings":

> *The West's response to the Arab Spring would make a perfect case study for those interested in the conflict between perceived interests and values. On the one hand, the West finds it hard not to sympathise with the demands of the "Arab street"... On the other hand, Western countries, most notably the United States, were wary of the potential outcome of the revolutionary wave that is shaking the Arab world, since it might evolve into a system of regional relations less compatible with Western preferences than the pre-2011 one [27].*

For decades, the United States and the European powers have often actively supported Arab authoritarian regimes in the name of stability. The perceived stability was nothing but securing their interests at the expense of the people of the region. These interests are primarily manifested in energy security, protecting Israel, and preventing the reach of the majority representatives to power. Two other significant

interests were defined later: cooperation in the fight against terrorism as well as irregular migration [28].

Given that it is always easier to deal with a dictator who lacks legitimacy and needs foreign support to compensate for this deficiency, a transactional relationship between these authoritarian regimes and Western countries was established based on the exchange of services. The dictators would contribute to securing the Western countries' interests, and in return, they would either provide him with support and protection or ignore all his transgressions. For decades, these kinds of transactional relations came at the expense of the people. Once the authoritarian regimes feel that they are losing leverage or threatened, they would remind the Western countries of their valuable role and that their fall would lead to chaos and destruction. Doing this would create a vicious circle of "either us or the chaos," which also plays into Western countries' fake stability narrative.

Countries like Russia and China, however, did not have a moral dilemma. Moscow had no profound influence in the Middle East beyond arms deals with some authoritarian regimes. However, once the Arab Uprisings erupted, Moscow received these uprisings cautiously. It revealed its true colours, however, when it had to deal with the Syria crisis. Moscow reacted negatively based on three factors. Firstly, it interpreted the events in terms of conspiracy theories and Western plots. Thus, if Western countries were going to topple some regimes, Russia would, by default, oppose this move, especially if the regimes were deemed close to Moscow. Secondly, the uprisings were unconsciously related to what were known as the "colour revolutions." The colour revolutions took place primarily in the post-soviet space, namely in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), Kyrgyzstan (2005) as well as Uzbekistan (2005), Belarus (2006), and Armenia (2008) [29]. Russia considered the "colour revolutions" a Western attempt to undermine its influence in this region and its quest to bring the former Soviet geographical sphere back into its fold. In this sense, Moscow looked at the Arab Uprisings from the

same perspective. If the "Arab Uprisings" were a Western plot aimed at toppling the regimes in the Middle East, then the domino effect might quickly move towards Russia and its traditional sphere of influence, thus prompting Moscow to defend the authoritarian regimes even if its officials denied that its intervention was actually designed to do as such. Thirdly, and most importantly, Russia harboured deep hostility towards Islamists [30], especially after the Soviet Union's experience in Afghanistan and Moscow's experience in Chechnya [31]. Knowing that democracy will mostly bring majority representatives to power, Russia opposed the uprisings wherever it could, mainly in Syria, and backed authoritarian and minority rule. The 2012 statement of Russia's Foreign Ministry Sergey Lavrov, in which he warned of "Sunni rule" in Syria, supports this thesis. Paradoxically, no Western country protested or opposed his statement [32].

The oil-rich Gulf States (Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) had their own calculations and motives too. Although these countries adopted different positions in different cases of the Arab Uprisings, they ended up spearheading the regional counter-revolutionary efforts to stop the domino effect from reaching them ultimately. Ironically, the Iranian regime came to power through a revolution that toppled the Shah's rule in 1979. As a country equipped with vast experience on how revolutions operate, the Iranian regime was the first to diffuse and end two revolutions just a few years before the Arab Uprising erupted, the 2005-Cedar Revolution in Lebanon and the 2009-Green Revolution in Iran. Tehran revealed its true anti-Arab Uprisings colour when these uprisings hit countries in its primary sphere of influence in the Middle East, such as Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen.

Tehran's most destructive role, however, was realised in the Syrian Uprising in 2011. To prevent the toppling of its ally and maintain access to Syria as a regional platform to Lebanon and the Eastern Mediterranean [33], Iran intervened in Syria through its military, the revolutionary guards, and thousands of sectarian armed militias from

several countries [34]. The most apparent claim at the beginning of the revolution was that it intervened to protect the Shiite minority and their holy shrines [35]. The Iranian intervention had severe implications not only inside the country but beyond its borders. Supporting the bloody crackdown of the Assad regime in Syria and the al-Maliki government in Iraq triggered a vicious wave of sectarianism in the region and created the perfect conditions for the rise of radicalism and terrorism, including ISIS. Most importantly, the survival of Assad encouraged Arab dictators to resist the uprisings and join forces to put an end to them.

Likewise, the UAE and Saudi Arabia spared no effort to foil the uprisings. Both joined forces and played a crucial role in sponsoring the military coup that toppled the first democratically elected President in the history of Egypt [36]. Armed with deep pockets, a media empire, and significant influence in the West, Abu Dhabi and Riyadh sought to clone the Egyptian model and install military dictatorships in other countries such as Libya and Sudan [37]. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE bankrolled the counter-revolutionary forces in Egypt, Libya, Sudan, Tunisia, and other countries in the Arab world. Together with Egypt, they led the counter-revolutionary effort, unleashed a war of cancellation against political Islam in the Arab World, and fuelled Islamophobia [38] in the West to justify this war.

The UAE-Saudi-Egypt axis went a step further by targeting whoever thought of standing by the uprisings or seeking to change the pre-uprising status quo, including countries like Türkiye and Qatar. In 2016, several Turkish parties accused Abu Dhabi of playing a role in the 2016-coup attempt that was ultimately foiled by the popular action. In 2017, the axis comprised of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain imposed a blockade against the small gas-rich Gulf country Qatar against the backdrop of its pro-Arab Uprisings foreign policy and its regional role. They also tried to topple its Emir and reportedly intended to invade the country [39]. Although it was initially thought that the UAE and Bahrain supported the Syrian Uprising, they ended up

normalising relations with the Assad regime starting in 2018 [40]. The UAE, in particular, chose to silently support the regime in several ways under different pretexts despite knowing the depth of its relations with Iran [41]. Abu Dhabi, along with Egypt, is leading the Arab efforts to rehabilitate the Assad regime.

Considering the favourable position of foreign actors vis-à-vis the Arab authoritarian regimes, Arab dictators figured out that they have a wide range of options and a vast space to manoeuvre, survive, and even emerge victorious, at least for the time being. Accordingly, the dictators believed they had other options than sacrificing a scapegoat, stepping down, or fleeing the country. They believed they could hold their position and fight viciously to stay in power. The fact that Islamist parties won the majority of the votes in several elections in different Arab countries following the Arab Uprisings was an obviously unfavourable outcome to those who worked for decades to prevent this particular result on the domestic, regional, and international levels, prompting them to act against supporting genuine transformation. The convergence of interests between seemingly opposing or antagonistic foreign actors made it impossible for rebels to sustain their will and effort to continue the struggle against the regimes with the same momentum. It made their effort to produce meaningful change towards democracy in an internal, regional, and international environment that is heavily shaped against them, all but impossible.

Conclusion: Did the Arab Uprisings Fail?

Considering what has come to follow the Arab Uprisings ten years on, there is a debate on whether these uprisings failed. Many people argue that the Arab uprisings did fail given the re-emergence of more stubborn and repressive regimes. Nevertheless, others maintain that the uprisings are still alive, albeit in different forms and with different dynamics, citing the emergence of the second wave of uprisings in Algeria, Sudan, Lebanon, and Iraq in 2018 -2019 as proof. While there is no easy answer to this question, one can argue yes and no at the same time, depending

on whether he/she sees the Arab Uprisings as a defining moment, or a complex process interspersed with rounds of ups and downs.

The re-emergence of the Arab authoritarian regimes should not be exclusively seen through a regional lens. The global indicators reveal that, during the last decade, democracy has been on the decline worldwide in favour of rising autocracy, authoritarianism, and populism. This trend was evident to the point that even very well and long-established Western democracies could not escape it. For the first time since 2001, democracies are no longer the majority. In 2010, democracies reached their peak and constituted 55% of the countries in the world [42]. However, in 2019, their percentage declined to 48% comprising around 46% of the world's population [43]. In line with this trend, democracy declined in 26 countries between 2018 and 2019 compared to 17 in 2016 and 24 in 2017 [44].

According to "Democracy Report 2020: Autocratization Surges – Resistance Grows" [45] by V-Dem Institute, 2019 registered a new record in the rate of democratic backsliding in the world. The report analysed the state of democracy in the world in 2019 based on the V-Dem dataset (v10). It ranked Hungary as the EU's first-ever authoritarian member state and noted that the United States of America is the only democracy in Western Europe and North America undergoing substantial autocratization in 2019 [46]. Likewise, in its "Freedom in the World 2021" report, Freedom House asserted that authoritarian actors grew bolder in 2020 as major democracies turned inward, contributing to the 15th consecutive year of decline in global freedom. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the democratic decline and strengthened authoritarian tendencies worldwide [47].

To those who participated in the Arab Uprisings, the build-up of global authoritarianism during their struggle against the Arab dictators has been an unfortunate development because it meant that they had to continue their fight in unfavourable conditions both internally and globally. Their efforts to challenge or change the authoritarian regimes

have been largely ignored, at best. The fact that dictators tend to support each other in times of crisis - even if they have been chronically locked in a struggle against each other - meant that the rebels were not only left alone but had to face an increasing alliance of authoritarianism [48].

In most cases during the last 10 years, the attempts to challenge, reform, transform, or uproot Arab dictators have resulted in the rise of more stubborn regimes; however, this outcome does not necessarily imply that the Arab Uprisings failed. The increasing repression and authoritarianism could signify a more fragile, desperate, and frightened authoritarian regime. In this sense, increasing repression and authoritarianism means that the Arab Uprisings are doing what they are supposed to do, shaking the foundations of the tyrannical regimes. Equally valid, people in the Arab World suffered, paid a heavy price, became exhausted, frustrated, and lost much energy. Nevertheless, two primary factors suggest that the re-emergence of authoritarian regimes will not be the new norm, and the struggle will continue sooner or later, albeit in different forms, and with different dynamics, tactics, and tools. First, the political, economic, and social situations in the Arab World are only getting worse. In other words, the root causes of the Arab Uprisings are still there. Freedoms and human rights in the Arab World are retreating at unprecedented levels. The Arab World is like a pressure cooker with a malfunctioning valve. If not genuinely fixed, once it reaches a boiling point, it will explode again. Since the repressive regimes are corrupted and incompetent to the extent that no positive change or hope is expected, this suggests that the current situation is not sustainable, and that change is inevitable sooner or later. It is just a matter of time before we witness new uprisings and possibly the awaited great revolutions.

Second, more people realise that the change is a long, hard, and painful road, full of challenges. It will take time and will require sophisticated means and flexible tactics. Accordingly, people will re-adjust their perceptions and expectations and adapt to playing the long game. The

fact that they paid dearly for challenging the authoritarian regimes during the last 10 years means that they have reached the point of no return. The re-emerged authoritarian regimes will try to buy time by resisting change and prolonging the process, which will only worsen the situation, thus unintentionally laying the grounds for the next uprising.

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Chapter 5

The Betrayed Revolution in Syria

Ziad Majed

Introduction: Assad's Syria

Since Hafez Al-Assad's military coup in Syria in 1970, violence has been a constant policy of the Syrian regime. From the state of emergency prohibiting all political activity, to the campaigns of arrests, torture and assassination targeting his opponents, to the multiplication of intelligence services sowing terror, to the large recruitment of rural youth from the Alawite community into the army, to the networks of allegiance led by religious leaders, security officers and the new state bourgeoisie, to the cult of personality seeking to impose submission and obedience on the whole of society, Assad the father meticulously built his power in the country.

At the same time, his regional policy set up after his army's invasion of Lebanon in 1976 and his instrumentalisation of the Palestinian cause, followed by his alliance with Khomeini's Iran in 1980, transformed him into a key player in the Middle East. Thus, the massacres committed by his services in the prison of Palmyra in 1980 [1] and by his army in the city of Hama in 1982 (killing more than 20,000 people) [2], as well as the detention for years of tens of thousands of opponents went almost unnoticed outside Syria, so focused was the world on the positions of Damascus in regional issues and conflicts.

As a result, he managed to sustain his rule for 30 years, based on violence, networks of loyalty and various international alliances, before handing over his power to his son Bashar, founding what Syrian and Egyptian writers call the first "monarchic republic" in the Arab world.

Bashar's Succession

When Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father in 2000, violence was thus well established at the heart of the regime. It permeated its functioning, its culture, and its management of public space. And as soon as Bashar was installed in his palace in Damascus, he used it against the intellectuals and activists of what was, in 2001, described as the "Damascus Spring". Dozens of them were imprisoned after they spoke out to demand an end to the decades-long state of emergency, the release of political prisoners and the return of exiles. In 2004, Bashar Al-Assad initiated attacks on Kurdish activists who were demanding cultural and political rights. Hundreds were killed or imprisoned in Qamishli, Aleppo, and Damascus.

In 2005, Assad's violence was this time deployed in Lebanon, where the assassinations of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri on February 14, 2005, followed by dozens of politicians, journalists and other citizens, were the most visible signs of the brutality of the Syrian regime and its allies in its confrontation with a broad-based Lebanese coalition demanding the withdrawal of its troops and an end to its 29-year hegemony in the country. In 2006, violence struck again in Syria, targeting signatories of the "Damascus Declaration for Democratic Change" calling for political reform. Two years later, in 2008, a bloody crackdown on a mutiny in Saydnaya prison near Damascus resulted in the massacre of dozens of prisoners.

In 2011, the year of the revolutionary popular uprising in Syria (after Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Bahrain), and then from its militarisation in 2012 and its transformation into an all-out war, the violence of the regime, supported by Russia and Iran, took an unprecedented turn: It became organised on an industrial scale, exacerbating over time to make in ten years more than 320,000 dead and missing among Syrian civilians (and Palestinian refugees in Syria) [3]. In addition to these victims, more than 13 million people are internally displaced or have been refugees outside the country (more than 50% of the population).

The following paragraphs explain the evolution of the situation in Syria since 2011 through a reading of the major events that have changed its configurations. They also analyse the reasons for the systemic violence of the Assad regime, its categories, and its objectives.

A Syrian Story in Nine Summer Upheavals

The revolution began in Syria in March 2011. For the first time in decades, the country was the scene of weekly and then daily demonstrations, involving hundreds of thousands of citizens, demanding an end to the rule of the Assad dynasty. Art, humour, political slogans, and networking accompanied this uprising and liberated expression, which had long been censored. However, the regime's violent response was swift: in five months it killed more than 3,000 demonstrators. At least 10,000 others were arrested, and hundreds of them were killed and tortured [4].

From the summer of 2011, signs of armed struggle appeared - following the defection of soldiers who refused to shoot their own people. Subsequently, local protection brigades were formed. These signs were confirmed throughout 2012, and Syria gradually turned into a theatre of war where foreign interventions multiplied while international diplomacy and the UN system were paralyzed. Russia, in particular, used its veto power twice (in 2011 and again in 2012) to block draft resolutions that stressed the need for a political transition, thus protecting the regime [5].

The first battles in Damascus and Aleppo took place in the summer of 2012, allowing the unstructured, multi-brigade armed opposition to take control of eastern Aleppo and the southern and north-eastern suburbs of the capital after seizing rural areas in the north and east of the country, as well as in the Ghoutas (suburbs) of Damascus. At the same time, the regime began to use its air force and ballistic weapons, targeting villages and residential areas under the control of its opponents. This summer also saw the military intervention of the Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite militias mobilised by their Iranian sponsor in support of the regime, particularly around the Syrian capital and near the Lebanese

border. The rise of Islamist (non-jihadist) formations, supported by Türkiye, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, within the armed opposition was also an important development in the summer of 2012, as was the arrival in Syria of jihadists from Iraq and across the Turkish border. Their jihad project, not being part of the temporality and territoriality of the Syrian cause, brought them into direct confrontation with opposition forces (Islamist as well as nationalist) before it led them (two years later) to join the "Islamic State" (already established in Iraq), after a stint in the ranks of the "Al-Nusra Front" (a formation affiliated until 2016 to Al-Qaeda).

In the summer of 2013, and after the loss of new cities and areas across the country, the regime crossed the only "red line" set by the U.S. administration of President Barak Obama by bombing the two Ghoutas of Damascus with chemical weapons (in this case sarin gas). More than 1,500 civilians died on August 21 [6]. Despite threats of retaliation from the United States and France, Obama finally accepted the agreement proposed by the Russians, which consisted of obliging the regime to hand over its arsenal of sarin gas to a UN agency responsible for destroying it. In return, the option of military sanctions against it was withdrawn, offering it impunity and implying that there was no American (and Western) will to intervene militarily to stop its crimes.
The summer of 2014, the fourth of the conflict, saw the declaration of the "Islamic State" (IS) by Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, with the expansion of his jihadist organisation around the Euphrates. As the IS thought of and implemented a strategy of violence against "apostates" and minorities (including Yezidis and Christians) to terrorize them, and then kidnapped and executed an American aid worker, the US along with an international coalition declared war on it. They armed and supported Kurdish militias that were already clashing with IS in parts of northern Syria. At the same time, fighting between the armed opposition and the regime continued, with the latter using explosive barrels in its aerial bombardment campaigns. Documented revelations on the industry of death in Assad jails showing the extent of the war crimes and crimes

against humanity committed prompted the Americans and Europeans to impose economic sanctions against Damascus officials and their collaborators, including the business community.

In the summer of 2015, and after a series of military defeats suffered by the regime and its allies in the north and south of the country, reducing the area of the territory they controlled to 20%, Russia announced the beginning of its direct military intervention. From September 30, it attacked the positions of the various opposition formations, bombing massively the regions they controlled, without sparing the civilian infrastructure, especially health (hospitals and clinics) facilities.

In the sixth summer of the conflict, the summer of 2016, military and political developments accelerated. The firepower of Russian forces and the militias mobilised by Iran contributed greatly to the reversal of the balance of power in favour of the regime and thus to its victory in the battle of Aleppo and other battles in the centre of the country. Türkiye, for its part, launched a military campaign to prevent the YPG-PYD faction of Kurdish socialist militias from controlling the border areas between its territory and northern Syria. As for the United States, which had entered an electoral cycle, it disengaged further from the "Syrian file", considering that its only priority was the war against the "Islamic State". The "Al-Nusra Front," for its part, broke with Al-Qaeda and managed to impose itself militarily in Idlib in northwest Syria against the various formations of the opposition.

In the summer of 2017, Russia, together with Iran and Türkiye, initiated a process of negotiations between the Assad regime and the opposition, but without reaching any final agreement. In the meantime, the Americans had intensified their bombing campaign targeting the "Islamic State", and Kurdish militias finally managed to take Raqqa, the Syrian capital of IS (after the fall of its Iraqi capital, Mosul). U.S. troops supporting the YPG-PYD-SDF on the ground subsequently established military bases in the northeast and east of the country while strengthening their base in the south-eastern desert, not far from the

borders with Jordan and Iraq.

In the summer of 2018, the eighth of the conflict, the Syrian regime and its allies regained control of the Deraa region in the south of the country after invading the Ghoutas of the capital two months earlier. Since the ninth summer of 2019, areas in the north of the country have faced regular Russian and Assad-regime bombings. Regime forces have also seized strategic towns around the highways linking Aleppo to Hama and the Mediterranean coast, while on the other side, Turkish special forces have deployed, in agreement with the Russians, in several localities and on roads that remained under the control of the opposition and the "Al-Nusra Front" (renamed "Fath Al-Sham" since 2016).

Thus, Syria became and continues to be today, in 2021, fragmented and occupied, while no political solution to the conflict seems in reach, largely because, despite the military supremacy of Moscow and its operations that have changed the physiognomy of the conflict and its balance of power, its protégé Assad remains vulnerable. The pro-Iranian forces and the various local militias (armed by the Russians or the Iranians) compete with his exhausted army and impose themselves on the same territory he occupies (over 65% of Syrian territory). Moreover, the Turkish and American military deployments have ensured that both Ankara and Washington will be influential players in any future political process. American and European sanctions against Damascus make it unlikely that relations with Assad will be normalised soon and that the Russians will be able to achieve the reconstruction they so desire, regardless of the renewed Emirati, Egyptian and Jordanian contacts with Assad. This complicates Moscow's tasks in a country in ruins [7].

Violence and Impunity: How Did We Get Here?

Why have we reached this situation in Syria today? Why and how has so much violence been orchestrated and carried out since 2011, transforming the country, where a popular revolution had started peacefully, into a theatre of war and barbarism?

The first element in deciphering this relentlessness has to do with what Bashar Al-Assad and his relatives have considered an existential battle against the revolutionaries and their social bases, having in mind the fate of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and especially that of Gaddafi in Libya.

The second, which follows from the first, is the relationship that the Syrian president and his family/clan have with their country, which they consider "private property", passed down from father to son, with all that this means politically and financially, especially since the liberalisation of the economy and the series of privatisations benefiting the cousins and other relatives of the president [8].

The third is undoubtedly the confessional element. The fact that the Assads and the vast majority of the senior army and intelligence service officers, as well as the chiefs of the *shabbiha* (the thugs), belong to the Alawite minority has created both mechanical solidarity, an *'asabiyya* (to quote Ibn Khaldun) within this minority, and a survival instinct that can transform a political conflict into a fight to the death.

The fourth is the emergence in 2014 of the "Islamic State" organization, whose spectacular barbaric violence and especially attacks in the West, have turned the spotlight away from Bashar Al-Assad's crimes and offered him the opportunity to present himself as a bulwark against "terrorism." By posing an equation that his propagandists in Europe repeated, "either him or the Islamic State", the regime has thus been able to continue its policy of brutalization with impunity.

The fifth is the fact that this war could never have been waged with such savagery without the support of Iran and Russia, and without the procrastination of the Western and Arab powers.

These five factors imposed themselves after March 2011 and especially as of 2012, following the militarisation of the uprising. The Assad regime's repression materialised into a declaration of all-out war against the society, in order to annihilate certain groups and subdue all others. Within the framework of this unrestrained war, three types or categories of violence can be distinguished.

War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity

If the regime's firepower and its terrible bombardment of the rebel-held towns and countryside, fuelled by its Russian and Iranian allies, have killed tens of thousands of Syrians with the aim of eradicating them, the mass arrests and the siege of a large number of localities throughout the country were aimed above all at psychologically breaking its opponents, humiliating them and subjugating them. There are now more than 90,000 Syrians who have gone missing between 2011 and 2019, most of them believed to be in Assad's jails. Reports by Amnesty, Human Rights Watch, the testimonies of hundreds of families and tens of thousands of carefully numbered images of corpses handed over by a defecting regime military police photographer show that some 30,000 of them died from torture and starvation [9].

Why does the regime practice torture so extensively? What is the origin of this obsession with documenting death, by numbering corpses? Death by torture or starvation practised on an industrial scale is the Assad regime's way of asserting its unlimited power. It proves its ability to kill whoever it wants, whenever it decides. As for the bureaucratic management of the killing, it is meant to remind us that it is organised by the state. Thus, the objective of torture is not so much to obtain information as to break the enemies, to dehumanize them, to make them realize that they are dealing with a machine capable of crushing their bones at any moment. Another objective, an indirect one, is to terrorize and paralyze their families, who are left with no news of where the detainees are or why they were arrested.

In addition to this terror in the prisons, there is another no less monstrous one, that of rape, especially of girls and women, but also of men. In fact, rape is one of the most brutal criminal acts in the long list of horrors committed in Syria. This is because it transgresses one of the most deeply rooted taboos and is protected by the silence of the victims who fear rejection by their own families. Rape, both physically and psychologically, breaks the victims and, when it is revealed, socially demolishes their relatives. Intentionally, the regime punishes its victim

twice, inflicting a collective lesson on the victim's community. Many testimonies of raped women underline the political meaning of these rapes. They report a formula hammered out by the rapists: "You want freedom? Here it is!" [10].

In the continuity of its enterprise of debasing the rebel society and its desire to mark the minds of the survivors forever, the army of Bashar Al-Assad besieged from the spring of 2013 several localities in the governorates of Homs and Damascus, then in 2016, the eastern neighbourhoods of Aleppo. These sieges starved tens of thousands of the 600,000 people living in the affected areas, while being bombed. The implementation of this policy is widely described, including by the UN, as a deliberate strategy.

The Laws of Sectarian Cleansing

On November 1, 2016, Bashar Al-Assad declared that "the Syrian social fabric is better than before the war" [11]. On August 20, 2017, he added, "We have gained a healthier and more homogeneous society[...] This homogeneity is the basis of national unity: it is expressed in beliefs, ideology, traditions, customs, perceptions, and perspectives" [12]. He was referring to the significant demographic changes taking place in the country. Indeed, 6 million people, the majority of whom are Sunni Muslims, had left the country, fleeing bombings and arrest campaigns. The deportations, internal displacements and organised looting of property that followed changed the demographics of western Syria and the Damascus governorate, driving hundreds of thousands of people from their homes.

The fulfilment of this forced homogenisation, based on sectarian and social cleansing, is now taking shape through Law 10 enacted by the Syrian government in April 2018. This law stipulates that when a development zone is defined, the authorities must, by public announcement, notify the owners of the affected land and housing. They have a period of one month to submit evidence to assert their property rights, which will be transformed into shares. This is obviously

a lost cause for the owners when we know that most of the 13 million displaced Syrians, either inside Syria or abroad, are not in possession of their property titles, which have been lost, destroyed or non-existent from the start. Moreover, many of those who still have them will not be able to come forward to the authorities for fear of reprisal.

Law 10 confirms a desire to permanently alter Syria's demography and to make it impossible for a large number of internally displaced persons and refugees to return. It also aims to destroy evidence of war crimes committed by the regime in several areas that have suffered sieges and bombings around Damascus where "urban development zones" are planned.

Chemical Weapons

The ban on the use of chemical weapons (by international law since 1929) and its designation by the US administration as a "red line", never prevented the Syrian regime from using them. UN reports and those of several international organisations reveal that dozens of chemical attacks have taken place between 2013 and 2018 [13]. While Bashar al-Assad's regime has mainly opted for chlorine dropped from helicopters in explosive barrels, he has used sarin gas on at least four occasions, killing hundreds of civilians.

Why did the Assad regime use chemical weapons, knowing that this was the only "red line" that had been drawn by the White House and Western capitals? How can this be explained when his troops, backed by the Russians, the Iranians and the Lebanese, Iraqi and Afghan Shiite militias, were in a position of strength from a strictly military point of view as of 2016? Contrary to what is often said by the regime's propagandists in the West or by certain observers who are prone to conspiracy theories, the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons precisely because they constitute a "red line". It was thus testing international reactions and showing its defiance, being certain of Moscow's political and diplomatic cover. It also knows that the balance of power, turning in its favour after the Russian military intervention

in 2015, will raise questions from some sceptics: "Since the regime is winning, what interest would it have in using chemical weapons?" But this is a regime that excels in distilling doubt and suspicion. It cultivates a culture of rumours and plays on the antecedent of the American lie about chemical weapons in Iraq in 2003 to divide opinion. It also uses and abuses it because it has, in this case, perfectly understood that, despite the "red line", this was only going to cause lukewarm Western reactions. Consequently, any military strike against the regime would be symbolic and would offer its supporters a golden opportunity to denounce the "plot" and "the imperialist intervention".

More importantly, the Syrian government has used chemical weapons to display its impunity, both to its supporters and enemies. It sets itself up as an eternal "master" in the eyes of all.

Another perverse dimension of the use of chemical weapons and its consecration as a "red line" at the international level must be underlined: the focus on this prohibited weapon has had the effect of relativizing the impact of all the other crimes, which appear as almost banal acts of war since they are below the threshold of the famous "red line". The use of chemical weapons was, therefore, the best way for Bashar Al-Assad to display his absolute power and his impunity, both inherited from his father, which gave him a licence to kill.

Impunity and Political Realism

It is clear today that Bachar Al-Assad's strategy of violence is not to kill everyone but to kill enough Syrians to make others feel threatened. The regime imprisons, tortures, starves, and rapes enough Syrians so that the survivors carry the stigma of fear and humiliation wherever they are. In the same way, it does not deport and confiscate the property of all Syrians but of enough of them to change the confessional demography of the country. In this way, it wants to reduce Syrians to survivors, whose memory is marked for life by massacres, prisons, torture, rapes, sieges, deportations, sarin gas and the abandonment of the world.

In the face of this violence, which continues in the jails where tens of thousands of men and women are still being tortured, in several localities invaded by the regime thanks to Russian and Iranian forces, or regularly bombed by its troops, and through the confiscation of property around the capital Damascus and other cities, what remains of the credibility of international law and UN institutions? What about the Russian appeals to the international community to finance what they call "reconstruction" and "reconciliation" in Syria?

It should be remembered that at the moment, only the Russians, Iranians and Turks are negotiating the future of Syria, albeit without any substantial success. The process that Moscow has put in place has marginalised the minimal UN efforts. The dominant trio is in fact waiting for the evolution of American policies (still hesitant towards Iran and when it comes to the deployment of its forces in Syria) and counting on the Europeans to accept a "fait accompli" on the fragmented ground.

The most important question that arises in relation to all this is that of impunity, for from the treatment of this question flow answers to several others. The rejection of impunity is the only possible policy today given the balance of power on Syrian soil and the status quo it imposes. This rejection is not only ethical or legal, but also part of a realpolitik approach, because excluding Syrians from international law, accepting the triumph of crimes against humanity and normalising relations with their actors, even financing them under the pretext of reconstruction, is a fatal error that will hardly lead to stability and the return of refugees. On the contrary, it will fuel frustration, hatred, and anger, once again benefiting nihilism and the future emergence of "terrorist" groups. The latter always elaborate their discourse and justify their acts on the basis of "victimisation" and the injustices inflicted on the peoples of the Middle East.

Rejecting impunity also means rejecting any solution imposed by military force, by the occupations of Syria, and it means demanding a political transition, a new constitution, and free elections. Without

the transition, the reconstruction - which neither the Russians nor the Iranians have the capacity to finance - has only one objective: to concede a political victory to Moscow and accept the violence of the Syrian regime. Finally, rejecting impunity means rebuilding part of the credibility of international institutions, which was totally lost in Syria, at least since 2011.

Endnotes

[1] In 1980, special forces led by Hafez Al-Assad's brother Rifaat attacked the prison of Palmyra killing hundreds of political prisoners accused of belonging to the Muslim brothers or of complicity with them.

[2] Following an armed rebellion led by the Muslim Brothers, several divisions of the Syrian army and special forces attacked the city in February 1982 after having besieged and bombed it. Massacres were committed in its neighbourhoods, and the few sources of the time mention a death toll ranging from 17,000 to 40,000.

[3] For accurate figures, visit the website of the Syrian Network for Human Rights, which today has the largest database on the conflict in Syria: www.sn4hr.org

[4] These figures were included in the reports of the local coordination committees (founded by lawyer Razan Zaitouneh) and are taken up by the Violations Documentation Centre, one of the most reliable sources on Syria. https://vdc-sy.net/en

[5] Russia, often accompanied by China, will eventually use the veto 14 times against resolutions related to Syria between 2011 and 2020.

[6] For more information on this large attack, please refer to: https://news.un.org/en/story/2013/09/449052-clear-and-convincing-evidence-chemical-weapons-use-syria-un-team-reports; and also especially: https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/09/10/attacks-ghouta/analysis-

alleged-use-chemical-weapons-syria

[7] To all that are added regular Israeli air and missile attacks on pro-Iranian forces and Hezbollah militias' positions aiming at putting pressure on Teheran and keeping its direct allies away from the Syrian Israeli borders (and the occupied Golan heights).

[8] The Syrian president's inner circle included his brother Maher, his paternal cousin Zhoul-Himma Chalich, his maternal cousin Hafez Makhlouf, and until 2012 his brother-in-law Assef Chawkat. A third cousin, Rami Makhlouf, took advantage of the privatisation projects and obtained most of the state contracts in the financial, tourism, and energy fields, and he also obtained a monopoly in the telecommunication sector until 2019. Since then, he has been removed because of mafia rivalries and the rise of Asma Al-Akhras (Bashar's wife) and her clan.

[9] Read on this subject Garance Le Caisne, Operation Caesar, Paris, Stock, 2015.

[10] See on this subject the documentary by Manon Loizeau and Annick Cojean, Le cri étouffé, France 2, 2017.

[11] Remarks reported by the Lebanese daily Al-Akhbar at a reception hosted by the Syrian presidency, and echoing the terms mentioned in an interview Assad had with the Cuban agency on July 21, 2016.

[12] Syrian president's statement at the annual foreign ministry conference held in Damascus: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SkK9KttSdQc (from minute 6:40 to minute 7:10).

[13] A comprehensive report on Chemical attacks in Syria can be found on this link : https://www.gppi.net/media/GPPi_Schneider_Luetkefend_2019_Nowhere_to_Hide_Web.pdf and can be read through UN reports and different International organisations' documents, including the recent Amnesty International's report https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/02/syria-witness-testimony-reveals-details-of-illegal-chemical-attack-on-saraqeb/

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Chapter 6

From A Nationwide Revolution to Limited Self-Governance: The National and International Ramifications of the 'Syrian Revolution'

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Introduction

Ten years after the Syrian people began to demonstrate peacefully for democracy and freedom, the country is still suffering under the conditions of an ongoing civil war. The violation of rights as a result of the disproportionate use of force by the Assad regime on demonstrators was the biggest factor that transformed the Syrian revolution into a civil war. The transformation of the situation in Syria did not stop with the beginning of the civil war; it was ultimately internationalised through foreign interventions and the involvement and expansion of several terror organisations. Given the general chaos, the change of military balance, and the humanitarian disaster, many argue that the Syrian revolution failed. This assumption fits into the broader narrative about the popular uprising that broke out across the Arab world in 2010, known as the Arab Spring. This chapter will examine the dynamics behind the changing situation in Syria and how it affected the Syrian revolution. It will examine the current role, ambitions, and situation of the Syrian opposition and its future in Syria. Furthermore, the paper will try to elaborate on the ramifications of the Syrian revolution for the Arab popular uprising in general.

The Transformation of the Syrian Revolution

First things first, the idea that the Syrian revolution died is wrong. It has transformed after realising that it will not achieve its initial goal and continues to thrive in Syria and in the minds of the Syrian people. The international community might not be interested in them. However,

Syrians still demonstrate in liberated areas for the Syrian revolution and continue to call for the end of the Assad regime. However, with the expanding territorial control of the Assad regime and the totalitarian approach of the YPG in northeast Syria, the only area left for Syrians to demonstrate freely is the northwest of Syria [1]. The 10th anniversary of the Syrian revolution showed that the revolution still lives on, however, it has transformed over the years.

Currently, Syria is de-facto partitioned into three zones of control: A Russia and Iran-controlled Assad regime, a US-backed and Russia-protected self-declared autonomous administration of the YPG, and the Türkiye-protected Syrian Interim Government (SIG) as well as the region of Idlib. Within this dynamic, the Syrian opposition (i.e., SIG) is implementing a limited self-governance model in Syria's north. Within this territory, despite all of the outside trouble-makers and security risks, the Syrian opposition has tried to demonstrate what life in Syria after Assad could look like. The strong emphasis on local administration and the pursuit of the goals of the Syrian revolution has reportedly resonated among the Syrians. The areas of the SIG (Operations Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch and Peace Spring regions) and Idlib combined have a population increase of 3.4 times, from 1.6 million in 2004 to 5.4 million people in 2020 [2]. Syrians from all across Syria have settled in Syria's north [3]. However, this transformation from a nationwide revolution to a limited self-governance and the reasons behind this transformation has been widely ignored. The Syrians who rose up against the Assad regime had to transform their methods and goals due to three main reasons: Civil war, foreign intervention, and terrorism.

Civil War

When uprisings spread across the Arab world in 2010, the Syrian people participated in these developments for the first time in March 2011, most notably in the cities of Deraa and Damascus [4]. In the early stages of the demonstrations, dozens of civilians lost their lives due

to the interventions of security forces [5]. Assad's army handed over the mostly Kurdish-populated areas of northern Syria to the People's Defence Units (YPG), the Syrian branch of the PKK, formed in July 2012 [6]. Subsequently, the course of the civil war changed for the YPG. The YPG advanced rapidly in Ayn al Arab (Kobane) [7], which was previously besieged by Daesh, and then along the Turkish border.

During the years of conflict, the US has repeatedly stated that the use of chemical weapons was a "red line". Thus, the use of sarin gas by the regime was expected to be a game-changer for the US. However, American leaders ultimately hesitated to respond to the chemical attack in Ghouta. Following the attack, the Obama administration agreed with Russia "to clear chemical weapons from the region, rather than a military operation against the Assad regime that could undermine the nuclear deal with Iran" [8]. Since the US previously designated the use of chemical weapons as a 'red line', Washington's timidity in the face of the Assad regime's chemical attack was interpreted as the US backpedalling against Iran. However, this decision did not prevent the civil war from turning into a proxy war between competing sides.

While Iran caused the crisis to move from the local level to the regional level, Russia and the US have brought the scope of the conflict to the global level. Iranian-backed Shia militias and regime allied Syrian militias on one side and the armed Syrian opposition backed by the US, Gulf States, Jordan, and Türkiye quickly gave the conflict a proxy war character. Even though the reality is more complex, numerous scholars have argued that the Syrian civil war is, in reality, a sectarian proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran over dominance in the Muslim world [9].

In terms of destruction and the toll on civilians, the Syrian Human Rights Network (SNHR) alleges that the Assad regime has tortured to death approximately 14,338 people, including 173 children and 74 women since March 2011 [10]. As a result of the crisis in Syria,

there are 13.4 million people in need of humanitarian and protection assistance in Syria, 6.7 million internally displaced persons, and 6.6 million Syrian refugees worldwide, of whom 5.6 million are hosted in countries near Syria [11].

The Role of Foreign Intervention

Actions involving foreign intervention, such as the regime's invitation to Russia and the permanence of Russia's presence in Syria (naval base, airspace superiority, etc.), the partnership of the US with the YPG, and the joint Turkish-Syrian military operations against terrorism and to safeguard civilians have had key importance in shaping the situation in Syria.

Iran

In February 2013, Iran officially announced its presence in Syria and increased its support for the regime together with Russia [12]. However, the de-facto intervention of Iran via its Shiite militias dates back to the early days of the civil war [13]. The first significant military victory to which Iran contributed was the capture of Qusayr from the opposition in June 2013 [14]. With the capture of Qusayr, the course of the war changed in favour of the Assad regime. Iran has supported the Assad regime militarily and economically since the Iranian government feared that the civil war in Syria could spread to its own country. This understanding, "which was based on the assumption that Tehran's security started from Damascus", meant that Iran envisioned its security borderline as originating far beyond its territory. Iran emphasises a wider regional system with its "Shiite crescent" formulation. To preserve the so-called "Shiite crescent", Iran has brought in Shiite jihadists from Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Pakistan, and Afghanistan [15]. All of these foreign militias were controlled, trained, and equipped by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. Apart from the military/strategic dimension of said expansionism, it can be said that Iran has

established a base economically and socially in Syria.

However, Iran did not keep the Syrian regime militarily afloat on its own. Thus, it welcomed the Russian intervention at the end of 2014. With the relative disappearance of the existential danger facing the Assad regime, the Syrian issue has become more political, economic, and socio-cultural for Iran. In line with this thinking, Iran is playing the long game in Syria. It invests in social, demographic, and geographical aspects to secure a geographical strip to ensure continuity of its interests and wants to change demographics and social dynamics in its favour by propagating Shia Islam and investing in the current regime in Syria [16].

The United States

The main reasons for the involvement of the US in the civil war are stated as "maintaining the regional balance of power, ensuring the continuity of the oil flow and suppressing the radical groups that pose a threat to the US" [17]. Therefore, the US has been at odds with Russia, Iran and China in terms of the balance of power in the region. In January 2012, when Russia and China vetoed the Security Council resolution calling on Syrian President Bashar Assad to resign, Susan Rice, an important American diplomat during the Obama administration, strongly condemned both countries and stated that "We the United States stand with the Syrian people […] Russia and China are openly on the side of Assad" [18]. Over the years, under the leadership of Hilary Clinton when she was Secretary of State, the US tried to galvanise the international community in support of the Syrian opposition and worked on the recognition of the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people [19]. However, years after the Obama administration refused to intervene in the civil war, the US intervened but not on behalf of the legitimate Syrian opposition. The US focused exclusively on the fight against Daesh and became a partner with the YPG, the Syrian branch of the PKK [20]. Over

the years, the partnership evolved and the YPG formed the bulk of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) [21]. The formation of the SDF allowed the US to circumvent the problem of the terrorist designation of the PKK and increase investment in the YPG. The strong Turkish rejection of this policy became a political issue the US tried to manage rather than resolve.

The Trump administration continued this policy and viewed the partnership with the YPG as the fastest way to de-territorialize Daesh. Trump, who officially permitted the Pentagon to "direct weapons aid to the YPG" [22] in May 2017, continued his aid to the terrorist organization but later partially withdrew American troops from northern Syria in 2019. After this decision, which was met with dissatisfaction in Congress and official circles in Washington [23], Trump was convinced to remain in parts of Syria to protect the oil resources that the US controlled against Russia [24]. During the withdrawal, CENTCOM officials handed over their bases to Russian forces to prevent further incursion by Türkiye and the Syrian Interim Government (SIG).

In line with the general goals of the Trump administration in Syria, the Biden administration did not significantly change the policy outlook in Syria. It is understood from Biden's statements about the region that there will be a limited military presence in Iraq focused on the fight against Daesh. In addition, within the scope of the fight against Daesh, the US continues to support the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the YPG affiliated with the SDF in Syria [25].

Russia

The Syrian crisis has been an important trump card for Russia in terms of not losing more ground against the US after the Cold War and proving that Russia is at least as effective as the US in world politics. Thinking that Russia's presence in the Middle East and East Mediterranean has weakened, Russia started to take steps to protect the Assad regime in 2014, which it has always seen as its best ally in

the region, especially vis-à-vis the US. Particularly with the expanding threat of Daesh, Russia tried to legitimise its intervention in 2015 by saying that Syria would come under the control of terrorist groups [26]. Russia established a military airbase at Hmeymim on Syria's coast and sent warplanes, attack helicopters, air defence systems, and unmanned aerial vehicles to the country [27]. Russia also strengthened its naval base in Tartus [28] and has sent about 1,700 Russian military experts to the region [29]. Following the revelation of Russia's military presence in Syria, Foreign Minister Lavrov confirmed that arms and military experts had been sent to Syria for some time and stated that their main purpose was to fight terrorist organisations in Syria [30]. However, Russian airstrikes and Russia-supported military operations of the Assad regime focused primarily on the armed Syrian opposition and paved the way for a military victory in Ghouta, Homs, Zabadani, Darayya, Deraa, and most importantly Aleppo - Syria's economic heart. The Russian intervention was a game-changer in the country, as stated by the Russian Ambassador to the EU, Vladimir Chizhov. He also emphasised that "Had there not been Russian intervention, the civil war perhaps would have ended earlier, with the destruction of the Syrian army and the government, [...]" [31].

In the wake of its military victories, Russia attempted two different strategies to establish political stability in the war-torn country and demonstrate its capability of resolving the crisis in Syria. The first of these was the establishment of the Astana process together with Türkiye and Iran. The Astana process proved to be the only influential diplomatic effort and was essential in shaping dynamics inside Syria, most notably by the establishment of four de-escalation zones [32]. However, Russia has since supported the regime in its efforts to take control over three and half of the initial de-escalation zones [33]. One of the successes of the Astana process was the establishment of the constitutional committee to draft a new constitution. However, the committee's progress quickly stalled due to the regime's outright rejection of the process. The second

strategy was Russian-sponsored local reconciliation agreements between the regime and the armed Syrian opposition. Initially, Russia hoped to propagate these agreements as a model for Syria. However, the fragile security situation in the reconciled regions of Deraa has cast doubt on their viability.

Türkiye

At the beginning of the Syrian civil war, the armed struggle was mainly between the Assad regime and opposition groups. Attacks on Türkiye originating from Syria were limited. However, since the end of 2012, when the Syrian civil war was increasingly characterised by proxy warfare, the magnitude of the threat to Türkiye changed and its cost increased. The gap that emerged, especially in Syria's north, was quickly filled by non-state terrorist groups such as Daesh and the YPG. This situation has presented a new security problem for Türkiye and has led to the emergence of new strategic and political realities. Türkiye has embraced "a three-pronged approach" that was proposed in combating terrorist groups, including regular sharing of information and intelligence, "fighting the reasons for the emergence of Daesh" [34], and working with the SIG. However, an impasse reaching the level of a crisis occurred between Türkiye and its allies regarding relations with the YPG.

The PYD was founded in 2003 by the direct decision of PKK leader Öcalan and is the Syrian branch of the PKK. At the 8th Congress of the PKK in 2002, the establishment of the PYD was decided [35]. After the civil war broke out in Syria in 2011, Salih Muslim, who served as the "co-chairman" of the separatist terrorist organization PKK's Syrian extension, the PYD, between 2010 and 2017, announced that he had founded the YPG as the armed branch of the PYD [36]. With the formation, the Assad regime handed over chunks of territory to the YPG. The YPG presence has posed a great threat to Türkiye's security.

Daesh also presented a significant threat to Türkiye's security, and both terror groups shocked Türkiye with dozens of suicide attacks and car bombs, killing hundreds of civilians [37]. After Türkiye defined the YPG's crossing to the west of the Euphrates as its red line, the US initially limited its cooperation with the YPG to its west of the river. However, with US support, the YPG crossed west of the Euphrates River. During this period, Russia encouraged the YPG to advance east from the Afrin pocket to connect with the forces that crossed the Euphrates [38]. The YPG wanted to advance to Azez via Afrin to seize the Azez-Jarablus line to have a region that would ensure its control over a geographically contiguous space in northern Syria.

Shortly after the failed coup attempt in Türkiye in July 2016, the Turkish Armed Forces, together with the Free Syrian Army - who later became the Syrian National Army (SNA) under the command of the SIG - launched a military operation to clean northern Aleppo from Daesh. This military operation was followed by Operation Olive Branch in 2018 that targeted the YPG in the Afrin region, and Operation Peace Spring in 2019 to remove the YPG from northeast Syria. After the killing of 34 Turkish soldiers by an airstrike in February 2020, Türkiye launched Operation Spring Shield against the Assad regime and Iranian-backed Shia militias to protect 3.1 million civilians in Idlib [39].

Terrorism

In Syria, there were fundamental turning points that changed the course of events, such as the emergence of Daesh, the formation of the Jabhat al-Nusra (Al-Nusra Front), the evolving role of the YPG with the support of the US, and Hezbollah's support of regime forces. Jabhat al-Nusra announced its establishment in January 2012, one year after the start of the Syrian civil war. While the organisation did not officially declare its allegiance to Al-Qaeda at the beginning, it subsequently publicly presented itself as "Al-Qaeda's Syrian franchise" [40]. Apart from the Syrians, "Some militant groups of Algerians, Iraqis, Yemenis, Afghans,

Chechens, and Pakistanis, who were experienced in civil wars" came together under the roof of the organisation. The aim of Jabhat al-Nusra was to wage war on the Assad regime and to introduce "sharia law" as the administrative system in Syria [41]. In pursuit of these objectives, the organisation adopted the strategy of inflicting more casualties by using suicide bombers against regime forces. In addition, it used harsh sectarian rhetoric. Although Jabhat al-Nusra positioned itself as an anti-regime force, it also attacked and weakened the legitimate Syrian opposition [42]. The YPG also gained territorial control in northern Syria and brought another new dynamic to the conflict. Under the Obama administration, arms were provided to the YPG [43]. With their newfound American support, the YPG, which had repulsed Daesh, then advanced rapidly along the Turkish border [44]. The terrorist organisation then turned south and captured Raqqa and Deir Ezzor [45]. The YPG actively cooperated with Russia and the Assad regime against the legitimate armed Syrian opposition, occupied Tel Rifaat, and helped regime forces and Iranian Shia militias to besiege Aleppo city [46]. In political terms, the YPG follows a separatist agenda and implements the democratic confederalism model - a radical left-wing governance model adopted by Abdullah Öcalan [47]. The YPG played an essential role in suppressing Syrian Kurds advocating to increase cooperation with the legitimate Syrian opposition, ultimately weakening the ranks of the armed Syrian opposition and reducing the role of Syrian Kurds within it. Russian officials claim that the regime controls 90% of the country – an exaggerated number indicating that Russia views YPG-held areas to be part of the area under regime control.

Daesh came into Syria in 2012 but announced its official presence in 2013. Soon after, it captured Raqqa in Syria and Mosul in Iraq and declared its caliphate [48]. The terrorist organisation has grown rapidly and has carried out many terrorist attacks both in the region and globally. As a result, the priority of global actors such as the US became the fight against Daesh [49]. When the terrorist organisation launched an operation to control Ayn al-Arab (Kobane) in 2014, it

marked the beginning of US intervention [50]. With the emergence of Daesh, the Syrian civil war gained an entirely new aspect. Not only was the phenomenon of Daesh imported from Iraq into Syria, but also extremists from all across the world flocked to Syria to join the group [51]. Daesh managed to control a vast territory and primarily targeted the armed Syrian opposition. Former opposition strongholds fell to Daesh, and the organisation took over essential sources of income such as oil. Moreover, the ideology of the terrorist organization and its pursuit of an establishment of a terror state influenced the political and social situation in Syria.

Lebanon's Hezbollah officially declared its presence in Syria two years after the start of the Syrian civil war. From the beginning, Hezbollah supported the Assad regime in suppressing protests and uprisings [52]. With the import of Hezbollah from Lebanon, the Syrian civil war gained a new sectarian dynamic. Hezbollah forces and their crimes in Syria provoked a reaction of sectarian rhetoric among Islamist groups within the armed Syrian opposition [53]. For Hezbollah, the legitimate Syrian opposition were, in reality, American-Israeli agents and radical jihadists. Hezbollah head Nasrallah stated that his organisation will support Assad and prevent him from falling into the hands of "the USA, Israel, and radical jihadists" [54]. Hezbollah pursued three main objectives in helping Assad. First, Hezbollah aimed to protect the Iran-Syria border line, which it describes as the "Axis of Resistance", by strengthening the military capabilities of the Assad regime [55]. Secondly, Hezbollah aimed to maintain access to financial support from Iran and Syria by protecting the communication and transmission lines from Damascus to Lebanon. Thirdly, the organisation sought to prevent a Sunni-dominated government in Syria [56].

The involvement of terror groups in the conflict in Syria has transformed the conflict into a different paradigm. While "the moderate opposition" in the region was in danger of being "swallowed" by the Al-Nusra front, Türkiye's border security and the "security of the civilian population"

were endangered by the separatist YPG. Also, foreign terrorist fighters from all over the world came to the region to join Daesh, while Hezbollah gave the Syrian civil war a sectarian aspect. Finally, all of them together managed to internationalise the Syrian civil war.

The Future of the Syrian Opposition and the Political Process in Syria

Foreign interventions and terrorism have shaped the situation Syria is facing today. While the Iranian intervention prolonged the survival of the Assad regime, Russia guaranteed its survival and enabled the regime to regain much of its territorial control. The American intervention de-territorialised Daesh and facilitated the YPG-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces in its third-way attempt to form a self-declared autonomous region. On the other side, the Turkish intervention not only served Türkiye's national security but also guaranteed the presence of the legitimate Syrian opposition and provided them with a safe zone to implement their alternative for Syria [57]. Most importantly, the Turkish intervention against the Assad regime in 2020 stopped the pursuit of a military solution to the conflict in Syria and showed that a political process is the only way forward.

The Syrian Interim Government: An Alternative for Syria?

The SIG was initially founded on 18 March 2013 by the SNC [58]. As the legitimate representative of the Syrian people, the SNC elects the SIG for a yearly period. The current prime minister is Abdurrahman Mustafa who heads a cabinet of seven ministers [59].

The SIG is the official political supreme body of the local councils in Syria's north and commands the SNA. Its governmental institutions are present in Gaziantep, Türkiye as well as Azaz, Syria. Despite all of the progress in recent years, the overall security situation in Syria forces the SIG to maintain its presence in Türkiye [60].

The SIG takes governmental decisions in Syria, meets with official delegations of foreign countries and supra-national entities such as the EU and the UN [61]. Most importantly, the government oversees the work of the local councils, the SNA, the Free Syrian Police (FSP), and the border crossings in its areas.

The local councils in the areas of the SIG are elected by the people of the region. Within their local capacity, they make all of the administrative decisions and each council has its internal structure adjusted for the dynamics in each region. While the localised approach guarantees local legitimacy and effectiveness, it limits the ability to have a broader inter-regional approach. Therefore, the role of the SIG and its Minister of Local Councils to oversee the work of the local councils and coordinate their efforts is essential [62].

When it comes to the FSP, its structure is similar to the local councils in that it is locally-based and each region has its police structure. As a result, the FSP enjoys a high degree of authority and effectiveness in local matters, however, combatting cross-regional criminal activity remains a significant challenge. To coordinate efforts against criminality, the branches of the FSP require the aid of the SIG and the Minister of Interior. Moreover, as most criminal gangs in Syria are armed, the capacities of the FSP might not be sufficient. Therefore, the FSP often requests help from the SNA and the Military Police of the SNA, a procedure that requires coordination with the SIG [63].

Last but not least, the SNA is the accumulation of several moderate armed Syrian opposition groups. Most of these groups were formerly backed by the US and all of them are officially represented in the Astana process and the constitutional committee as the legitimate armed opposition. The SNA is structured within seven legions with their respective Divisions and Brigades. However, several problems such as factionalism and lack of hierarchical command within the SNA are still prevalent.

However, the SIG has its limitations. Foremost is the fact that its economic income resources are limited to income from the border crossings with Türkiye, foreign financial aid, and limited tax revenues. Secondly, Turkish support is essential in enabling the governance model of the SIG. While the SIG provides better education and healthcare than any other party in Syria, it does so, thanks to Türkiye. Ankara not only trains and equips the SNA and the FSP but also provides aid in healthcare, education, infrastructure, and administration [64]. Furthermore, the local self-governance model in Syria's north has not yet been tested on a wide scale. The proximity to Türkiye is a strong factor in its success and it remains untested if and how this model could function on a more general level. On the one hand, expanding this model to other parts of Syria would require bigger resources and income; and on the other hand, foreign support would still be essential.

The Blocked Political Process and the Status Quo

After the initial phase of the Geneva Conference to find a solution to the Syrian civil war failed to make any significant progress, the new realities after the Russian intervention, the fall of Aleppo city, and the YPG's crossover to the west side of the Euphrates River formed the basis for the Astana process [65]. The basis behind the Astana process is that Türkiye, Russia, and Iran came together to bring the Syrian opposition and the Assad regime into negotiations [66].

With the Astana process, the three nations became guarantor powers in Syria and managed to bring the two parties together to preserve Syria's territorial integrity. While the regime and the legitimate Syrian opposition have conflicting positions, they both share the goal to preserve their country. Within this new dynamic, the first major progress in the political process was achieved: The formation of the constitutional committee [67].

With huge efforts by the guarantor powers, a 150-person committee was formed to write a new constitution for Syria and push forward the

political process. This alone is an important step, however, it failed to go anywhere on its own. The Assad regime explicitly blocked all negotiations in the committee and prevented any progress. Therefore, at the moment of writing, a successful political process to bring peace, democracy, and security to Syria remains a distant prospect [68].

The Assad regime's pseudo elections in which more people voted for Assad than were actually living in regime-held areas may have been the last nail in the coffin. It demonstrated that the regime is not even interested in giving the impression of legitimate and free elections. Within the current status-quo, four groups are vying for influence, but only two - the Assad regime and the opposition-led government in the north - have a real shot at running the country. The Syrian Salvation Government of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Idlib; the opposition-led SIG in the north; the self-declared autonomous region in the northeast, managed by the YPG; and the Assad regime, maintained with the support of Russia and Iran [69]. Looking at the advantages and weaknesses of each, it is likely that either the Assad regime or the SIG could be successful in the long term.

Ramifications for the Region

The Syrian civil war affected the psychology and the motivation of the Arab people. The catastrophic humanitarian situation of Syrians is a result for the people to consider before demanding democracy and freedom against an authoritarian regime. When Syrians rose up, they had seen how the people in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya had done the same. Moreover, they had seen foreign aid and international support given in the case of Libya. All of this encouraged them to do the same; however, the response by the Assad regime was different and even much more violent than the military response of Gaddafi. It responded with brutality and military force. In response to this brutality, Western states were reluctant to intervene on behalf of the Syrian people. Partially thanks to this reluctance, Daesh emerged in Syria and an international coalition needed to be formed to fight against Daesh. At the end of the

day, the very same reluctant countries intervened anyway in Syria. However, they did not do so on behalf of the Syrian people but against an outcome of the conflict in the form of terror.

When the Arab youth, in general, consider uprising against authoritarianism, they need to consider the effect of 10 years of war in Syria. They may consider achieving a similar outcome of limited self-governance, but is it worth the risk and the costs? Moreover, the Assad regime has evolved into a model for authoritarian regimes on how to handle popular uprisings. The invincibility of the regime despite its massive war crimes and violations of human rights shows other authoritarian regimes that they can survive if they employ brutality against the people [70]. In this manner, the discussion among some states to normalise relations with the Assad regime is a further motivation for authoritarian regimes.

During the ten years of war in Syria, the positions of foreign states became clear. Western states have stepped down their support for the Syrian opposition. The US, for instance, focused solely on the fight against Daesh and partnered with a force that does not fight the Assad regime or Iranian-backed Shia militias. By doing so, the US has side-lined itself in the conflict [71]. The only foreign actor who intervened together with the legitimate Syrian opposition was Türkiye [72]. In the broader context, Türkiye has become the sole foreign state that puts its weight behind the advocates for democracy and freedom. While certainly this was partially backed by the Turkish sympathy for these calls, it's mainly driven by a more assertive Turkish foreign policy to defend what it sees as its strategic interests. Together with the Turkish role in Libya, the Syrian civil war also marks the beginning of the rise of Türkiye's hard power [73].

Conclusion

The Syrian revolution may have begun with a certain goal, but after not reaching it, the revolution showed high flexibility in adapting itself

to new circumstances. Therefore, the Syrian revolution is not dead but transformed from a nationwide uprising to a limited self-governance model.

On the other side, the civil war in Syria gained a proxy war aspect. The main thresholds for the armed Syrian opposition were the handing over of territories to the YPG by the Assad regime, the use of chemical weapons, and the decision of Obama not to follow through with its imposed redline [74]. The most significant elements that shaped the Syrian revolution were interventions by Iran, Russia, the US, and Türkiye. The intervention by Iran prolonged the conflict and provided the Assad regime with the ability to survive a conflict that people expected to end quickly [75]. After Iran bought time for the regime, the Russian intervention in 2015 was decisive and changed the military balance of power entirely [76]. The American intervention against Daesh by partnering with the YPG [77], on the other hand, facilitated another dimension to the conflict and showed the disinterest of the US in counterbalancing Russia. Thus, only the Turkish intervention was life-saving for the Syrian opposition [78]. Otherwise, Russia, Iran, and the Assad regime would have imposed a military solution. Next to the foreign interventions, terrorism was a strong factor in the transformation of the Syrian revolution. The involvement of terror groups in the conflict has transformed the conflict. As the civil war continued, various paradigms emerged that internationalised it: (a) Jabhat al-Nusra sabotaged the image of the legitimate Syrian opposition [79], (b) the YPG brought in the aspect of separatism and radical leftist governance [80], (c) Daesh brought in extremists from all over the world [81] and its conception of a 'caliphate' [82], (d) and Hezbollah gave the Syrian civil war a sectarian aspect [83].

New dynamics and the reality on the ground ultimately forced the Syrian opposition to adjust its agenda and strategy. The aspiration of the Syrian people for their revolution still lives on. Therefore, the Syrian opposition transformed its agenda into a limited self-governance model. Thanks to

the support provided by Türkiye, the Syrian opposition controls a chunk of land in northern Syria. In this region, the SIG governs with a model of limited self-governance in which local councils and local security structures play an important role [84]. The SIG – elected by the official representatives of the Syrian people – functions as a supreme executive body to coordinate these local efforts. The SIG with its SNA, FSP, and local councils and its limited self-governance could be a model for Syria. However, it is still faced with significant challenges, namely its limited financial resources and dependence on Türkiye.

Nevertheless, the SIG may be a model for a resolution in all of Syria as the international political process has been effectively blocked. The constitutional committee established within the Astana process could not achieve progress due to the policy of the Assad regime to sabotage and blockade negotiations and the drafting of a new constitution for Syria.

While the Syrian revolution transformed due to the transformation of the situation in Syria, its ramification for the Arab world was of psychological nature. The brutal response by the Assad regime with military force to peaceful demonstrations, together with the reluctance of Western states to intervene to protect the Syrian people, has become a textbook example for authoritarian regimes on how to suppress a nationwide uprising. For democratic aspirants across the Arab world, Syria is a lesson on how their uprising may evolve if their authoritarian regime is backed by foreign states.

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Chapter 7
Operation Peace Spring and the Battle for a Free Syria

Şener Aktürk

Introduction

Operation Peace Spring, which was launched in October 2019, had been in the making for more than four years. By mid-2015, the YPG-PYD's expanding occupation of the mostly Arab-majority Northern Syria, combined their deliberate policy of forced displacement of its opponents, primarily Arabs and Turkmens, but also many dissident Kurds, led to a new wave of Syrian refugees entering Türkiye. Moreover, the PYD's occupation of Northern Syria was accompanied by the deadliest wave of terrorist attacks of the last two decades against Türkiye by the PKK. Beginning in July 2015, this wave of attacks had claimed the lives of approximately one thousand Turkish citizens by July 2016. Based on these two major motivations, *Operation Peace Spring* was launched by the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) and the allied Syrian National Army (SNA).

By all indicators, including a recent survey conducted by Gallup International, *Operation Peace Spring* appears to have been welcomed by a majority of the region's Arab population and a significant portion of Kurds [1]. The widespread local Syrian support for *Operation Peace Spring* is in great part due to Türkiye being the only state supporting majority-rule in Syria, an absolutely essential characteristic for a functioning democratic society [2]. In stark contrast, Iran, France, Russia, and the United States militarily supported and supplied various factions that depend on small ethnic sectarian and ideological minorities. Relatedly, it has been repeatedly demonstrated that the territories that came under the control of Türkiye and the Turkish-backed opposition

alone did not revert back to the Assad regime, whereas significant territories previously held by the YPG, Daesh and the HTS, all came under the control of Assad regime.

A third factor that may have influenced ordinary Syrians' overwhelmingly positive evaluation of Türkiye as the most benevolent outside power in Syria is the fact the *Operation Peace Spring*, similar to *Operation Euphrates Shield* (2016) and *Operation Olive Branch* (2018) before, has been conducted with minimal civilian casualties and minimal destruction of infrastructure. In stark contrast, the U.S.-YPG takeover of Raqqa resulted in thousands of civilian casualties, and the Russian-Iranian backed Assad regime's takeover of Aleppo and much of Northwestern Syria from the Syrian opposition resulted in tens of thousands of civilian casualties. Moreover, it has been demonstrated time and again that the YPG allowed Daesh terrorist free passage in quid pro quo deals [3]. Even more publicly and far more often, the YPG collaborated with the Assad regime, including handing over anti-government activists to the regime, and more recently, handing over entire towns and territories to the regime as a form of protection against Türkiye and the SNA.

The territories captured from the YPG during *Operation Peace Spring*, such as Tal Abyad and Rasulayn, are overwhelmingly populated by Arabs with relatively few Kurds. Moreover, the PYD-YPG that previously occupied these territories is only a Marxist socialist faction within the Kurdish minority. Against this background, it remains a question as to why many prominent Western opinion leaders supported the YPG, a radical ideological minority within an already small ethnic minority (Kurds make up approximately 10 percent of Syria) that occupied almost one-third of Syria with the support of the U.S. military and significant Saudi Arabian financing [4]. Widespread support for the YPG among influential Western opinion leaders represents a convergence of far right (e.g., Pat Robertson) and far left (e.g., Noam Chomsky) radicalism, which share an overt – in the case of the former

– or covert – in the latter case - Islamophobic bias in their political evaluations.

Finally, Türkiye is the only neighbour of Syria that is both materially capable and politically willing to assume part of the responsibility for the reconstruction of post-war Syria, which is the minimal necessary condition to enable the return of Syrian refugees. The magnitude of such a reconstruction and the return of the Syrian refugees to their homeland, however, can be far greater with the assistance of the European Union and the United States. Otherwise, such reconstruction and return of refugees will most likely remain limited to rather small pockets that Türkiye has access to in Northern Syria.

Origins of the Operation: The YPG Takeover of Northern Syria and the Refugee Crisis

Operation Peace Spring, which was launched in October 2019, has been in the making since the PYD-YPG's capture of Tal Abyad in June 2015, which was widely recognized as a "turning point" in the Syrian conflict [5], and the PKK's declaration [6] of a so-called "People's Revolutionary War" against Türkiye shortly thereafter in July 2015 [7]. These two historical turning points that took place in mid-2015 highlight the humanitarian and the security concerns that motivated Türkiye to undertake *Operation Peace Spring* after lengthy preparations and years-long negotiations abroad.

The PYD's policy of forced displacement of its Arab, Turkmen, and Kurdish opponents from Northern Syria was documented by Amnesty International in a detailed report already in October 2015 [8]. This policy of deliberate displacement and population engineering served the goal of building a totalitarian one-party state inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution that forged the Soviet Union, which led the author of this outlook to depict the PKK and the PYD's attempt as a "Kurdish Soviet experiment" in Syria and Türkiye [9]. Türkiye hosts approximately 300.000 Syrian Kurdish refugees [10], most of whom fled from the

PYD-YPG occupied areas of Northern Syria, and who "fear returning home due to the PYD/PKK threat" [11]. This number is still less than one-tenth of the approximately 3.5 million Syrian refugees of all ethnic backgrounds that Türkiye continues to host, a sizeable portion of them being the Arab inhabitants of Northern Syria who were forcefully displaced by the PYD as recognized even by Western media outlets such as the *New York Times* [12], which is otherwise very sympathetic to PYD-YPG. In short, allowing for the repatriation of hundreds of thousands of Syrians who were forcefully displaced by the PYD and sought refuge in Türkiye constitute one of the two major justifications and motivations for *Operation Peace Spring*.

The PYD-YPG's Occupation of Northern Syria and PKK Terrorism in Türkiye

The YPG's takeover of Northern Syria was accompanied by the PKK's decision to launch the deadliest terrorist campaign that Türkiye has suffered in the last two decades. Within a month of the YPG's occupation of Tal Abyad, which brought the entire Syrian-Turkish border east of Euphrates River under contiguous YPG control, the PKK declared that was unilaterally declaring an end to the ceasefire and launching a "People's Revolutionary War" against Türkiye. The immediate reason given was the construction of hydroelectric dams in south-eastern Anatolia, which struck many observers as a particularly unconvincing pretext for launching one of the bloodiest terrorist campaigns of the 21st century [13]. According to the International Crisis Group's report based on open sources, at least 4,739 people were killed in the Türkiye-PKK conflict between July 2015 and November 2019 including at least 490 verified civilians and 1,220 Turkish security forces personnel [14]. Importantly, 2,034 of these people were killed between July 2015 and July 2016, corresponding to almost half of the total casualty figures. PKK attacks included numerous suicide bombings in Türkiye's urban centres such as the suicide bombing next to a major stadium in Istanbul during a football match in December 2016 [15].

The most likely reason behind the PKK's decision to initiate its most comprehensive offensive against Türkiye in July 2015, right after its YPG Syrian affiliate captured Tal Abyad in June 2015, was to preserve, consolidate, deepen, and possibly expand its occupation in Northern Syria, while keeping the Turkish military and security forces busy fighting domestic terrorism, and hence preventing Türkiye from intervening against the PYD at such a critical juncture [16]. In fact, a pro-PYD mobilisation that ended with dozens of civilian fatalities already took place in October 2014 when thousands of pro-PKK sympathisers took to the streets in numerous Kurdish-majority towns in Türkiye to protest Türkiye's lack of assistance to the YPG-held Syrian town of Kobani (Ayn Al-Arab) besieged by Daesh at the time. During the course of these events, dozens of dissident Kurdish civilians who did not support the PKK/PYD, such as 16-year-old Yasin Börü, were murdered [17] in what one journalist described as the "PKK's witch hunt" [18]. Throughout this conflict, PKK leadership [19] and pro-PKK political actors, [20] including legal political parties that are openly sympathetic to the PKK in Türkiye such as the HDP [21], explicitly prioritised the preservation of the PYD-YPG's gains in Syria - the so-called "Rojava revolution" - as the most critical objective of PKK's violent campaigns. In other words, the PKK's violent campaign against Türkiye including numerous acts of terrorism including suicide bombings, was explicitly linked to the PYD-YPG's occupation of Northern Syria.

Moreover, many militants receive training in Syria [22] and are involved in both the PKK and the PYD attacks in Türkiye and Syria, respectively [23]. Türkiye's Ministry of Interior published a bilingual report (in English and Turkish) on the concrete links between the PKK and the PYD, which includes biographies of leading terrorists who participate in both the PKK and the YPG [24]. The report is also available in Arabic [25] and German [26]. In a detailed story about the YPG and the PKK by the *Wall Street Journal*, titled, "America's Marxist Allies Against ISIS," a YPG fighter, Ms. Ruken, pithily summarises the unity of the PKK and the YPG in her own example: "Sometimes I'm a PKK,

sometimes I'm a PJAK, sometimes I'm a YPG. It doesn't really matter. They are all members of the PKK" [27].

Among numerous similar examples, YPG fighters celebrated their capture of Raqqa by displaying a gigantic poster of Abdullah Öcalan at the city centre, demonstrating their strong affiliation with the PKK in a rather spectacular and irrefutable manner [28]. Not just in Raqqa but throughout Syria in general, YPG militants unabashedly and proudly praised Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the PKK, which is recognized as a terrorist organisation by the European Union, the United States, and Türkiye [29]. In short, in addition to hundreds of thousands of Syrians displaced by the PYD-YPG who have been living as refugees in Türkiye, *Operation Peace Spring* was also necessitated and justified due to the terrorist attacks emanating from the PKK-PYD-SDF with specific reference to the war in Syria, which claimed the lives of hundreds of Turkish civilians and over a thousand Turkish security personnel since July 2015.

The Majority of Syrians Support Türkiye's Intervention

There have been numerous indicators that the majority of Syrians, and especially the Sunni Arabs, supported Türkiye's intervention in Syria, and especially against the PYD-YPG. In the absence of free and fair elections, referenda, or regular nationwide opinion polls, the mass migration movement within and beyond Syria can be considered an indicator, however imperfect, of which factions and external powers Syrians prefer. Among the three zones of control in Syria, namely, the Russian-Iranian backed Assad regime, French-Saudi-U.S. backed YPG-PYD territory, and Turkish-backed SNA and Idlib zones, the largest internal migrations have been away from Assad-regime and YPG-PYD controlled territories to Turkish-backed SNA and Idlib zones. To a certain extent, millions of Syrians already voted with their feet to indicate that they feel most secure in territories controlled by Turkish-backed groups. More than 3 million Syrians fled to and remained in Türkiye since the beginning of the war, making Türkiye the host country with the largest

number of Syrian refugees worldwide. Thus, somewhere between one-fourth and one-third of Syria's total pre-war population either lives in Türkiye or in the Northwestern Syrian territories protected by Türkiye at present, which itself is a very meaningful fact in this regard.

A Gallup International survey in Syria, conducted in the governorates of Hasakah and Raqqa, which are the only ones affected by the *Operation Peace Spring*, but conducted among residents not living in the territories already under Turkish or Turkish-backed FSA/SNA control, demonstrated that 57% of Syrians "support Turkish military intervention" [30]. The Gallup survey also indicated that when broken down according to ethnic categories, 64% of Arabs and 23% of Kurds openly support the Turkish military intervention. This indicates a very clear majority are in favour of Turkish intervention among Syrians in general, and an overwhelming two-thirds majority among Syrian Arabs. Moreover, the 23% support that the Turkish intervention already enjoys among Syrian Kurds must be considered a lower bound, and the actual levels of support are likely to be much higher because of the deliberate oversampling of the subset of Kurds who are most likely to oppose Turkish intervention by definition: Gallup explicitly states that they included 100 Kurds who fled from the territories that already came under Turkish control during *Operation Peace Spring*, and since these Kurds are among those that fled Turkish intervention, they are almost by definition likely to oppose it. Including 100 respondents with such a background in an otherwise demographically representative sample of 600 Syrians, the majority of whom must have been Arabs, probably skews the Kurdish responses by about a third if not more. Thus, it is possible that actual Syrian Kurdish support for the Turkish intervention might be as high as 50% rather than the 23% reported in the Gallup survey. In any case, even the current survey indicates that one out of four Syrian Kurds and two-thirds of Syrian Arabs support the Turkish intervention, leading Gallup to conclude that "there is a deep intra-Kurdish divide." Based on their interviews, they maintain that, "[m]any Kurds in Syria are ideologically at odds with the PYD - a left-wing

affiliate of the PKK with non-Syrian leadership," which is consistent with the assessment of many other experts on Syria.

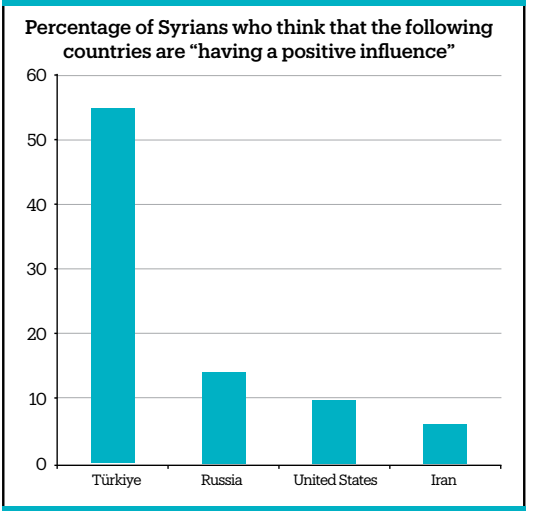
There are numerous other indicators of a deep intra-Kurdish divide and subsequent Kurdish support for Türkiye's intervention against PYD-YPG in Syria. In a dramatic illustration of the deep intra-Kurdish divide, Professor Mustafa Muslim, the elder brother of Salih Muslim - leader of the PYD - could not live in the Soviet-inspired totalitarian one-party regime that his brother was building, and he left "Rojava" and sought refuge in Türkiye [31]. Mustafa Muslim stated that "the PYD only represents 10 percent of Syria's Kurds" and that they "arrest dissidents and do not want any difference of opinion"[32]. Indeed, his brother and PYD leader Salih Muslim explicitly stated that not only rival forces and parties of Arabs or Turkmens, but even the *peshmerga*, the Kurdish fighters affiliated with the Kurdistan Democratic Party, would be denied entry to the PYD-YPG occupied Northern Syria [33].

Nechirvan Barzani, the President of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, speaking at a panel in Erbil stated that "Türkiye does not have any problems with Kurds in Syria, and it only aims to fight a PKK-affiliated terror group there" as TRT World broadcasted and reported [34]. Barzani maintained that "the biggest problem was that the PKK tried to obtain its legitimacy at the expense of Syrian Kurds" and "[w]hat Kurds eventually suffered came as a result of the wrong policy they [PKK] followed," according to *Rudaw*, the leading broadcaster of the Kurdistan Regional Government [35]. In short, public opinion surveys as well as testimonies of leading Kurdish notables including the President of Kurdistan Regional Government and the elder brother of PYD's leader himself indicate that there is a deep intra-Kurdish divide even among Northern Syrian Kurds, with at least 23 % of the Syrian Kurds openly supporting Türkiye's military intervention, and with only a fraction supporting the PYD. Perhaps more importantly, an overwhelming majority of Arabs (64 %), who constitute the absolute majority in Northern Syria, in both Hasakah and Raqqa, support and welcome Türkiye's intervention to free their territories from PYD-YPG occupation.

Türkiye is the Only Country Having a Positive Influence According to Most Syrians

Türkiye is seen as "having a positive influence in the region" by 55% of the representative sample of Syrians surveys by Gallup. In stark contrast, only 14%, 10%, and 6% of Syrians have a favourable opinion of Russia, United States, and Iran, respectively. Thus, among the four major military powers currently on the ground in Syria, Türkiye is the clear favourite among Syrians by a very large margin. The Gallup report emphasises that this is not an ephemeral or local outcome, since "[f]or many years now, public opinion has consistently shown that Türkiye is considered the only country that has a positive influence on affairs inside Syria" [36]. The particularly favourable views of Türkiye by Syrians might be due to the fact that Türkiye has been and remains the only foreign actor, which consistently supported majority-rule in Syria, which is also a necessary condition of democracy, whereas Russia, Iran, France, and the United States supported various ideological, ethnic, and sectarian minorities in Syria, including the Baathists (Russia), the Alawites (Iran), and the Kurdish socialists (France and the United States).

Graph 1: **Which country is having a positive influence according to Syrians?**



Source: The graph was designed as per the data of the Gallup International Survey in Syria. Available at: <shorturl.at/dITV1>.

Türkiye is also the only actor that has so far been able to guarantee that the territories that came under its control would not revert back to the Assad regime, which is a very important fact since 57% of Syrians

interviewed by Gallup International are of the opinion that "living under Daesh would be preferable to living under the control of Assad" [37]. In other words, there are many examples of territories that were first captured by the Daesh, the HTS, or the YPG, which were later taken over by the Assad-regime, either by force (e.g., from HTS) or peacefully handed over (e.g., by YPG), whereas there is no example of a territory captured by Türkiye, which was subsequently captured by or handed over to the Assad-regime. The finding that the Assad regime is the least preferable administration for most Syrians is also troubling if we consider that both the PYD-YPG and HTS (in Northwestern Syria) ceded or lost significant territories to the Assad regime, either willingly as in the case of PYD-YPG or unwillingly in the case of HTS. In stark contrast, Turkish backed FSA-SNA controlled territories alone have remained immune from being taken over by the Russo-Iranian backed Assad regime.

Roy Gutman, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist reporting on Syria, provocatively suggested that "America's dirty secret in Syria" is a "de facto alliance with Assad," which was exposed by Türkiye's intervention in Afrin (*Operation Olive Branch*): "The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces the United States relies on to fight the so-called Islamic State in eastern Syria is allied with the infamous regime of Bashar al-Assad," Gutman contends [38]. There is also evidence that surfaced in testimony to the U.S. Congressional Committee of Foreign Affairs [39] to suggest that the Obama administration worked with Russia to prevent the fall of the Assad-regime [40]. Instead of surrendering territory to Turkish-backed Syrian opposition forces such as FSA and later SNA, U.S.-backed PYD-YPG repeatedly invited Russian-Iranian backed Assad regime forces to patrol and even take over territories under its control. The widespread collaboration between the PYD-YPG and the Assad regime was also noted as a critical observation in Gallup International's summary of interviews with Kurdish Syrians in Raqqa and Hasakah provinces, where they stated that "many Kurds who joined the beginning of the Syrian revolution view the PYD as collaborators

with Assad and a group that has previously handed over many activists to the regime" [41].

Apart from its overt collaboration with the Assad regime, the YPG has also collaborated with Daesh/Islamic State (IS), although far more covertly. Upon the capture of Raqqa by the SDF with massive U.S. and British support, the "BBC has uncovered details of a secret deal that let hundreds of IS fighters and their families escape from Raqqa," including "some of IS's most notorious members" [42]. In short, the overt and the covert collaboration of the PYD-YPG with both the Assad-regime and Daesh, as well as the successive defeats that the HTS suffered (most recently and significantly surrendering Khan Sheikhoun) [43], makes Turkish-backed Syrian opposition (FSA/SNA) the only reliable military force that can protect the majority of Syrians who prefer to avoid living under Assad-regime at all costs.

Another factor that may partially explain ordinary Syrians' overwhelmingly positive evaluation of Türkiye as the most positive influence in Syria is the fact Türkiye conducted its military operations in Syria with minimal civilian casualties and minimal destruction of infrastructure. For example, many Turkish social media accounts shared photographs [44] and videos [45] of Afrin following its liberation by Türkiye and the FSA through *Operation Olive Branch* (2018) juxtaposed against pictures and videos of Raqqa following its "liberation" by the United States and the SDF in 2017. The U.S.-led coalition's strikes on Raqqa alone killed 1,600 civilians, as revealed in an investigation by Amnesty International [46], and reported by BBC [47], Deutsche Welle [48], and Voice of America [49], among others. Likewise, the Assad regime's takeover of Aleppo and much of Western Syria from the Syrian opposition with massive Russian and Iranian support resulted in tens of thousands of civilian casualties and included the use of chemical weapons. Türkiye's military operations in Syria compare far more favourably to those of Russia, Iran, and the United States in terms of civilian casualties and the destruction of infrastructure.

The territories liberated during the *Operation Peace Spring* by the TAF-SNA as of October-November 2019 such as Tal Abyad and Rasulayn are overwhelmingly Arab populated regions with relatively small Kurdish minority populations, only a fraction of which are Kurdish PYD-YPG supporters. The choice of overwhelmingly Arab towns of Rasulayn and Tal Abyad as the primary targets of the Turkish and SNA operation have been noted by both Turkish [50] and non-Turkish commentators [51] well before the beginning *Operation Peace Spring*, since this operation has been in the making for many years as noted above. Tal Abyad in particular was identified as the "Achilles Heel" of the YPG's territorial entity precisely because of its Arab-majority [52]. It is inaccurate from a demographic point of view to depict *Operation Peace Spring* as a Turkish-SNA incursion into Kurdish-majority territories because the operation deliberately and precisely targeted the Arab-majority towns of Rasulayn and Tal Abyad. In terms of the demographic context, it is worth emphasizing that even a significant percentage of Syrian Kurds, ranging from at least 23% according to the Gallup International's survey up to a large majority of Syrian Kurds as argued by Mustafa Muslim quoted earlier, also reject the PYD-YPG and welcome the Turkish-SNA intervention. Many Syrian Christians also openly protested PYD-YPG rule, as demonstrated by the joint statement of 16 Armenian and Assyrian organisations in Hasakah province, protesting the PYD's forceful conscription of Christians, confiscation of their private properties, and interference in their church curricula [53].

As mentioned above, the most uncompromising supporters of the PYD-YPG-SDF in the West, come from both the far right (e.g., Pat Robertson) and the far left (e.g., Noam Chomsky). The widespread support that the PYD-YPG enjoys among Western opinion leaders is perplexing, especially given its totalitarian Soviet-esque ideology and organisation, which was also staunchly anti-American originally but subsequently revised to accommodate its new geopolitical relationship of patronage with the United States. President Trump's decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria, and the agreement between the

United States and Türkiye regarding the establishment of a 20-mile/32-kilometres deep safe zone in Northern Syria along the Turkish border exposed those political actors and opinion leaders most committed to preserving the current status quo in Syria, including, most importantly, the U.S. military presence and active support for the PYD-YPG [54]. Pat Robertson, a Christian conservative televangelist an one-time Republican presidential candidate, who has not openly opposed Trump on any major decision or policy despite numerous domestic and international controversies, immediately came out against Trump with a swift and popular video broadcast, arguing that President Trump is in danger of "losing the mandate of heaven" with his decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria [55]. In an extremely rare instance of agreement with Pat Robertson, far left critic and public intellectual Noam Chomsky likewise spoke out strongly against the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria. In the case of Chomsky, his intervention appeared as a glaring contradiction with his otherwise anti-war, anti-interventionist stance [56]. In response, journalist Mehdi Hassan critically noted that "Chomsky, the arch-anti-interventionist surprised a lot of people last year[…] when he said that the U.S. should maintain a troop presence in Syria in order to deter Turkish aggression against the Kurds" [57]. In the past, Chomsky even objected to NATO's intervention against Serbia to stop the genocide of Bosniak Muslims and later to protect Kosovar Albanian Muslims against the same type of aggression. More recently, Chomsky also opposed a "no fly zone in Idlib or Aleppo where civilians were being bombed by Russia and the Assad regime" [58]. Reading the justifications that Pat Robertson, Noam Chomsky, and other far right and far left advocates of U.S. military intervention in support of PYD-YPG, juxtaposed against their staunch opposition to any military intervention to protect far more numerous Muslim populations that were and/or are being systematically murdered in Syria, the Middle East, North Africa, the Balkans, and elsewhere, one cannot escape the thought that their support for PYD-YPG is motivated by their overt (Robertson) or covert (Chomsky) Islamophobia.

Leaving aside the staunch and doctrinaire supporters of the PYD-YPG among the evangelical Christian right and the far left, there are also a very large, if not hegemonic group of pundits, scholars, intellectuals, and policy-makers at the "liberal centre", broadly defined, who also espoused rather sympathetic views of the YPG and decried the U.S. government's decision for a partial withdrawal from northern Syria as a "betrayal of the Kurds." The discourse of U.S. "betrayal of the Kurds in Syria" is perhaps the most bitterly ironic reversal of facts, because the U.S. decision to abandon the Syrian opposition and to support instead the PYD-YPG, which often collaborates with the Assad-regime, in fact constituted the most disastrous betrayal of Syrian allies [59]. The U.S. indeed betrayed its allies with disastrous consequences for millions of Syrians, but that betrayal consisted of abandoning the Syrian opposition and instead supporting the PYD-YPG, rather than ceasing to support the PYD-YPG, as suggested by numerous American pundits following the *Operation Peace Spring*.

Apart from all the political and humanitarian reasons ordinary Syrians support the Turkish-FSA-SNA interventions in the country, Türkiye is also the only power among Syria's neighbours that has both the material capability and the political will to assume part of the responsibility for the reconstruction of Syria and secure the voluntary "right of return" for millions of Syrian refugees around the world. Reconstruction and refugee repatriation can be far more extensive and successful, however, with the assistance of the European Union, United States, and external funding secured from intergovernmental and/or non-governmental organisations. Otherwise, such reconstruction and refugee repatriation will most likely remain rather limited to small pockets that are administered by Türkiye and the FSA/SNA in Northern Syria.

Operation Peace Spring has been a step forward in the struggle for a free Syria. This is in great part because given the trajectory of the past 8 years of war, the only reliable actor that has been able to protect and consolidate a "Free Syria" beyond the Assad-regime's control appears

to be Türkiye and the Turkish-backed SNA, rather than the PYD-YPG or the HTS, both of which repeatedly surrendered significant territories under their control to the Assad-regime. It is not without reason that the Assad-regime has been fighting alongside the PYD-YPG against the Turkish-backed SNA in Northern Syria since October 2019, if not much earlier. The PYD-YPG's occupation of mostly Arab-majority Northern Syria by mid-2015, combined with its policy of forced displacement of its opponents, led to a new wave of Syrian refugees entering Türkiye, and it was also accompanied by the deadliest wave of terrorist attacks of the last two decades against Türkiye by the PKK. *Operation Peace Spring* was launched by the TAF and the SNA primarily in order to secure the Syrian refugees' right of return and to put an end to the terrorist threat along Türkiye's border. The operation was then welcomed by a majority of Arabs and a significant proportion of Kurds in Northern Syria. Popular support for *Operation Peace Spring* among Syrians also has to do with Türkiye being the only state supporting majority-rule in Syria, unlike Russia, Iran, France, and the United States, all of which have militarily supported and supplied various factions that depend on small ethnic sectarian and ideological minorities. Similarly, Türkiye and the Turkish-backed SNA alone have been able to guarantee that the territories that came under their control would not revert back to the Assad regime, whereas significant areas previously held by the YPG and HTS later came under the control of Assad regime. Furthermore, *Operation Peace Spring*, similar to *Operation Euphrates Shield* (2016) and *Operation Olive Branch* (2018) before, has been conducted with minimal civilian casualties and minimal destruction of infrastructure. These achievements stand in stark contrast to the U.S.-PYD-YPG takeover of Raqqa, which resulted in the killing of at least 1,600 civilians, and the Russo-Iranian backed Assad regime's takeover of Aleppo and much of Northwestern Syria from the Syrian opposition, which resulted in tens of thousands of civilian casualties. Not only that YPG-SDF allowed ISIS terrorists free passage in quid pro quo deals, but they also collaborated with the Assad regime far more extensively

and more often. Finally, Türkiye is the only power neighbouring Syria that is *both* materially capable *and* politically willing to undertake part of the responsibility for the reconstruction of post-war Syria in order to enable the return of Syrian refugees. The assistance of the European Union and the United States would certainly upgrade the extent of such a reconstruction and refugee repatriation, which otherwise would only be limited to the areas under the control of Turkish-backed SNA.

With the United States retreating to East Central Syria around Deir-ez-Zor province, and the YPG surrendering many of its positions on frontlines to Russian-Iranian backed Assad-regime, the risk of a crisis or even an actual clash between Russian and Turkish forces is much higher than before. Although this risk seems to have been averted for now with the Russian-Turkish agreement on the withdrawal of YPG 32 kilometres from the Turkish border, this seems to be only a temporary solution both because YPG did not actually withdraw 32 kilometres away from the Turkish border, and also because there is much more established YPG zone under Russian protection in the Tel Rifat region north of Aleppo. Even more critically, from Russia's point of view, the "de-escalation zones" in Idlib province, the perimeter of which is established by Türkiye's observation points, "are merely a temporary measure," [60] whereas this perimeter demarcates the minimum amount of territory necessary for the opponents of the Assad-regime need to survive without a humanitarian catastrophe. On the other hand, both Russia, where real incomes declined for the fifth year in a row [61], and the Iranian regime, which has been the target of mass protests both at home, and also in Iraq and Lebanon, are economically and militarily overstretched. Thus, both Russia and Iran may have to accept the current internal borders of Syria, including the perimeter of the de-escalation zones in Idlib, as part of the semi-permanent status quo of a frozen conflict at least for the short and the medium term. In fact, if and once the YPG-PYD is (re)moved from Tel Rifat and Manbij and moved or retreats 32 kilometres away from the Turkish border, then declaring a permanent ceasefire and metaphorically "freezing" the conflict with its

current internal borders might provide the most immediate resolution to the Syrian civil war that is both politically feasible and ultimately humanitarian in avoiding further bloodshed under the current conditions.

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Chapter 8

10 Years After the Arab Spring: Is a Long-Lasting Political Solution Within Reach in Libya?

Ferhat Polat

Introduction

The political uprisings and widespread protests that broke out in late 2010 and known as the Arab Spring toppled the dictatorial regimes in Tunisia and Egypt and inspired Libyans to depose the Gaddafi regime. In 2011, the Arab Spring engulfed Libya, as people stood up against Gaddafi's regime. After more than four decades of autocratic rule, the Gaddafi regime was ousted by force in October 2011.

Many policymakers and analysts from across the world were hopeful that the movements would usher in a new era for the region. However, prospects for further democratisation have largely failed so far. In the wake of the uprisings, Libyan revolutionaries were unable to establish law and order. Former rivals banded together to oust Gaddafi. However, their loose alliance fell apart as the various groups pursued different agendas. The power vacuum made it easier for armed actors to implement their political and economic agendas with force in the country. As a result, Libya steadily fell into conflict fuelled both by internal contradictions underlying the rivalry of various political-military forces and external interference by regional and international actors pursuing their own economic and political-strategic interests.

In the last ten years, Libya has experienced two more bouts of civil conflict (May 2014-December 2015 and April 2019-October 2020). However, most recently, the UN-assembled Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) produced an executive authority tasked with setting up a temporary government and leading the country to elections scheduled for 24 December 2021.

Life Under Gaddafi

Gaddafi took power on September 1, 1969, with the "September Revolution," a military coup. From the start, his rule was autocratic and repressive against anyone who opposed the new political structures. Violence against resistance was a key element of Gaddafi's rule (Vandewalle, 2008). During Gaddafi's 42-year rule, Libya's state formation was shaped by his political, economic, and social ideology based on his Green Book, the first volume of which was introduced in 1975. The book emphasised popular rule, stateless society, and direct democracy, and called for populist economic policies [1]. In fact, the Green Book does have its own peculiar logic: a mixture of utopian socialism, Arab nationalism and 'Third World' revolutionary ideology, an eclectic worldview inspired by a particular understanding of socialism and Islam (Bazzi, 2011). According to his Third World revolutionary ideology, people would, in theory, rule themselves directly. In other words, the only legitimate form of democracy, according to Gaddafi, is one where the masses come together in people's committees, popular congresses, and professional associations. Thus, Gaddafi frequently railed against elections, political parties, and the notion of popular representation.

Ibrahim Fraihat, the author of *Unfinished Revolutions* wrote that:

> Gaddafi came to power in a bloodless coup against King Idris in 1969 and established the Great Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya (state of the masses), premised on his own philosophy of governance known as the "Third Universal Theory." He used his philosophy of Jamahiriya to ensure that state institutions were built to serve his regime. The national army was marginalised, with Gaddafi instead empowering security apparatuses that were loyal to him, such as the powerful 32nd Reinforced Brigade of the Armed People. More broadly, he exercised absolute political power, banning political parties

> and imprisoning, exiling, and even executing opposition leaders without trial. For forty-two years, Gaddafi not only prevented the formation of political parties and civil society organisations but also invested very little in the development of his country. He left Libya with minimal development in almost every sector including education, health, industry, and agriculture and a corrupt and inefficient bureaucratic apparatus. (Fraihat, 2016: 21-24).

Ulf Laessing, the author of *Understanding Libya Since Gaddafi* also stated that:

> Gaddafi kept the army weak to minimise the danger of a coup d'état and set up competing security agencies to keep watch on one another. Special brigades were recruited from his own tribe, the *Gadhadfa*; the *Warfalla*, a tribe from the city of *Bani Walid*, south of Tripoli; and the *Magarha*, another tribe from deep in the south, and from which his spy chief *Abdullah el-Senoussi* hailed. Like rulers before him, Gaddafi used the tribes to secure his power: he first side-lined tribal notables to break the dominance of elites allied to the monarchy; then, after dissolving state institutions, he restored their powers selectively, offering jobs, patronage and cementing ties through marriage. (Laessing, 2020: 43)

Libya has been an important producer of crude oil since the 1960s. With a population of only six million and significant annual oil revenues, amounting to $32 billion in 2010, Libya's economic potential is tremendous. However, during Gaddafi's 42 years in power, he reportedly controlled revenues to the benefit of his family and tribe rather than developing the country. Analysts estimate that the Gaddafi regime had as much as $200 billion in bank accounts around the world. By 2011, energy production still accounted for 65 percent of GDP and 80 percent

of state revenue. Although per capita income was quite high at $14,100, an estimated one third of the Libyan population still lived below the poverty line (Vandewalle, 2006).

Under Gaddafi's rule, corruption became ingrained in Libya's political and economic structures. This was mostly because of the vast centralisation of power in the hands of Gaddafi and a small cadre of family members and close friends which dominated and controlled oil resources (Polat, 2020). Consequently, Libya has experienced a lack of transparency, weak state institutions, widespread corruption, and misuse of its oil wealth, leading to the underperformance of its economic potential. This was seriously aggravated following the revolution that brought to end his rule in October 2011.

Youssef M. Sawani, Professor of Politics and International Relations at University of Tripoli, observed that:

> Libya will need to go a long way before it can adequately address the consequences and effects of Gaddafi's infamous rule that destroyed or impinged upon literally everyone and everything. However, Gaddafi's worst effects were not only those related to human rights violations or war crimes or the squandering of national natural and financial assets. The crimes of Gaddafi exceeded material waste. His destruction of moral values led to the disruption of the culture of the political community, which is an essential cultural component for development. His legacy has created enormous challenges that will hinder social reconciliation, which are essential for democratisation and the ultimate reconstruction of the society and the state. (Sawani, 2013: 39)

The Transition Process Since 2011

After forty-two years of oppressive rule, the Libyan people stood up against Muammar Gaddafi on February 17, 2011. Eight months later,

Gaddafi was killed in the battle for his hometown, Sirte (msnbc, 2011). Since the collapse of Gaddafi's regime, Libya has been dealing with enormous challenges of instability and insecurity reflecting and characterised by both a political deadlock and divided state institutions.

2011-2014

On February 15, 2011, protests broke out in Benghazi, the second most important city in Libya, when hundreds of protesters gathered in front of a police station [2]. Forces loyal to Gaddafi fired at the crowd, killing several protesters. Two days later, on February 17, thousands of marchers appeared protesting peacefully throughout eastern Libya in Benghazi, Ajdabiyah, Darnah, and Zintan. Security forces reacted with live ammunition, and about a dozen people were killed. Instead of putting an end to the protests, the regime's aggressive actions generated further anger and brought rebel forces to secure control of Benghazi on February 20. (Mueller, 2015) After taking control of Benghazi, a group of notables, including a former minister of justice, Mustafa Abd al-Jalil, and a human rights activist, Fathi Tarbil formed the National Transitional Council (NTC) with an aim of becoming a transitional government who were attempting to hold free elections and gain international support (Gritten, 2011). The NTC declared itself the sole legitimate representative of Libyan people and quickly gained international recognition and support (Reuters, 2011).

The NTC played a vital role in bringing European powers and eventually the United States to recognise it as the legitimate interim government and in obtaining military and other forms of aid for the rebels. The NTC created its own executive branch and passed a resolution for the interim Constitutional Declaration on August 3, 2011. This served as a roadmap for the formation of the new political institutions: parliamentary elections (for the General National Congress, GNC) would be held within eighteen-months to be followed by the election of a government and the drafting of a constitution by a separate committee (Mattes, 2016).

Libya has had a long record of political exclusion and stigmatisation of political opposition. Gaddafi took power through a military coup in 1969 and subsequently introduced a law banning the formation of political parties or civil society organisations. Since the fall of Gaddafi in 2011, Libya has been governed under a temporary Constitutional Declaration, under which Libya is designated as a parliamentary republic governed by the General National Congress (GNC), whose representatives were elected in July 2012. The key responsibility of the GNC was to form a constituent assembly which was expected to write Libya's permanent constitution. This process was intended as the first step in a transition from authoritarian rule to representative democracy (Polat, 2019).

The first democratic elections for a representative body in the history of modern Libya, the General National Congress, occurred on 7th July 2012 (BBC, 2012). Two hundred members were selected for the General National Congress (GNC) to replace the National Transitional Council which had governed since the overthrow of Gaddafi's regime in 2011. Many parties were formed during the run-up to the July 2012 elections, 21 of which secured parliamentary seats. Holding free and fair elections swiftly after civil conflict encourages a sustainable peace for all stakeholders by encouraging democratic governance and national reconciliation (Diamond, 2006).

The elected GNC took power in Libya in 2012. Equipped with a weak and dismembered military left over from Gaddafi, it dealt with the enormous challenge of restoring stability after more than a year of fighting. Ousting Gaddafi from power was not easy but disarming the militias and helping restructure the Libyan army has so far proven to be a more daunting task.

Many Libyans were optimistic about the prospect of their country's future after the elections of July 2012. After the despot's removal, there were high expectations that the coming period would be one of democracy and stability. Mahmoud Jibril, the former head of the Libyan rebel government until the country held its first elections in

2012, stated that "the Libyan people have managed to prove one thing: they are the real decision makers. That the destiny of this country is not in the hands of an individual, of any political force or political party. It's only in their hands" (Lindstaedt, 2016). Libyans had a limited sense of national identity and had no real experience of democracy. The collapse of Gaddafi regime opened many fissures of disunity, and these could not be avoided by a transitional government. To establish a functional state, Libya needs to prevail over the four-decade old Gaddafi-led authoritarian legacy which prevented the development of authentic national institutions (Hove, 2015). The country's weak state institutions allowed various militia groups to pose a significant threat to Libya's precarious stability and has affected the work of the congress and the government to impose its authority across the country.

2014-2019

In the post-Gaddafi era, the key challenges for Libya have been the issues of insecurity and political instability. Thanks to growing a power vacuum, militias gained considerable room to manoeuvre, to the extent that they threatened the effectiveness of government security forces both locally and nationwide. Since 2011, Libya's militias have fought each other in intra-city confrontations that lasted anywhere from a few hours to a few days, until some sort of ceasefire would be found and residents could move on with their lives (Laessing, 2020). The security situation worsened considerably in 2014, with fighting between militias escalating, splitting Libya into two halves with their own governments and accelerating the country's fragmentation. It was in this vacuum that Khalifa Haftar, himself a former Gaddafi-era military officer, was able to rise and form the self-proclaimed Libyan National Army (LNA). Haftar, born in 1943, had participated in the 1969 coup that brought Gaddafi to power, and served in Gaddafi's military thereafter. Haftar turned against Gaddafi after being deployed for Gaddafi's ill-fated military adventure in Chad in the 1980s, where Haftar was held as a prisoner of war for seven months. Instead of negotiating for Haftar's release, Gaddafi disowned him, saying the general was not part of his army. This experience,

especially Gaddafi's rejection of not only the conflict in Chad but also the existence of prisoners of war, turned Haftar against his former boss (Barfi, 2014). Haftar was eventually released following a deal with the U.S. government, in which he allegedly became a CIA asset and later a U.S. citizen. In the late 1980s eighties, someone like Haftar was of great value to the U.S. because Libya topped the list of state supporters of terrorism, and the US would benefit from access to intelligence from Gaddafi's inner circle (Toperich & Cagan, 2021).

Khalifa Haftar returned to Libya from the U.S. just after the uprising began in 2011. Haftar is backed by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, France, and UAE. It is a widely held view that the UAE, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia's counterrevolutionary orientation in the region has driven the approach in the region and in Libya in particular. As a result, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, engaged in a campaign against the forces emanating from the Arab Spring, most notably the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). In this regard, the UAE has taken a more proactive role in empowering Haftar and facilitating his control over eastern Libya, supplying vital support to his forces. The UAE came to regard the Arab Spring's promise of representative government and the prospect that the Islamist-leaning parties could one day come to power to be an existential threat to its survival. Since 2011, the UAE has taken a position at the forefront of a regional battle against the Arab uprisings and political Islamist groups, particularly the MB. The UAE views Libya as a key arena in this struggle (Megeresi, 2019).

However, a new level of conflict was reached when in May 2014 Haftar launched Operation Dignity in Benghazi, ostensibly to eject *Ansar al Sharia*, a Salafist militia that emerged during the 2011 uprising. This started a battle that would turn parts of Benghazi into ruins, kill thousands and close its air and seaports for three years. Haftar has claimed that he is the main opponent of radical militias in Libya and that he supports the democratically elected government. However, he extended the Operation Dignity campaign beyond Benghazi. Only

two days after Haftar declared the launch of the campaign, Operation Dignity-aligned forces stormed the parliament building in Tripoli and called for the dissolution of the GNC, Libya's democratically elected legislative body. The leading political bloc in the GNC, which was comprised of Islamist political parties, members of the Berber ethnic group, and former revolutionaries from the city of Misrata, among others, viewed Operation Dignity's raid as a direct assault on its power (Gartenstein-Ross, 2015). Haftar on several occasions announced that his attacks were aimed at ridding Libya of extremist groups, whom he blames for Libya's post-revolutionary chaos. Yet Haftar's LNA reportedly recruited a number of *Salafi Madkhalist* radical fighters. The Madkhalists role in the Libyan conflict became evident when Haftar launched operation Karama and Sheikh Rabi al-Madkhali, an ultra-conservative Saudi cleric, issued a fatwa on the need for Salafists to join Haftar as Libya's legal guardian and fight with him against the Brotherhood (Ali, 2017).

In 2014, Haftar presented himself as Libya's new strongman, capable of saving the country by commanding a real army. In fact, his LNA is an umbrella for former army units, militias, and radical groups, even mercenaries from Chad and Sudan. Libya elected a new parliament in June 2014 as part of the post-Gaddafi transition agreed by the main players in the previous assembly. As a result, the House of Representatives (HoR) based in Tobruk, took office following the June 2014 elections and replaced the GNC. However, voting took place but some of the polling stations were not opened, such as in Derna and some southern towns, due to fighting. And also, the voter turnout was too low, 41 percent of 1.5 million registered voters took part, much lower than in the 2012 vote, when 60 percent of 2.8 million registered voters went to the ballot box (Ulf Laessing, 2020). The Supreme Constitutional Court ruled that the elections were unconstitutional and the HoR should be dissolved. Following a number of disputes, the GNC did not recognise HoR's authority and established a rival parliament in Tripoli, called the new GNC (BBC, 2019).

On 14 August 2014, the UN's Secretary-General appointed Bernardino Leon, a Spanish diplomat, to serve as his new special representative. The United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) launched a political dialogue on 14 January 2015 between the GNC and the HoR and other key players in the hope that a resolution to the conflict could be reached. In 2015, the UN attempted to negotiate a political compromise under the framework of the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA). The agreement was aimed at transcending the country's political divide after the eruption of civil war in mid-2014 had put an end to the transitional process. The LPA had created a nine-member Presidential Council, a State Council as an advisory body, and a unity government called the Government of National Accord (GNA) to be approved by the House of Representatives (HoR). However, following the establishment of GNA, the HoR, headed by Aqilah Saleh, moved to the eastern city of Tobruk and refused to recognise the GNA as a unity government.

Libya's complex political and security situation has presented significant challenges to the achievement of a comprehensive political settlement. The LPA has not been able to resolve divisions. As a result, the HoR continued to act as a parallel government in eastern Libya and refused to recognise the legitimacy of the previous government (GNA). This was further complicated by the HoR who provided legitimacy for the military operations of Haftar, who rejected the UN accord.

The United Nation Security Council (UNSC) supported the LPA and called for all parties to work in a spirit of compromise, engaging in an inclusive political process. The UNSC stated that the LPA remains the only viable framework to end the Libyan political crisis and that its implementation remains key to holding elections and finalising the political transition.

The plan could culminate in the Libyans voting on a constitution via a referendum and eventually electing a president as well as parliament. However, none of these crucial steps has been implemented successfully. Although the LPA was widely endorsed by the international community,

interference from international powers and regional actors (the UAE, Egypt, France, and Russia) has been a significant factor in the deepening political fragmentation and polarisation of Libya and these countries reportedly played an active role in preventing the adoption of the LPA. Continued support for Haftar facilitated his attempt to control more territory in the East. Consequently, this prevented the GNA from imposing its authority across the country. Such tacit support for Haftar in the last few years, has undermined years of efforts to bring a lasting political solution to the conflict. Haftar launched a years-long military offensive that left him in control of large swaths of territory in eastern Libya.

In 2015, Daesh gained significant ground in Libya with the capture of the coastal town of Sirte. Daesh emerged in Libya in early October 2014, when extremist factions in the eastern city of Derna joined their cause (Banco, 2014). Derna has been a centre of extremist factions in Libya for more than three decades. After 2011, Derna continued to serve as a centre for militant Salafis with links to terrorist groups including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (ASL). On December 5, 2016, Daesh was defeated in Sirte following a six-month military campaign led by armed groups loyal to the GNA with support from US airstrikes (Lewis, 2017).

Over the past four years, efforts to find a political resolution to Libya's ongoing conflict have failed at various conferences including in Paris, Palermo, Abu Dhabi, and Berlin. In May 2018, the French President hosted opposing Libyan factions in Paris for a summit. France also invited many countries who engaged in Libya's conflict. During the summit, they crucially agreed to hold elections in December 2018. However, this window of opportunity lapsed, with no election taking place. The efforts of France were insufficiently coordinated with the UN. The expected purpose of the conference was to bring together rival groups and support a political solution. However, it was considered that France's main intention seemed to be legitimising Haftar within

Libya and abroad (Polat, 2020). France appeared to adopt contradictory positions. On the one hand, Paris has said that it is committed to supporting UN efforts to resolve the Libyan crisis and supports the previous internationally recognised government known as the GNA. On the other hand, the French government has heavily backed Haftar, provided him with weaponry, training, intelligence, and even special forces. Paris's Libyan summit was poorly coordinated with Brussels and Rome as well as none of the regional powers involved in the Libyan conflict were present.

Following the Paris peace conference, Italy hosted the International Conference on Libya, which took place in Palermo, from November 11 to November 12, 2018. The Italian government organised the conference as an attempt to counter the Paris Summit organised by France in May 2018. Italy, for its part, sought to use the Palermo conference to reassert its role as the leading EU player in Libya. However, like most peace conferences, Palermo did not prove to be a watershed event for the stabilisation of Libya. Over the past few years, the Italian government has demonstrated a degree of ambiguity towards the Libyan conflict. Despite being an ally of the UN-backed GNA, Italy also recognised Haftar's political role. There has been a great division among two European member states, France, and Italy, over Libya. The clash between Italy and France over Libya has contributed to the failure of EU efforts to advance a political solution for the ongoing conflict (Polat, 2020).

Haftar's failed offensive against Tripoli

In April 2019, Khalifa Haftar and his self-declared 'Libyan National Army' (LNA) moved to seize the capital Tripoli from the U.N.- backed GNA, marking the beginning of a "third Libyan civil war." The war has displaced over 200,000 people and has witnessed some of the bloodiest battles the country has seen in years. While the humanitarian situation worsened, no clear military gains emerged for Haftar's forces. Borzou Daragahi, International Correspondent for The Independent,

commented that: "Haftar had been threatening to march on Tripoli since 2014, a claim which sounded ludicrous when he was 600 miles away in the eastern city of Benghazi. Over six years he has fought and schemed his way to the capital" (Daragahi, 2020).

On April 7, 2019, GNA forces announced a counter-offensive against Haftar's militias. Haftar was seeking to capture the capital and seize military control of the whole country before U.N.-sponsored talks (Gilbert, 2019). As a result, Haftar's offensive in April 2019 prevented the UN-planned 'national conference', intended to be held less than two weeks later, from negotiating a framework for the transition out of Libya's crisis such as setting a time frame possible for elections (Bloomberg, 2019). Michel Duclos, a former French diplomat, commented that: "Khalifa Haftar's profile, it is difficult to imagine that he can wisely comply with the constraints of a political process. All the diplomats who met him describe a man who is foreign to political considerations, a military leader with the qualities of a dictator, quick to describe his opponents as terrorists, convinced that his compatriots are not ready for democracy, and who is above all a believer in order based on coercion" (Duclos, 2019).

Haftar's forces, supported by the UAE, Egypt, France and Russia, are equipped with drones, tanks, heavy-duty weapons and foreign mercenaries. The UAE and Egypt have been the main sponsors of Haftar's war since 2014. The two regional actors are also providing political, diplomatic, and logistical support. It is imperative to highlight that the UAE, in particular, played a significant role in encouraging Haftar's offensive against the UN-backed government. Ali Bakir, Assistant Professor at Qatar university, commented that:

> "In the last decade, the UAE has emerged as a leading counter-revolutionary force in the Middle East. Feeling the heat of change in the region, the small, oil-rich Gulf country adopted an aggressive foreign policy that defined the UAE as a disruptive force that aims to reverse the fledgling democratic trend

> in the Middle East. After succeeding in Egypt in 2013, Abu Dhabi decided to support warlord Khalifa Haftar in Libya to overthrow the UN-recognized government in Tripoli, take over the power, and control Libya by force. To that end, the UAE offered massive military, financial, and diplomatic support to Haftar". (Bakir, 2020)

Some countries filled the vacuum, with an eye on Libya's wealth. Egypt, Russia, and the UAE bet on Haftar, supplying him with sophisticated weapons systems and the mercenaries to operate them (McQuinn, 2021). The arrival of Russian mercenaries and air support from the UAE have exacerbated the conflict. However, Türkiye's open intervention in the Libyan conflict changed that (Kirkpatrick, 2019). In the face of Haftar's assault, the GNA requested military support from the United States, Britain, Italy, Algeria, and Türkiye. In practical terms, it would appear as though only Türkiye responded with tangible assistance (Polat, 2020). In November 2019, Türkiye and the GNA signed two separate memorandums of understanding (MoU), one on military cooperation and the other on maritime boundaries in the Eastern Mediterranean (Reuters, 2019). Since then, Türkiye has deployed armed drones, air defence systems and sent soldiers to Tripoli in an advisory capacity. Türkiye's military assistance to the UN-backed GNA proved effective at preventing Haftar's LNA from taking control of the capital but also in removing them eastward to the edges of the strategic city of Sirte, which boasts al-Jufra airbase used by the Russian air force to back Russian mercenaries of the Wagner Group fighting alongside Haftar's LNA.

Türkiye has various interests in Libya, however, the main reasons for Türkiye's involvement include preserving its economic and geostrategic interests in the country and in broader the Eastern Mediterranean region. The Turkish government has concerns that the Libyan civil war could have a spill-over effect, leading to protracted instability, and providing anti-Türkiye forces with more leverage in the region.

As a result, Ankara has sought to prevent Libya from falling under the sway of the UAE, Egypt, Russia, and France which could put Türkiye's geostrategic and economic interests in the region at risk (Polat, 2020). Prior to the Libyan conflict, since the 1970s, Türkiye had considerable commercial activities in the country. According to some reports, from 1972 onward, the contracts that Turkish firms have signed amounted to nearly $40 billion, primarily in the construction sector (Bilen, 2020). Türkiye's determination to be more involved in Libya has created a new momentum for peace and given some life to the nearly dead UN-led political agreement.

Prospects for unifying the country

Libya's warring parties signed an agreement in October 2020 designed to pave the way towards a political solution to the country's ongoing conflict (UN News, 2020). That diplomatic leverage was largely made possible thanks to heavy defeats inflicted on Haftar's LNA by UN-backed GNA forces. The ceasefire agreement created a basis for the political talks that began on October 26th, 2020, intended to create a new interim government with the primary task of preparing the country for elections scheduled for December 24th, 2021. In March 2021, a new provisional government was formed in Libya (Aljazeera, 2021). The Government of National Unity (GNU), selected through a United Nations-supported process, replaced the previous GNA administration and the parallel eastern cabinet based in the eastern region, which was not recognised by the international community. The UN-led Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) selected a three-member Presidency Council and a prime minister. The GNU offers renewed confidence that a path to a more democratic and smooth transition of power can be achieved. However, the situation remains fragile, as many aspects and dynamics surrounding the political settlement could still thwart the ongoing process.

Libya has been locked in constant civil conflict with varying intensity since the Arab uprisings in 2011. The country has struggled to formulate

unified national institutions in the post-Gaddafi era. State institutions and the economy have suffered massive losses, laying the groundwork for conflict and a war-driven economy. Consequently, militias have continued to weaken the authority of the previous government (GNA), seeking to harm where it hurts most: oil revenues. For example, the closure of oil terminals from January 2020 until September 2020 by militias aligned with Khalifa Haftar further deepened Libya's economic crisis (Reuters, 2020). According to a Middle East Economic Survey (MEES) report, the oil blockades are estimated to have cost some $11bn last year (mees, 2020). Besides, some regional and international players have added to the complexities of the conflict and the difficulties of resolving it.

Consequently, the GNA struggled to carry out efficient control and security all over the country. Therefore, the new GNU administration will most likely face similar obstacles, meaning that establishing its authority across the country could prove difficult. Unifying government institutions, removing foreign fighters and mercenaries demilitarising and reintegrating militias, fostering national reconciliation, restoring security, and preparing the country for planned elections in December, will be challenging.

Assessing the Consequences of the Arab Spring in Libya

In the wake of the uprisings, revolutionaries were hoping to make the transition to stable democracy, however they have failed to achieve the desired outcome for a number of reasons. First, transforming the country from four decades of dictatorship to a functional democracy is necessarily a long process. Even after a peaceful revolution, it generally takes almost a decade for any type of stable regime to consolidate. If a civil war arises, the construction of the state will understandably take much longer. Secondly, persistent political divisions between east and west have prevented interim governments such as the GNA from imposing the rule of law and maintaining its authority across the country.

It is widely believed that when the post-revolutionary honeymoon period ends, divisions within rival groups start to surface. Although in 2011, the rebels united their forces to overthrow Gaddafi's regime, their loose alliance fell apart as the different groups pursued various agendas and distrusted each other for political and economic interests. Consequently, state institutions and the economy have suffered, laying the groundwork for conflict and a war-driven economy. As a result, militias have continued to undermine the legitimacy of the internationally recognised governments, trying to harm where it damages most: oil revenues. For instance, the blockade of oil terminals from January 2020 until September 2020 by militias aligned with Haftar further deepened Libya's economic crisis. The blockade has resulted in more than $9.8bn in lost revenue. Providing security must be a key priority for the international community along with efforts to improve political and socioeconomic conditions. It is imperative to unify Libya's state institutions, including the military. The present absence of an efficient national army leaves Libya open to exploitation from different militia groups, including radical groups and foreign fighters which deepen and prolong the conflict in Libya.

Libya needs sustained international support if it is to transition to democracy, have stability. Instead of supporting the democratic process in the country, the involvement of some international actors who seek their own political and strategic interests, has been a significant factor in deepening the political fragmentation and polarisation in Libya. A sustainable settlement seems to not be in the interest of some countries who have supported Haftar's wars for over the last few years financially, militarily, and politically. Therefore, it has been difficult to see a meaningful UN-led peace process or any meaningful process until October 2020 when the rival groups reached a permanent ceasefire agreement, and the war has been widely held since then.

Since the November 2019 military agreement signed between Türkiye and Libya, Ankara has been helping restructure the Libyan army and

police forces and is engaged in the process of institution-building in the country. Turkish forces are also helping prevent potential attacks by Haftar's LNA. It was with Türkiye's assistance that the international community was able to safeguard the UN-backed GNA and repel attacks launched by Haftar's LNA. The GNA's military gains enabled diplomatic initiatives to reintroduce the UN framework and take steps to resolve the long-standing crisis. Türkiye has played a decisive role in the Libyan conflict and Türkiye's involvement in the fighting has brought relative stability to the conflict and enabled the UN-led peace process to continue. Ankara's persistence and assertiveness have increased Türkiye's influence not only in Libya but also in the region.

In terms of improving living standards, the international community should help the Libyan government to build new democratic institutions. Despite the fact that Libya is an oil rich country, it needs transparency in terms of the distribution of oil wealth. Oil revenues should be poured into public goods such as hospitals, education and creating jobs for youth, otherwise, Libya's economic health will continue to deteriorate. Without having strong and accountable institutions, Libya's wealth will likely be used to fuel the war and undermine political stability. Rebuilding Libya's economy will take resources and commitment on the part of the UN-backed government. For that reason, international institutions have a responsibility to help the government establish a sustained strategy, focusing on security, institution building, and economic growth.

Conclusion

The end of Gaddafi's rule was expected to bring stability and democracy to Libya. Those hoping for Libya to make the transition to stable democracy quickly faced several obstacles, such as the weakness of civic and democratic culture, the oil-dependent rentier economy, in the lack of institutionalism, deep divisions among rival parties and in the growing influence of foreign interference. As a result, the country's fledgling democratic process has struggled to move forward and slipped

ever deeper into conflicts and instability.

Post-Gaddafi Libya has presented significant challenges, particularly as Gaddafi left the state without properly functioning institutions, which has had a negative impact on the post-revolutionary process of setting up democratic political institutions and stabilising the state. The path to lasting peace in Libya lies with building Libya's institutions. Libya's leaders have so far struggled to build national institutions and to foster unity over the post-Gaddafi transition, largely owing to deep-rooted divisions driven by Libya's fractious society and complex identity politics. Therefore, the complex political and security conditions in the country have made it harder to bring about a substantive political agreement between rival parties. In addition, the interference of some international and regional actors has been a vital factor in deepening political fragmentation and polarisation in Libya.

In the bid to find a permanent solution to the Libyan crisis, the United Nations has presided over many arrangements and cease-fires, none of which produced any durable peace until October 2020. Since last October, the UN-brokered truce between the two sides has generally been held. The ceasefire agreement created a basis for the political negotiations and established an interim government that has the important task of preparing the country for elections in December, along with commitments to unify Libya's divided financial and security institutions.

At the time of writing, the elections were just five weeks away, but it is evident that the complexities of this dossier would not lead to such a straightforward outcome. Despite the progress that has been made in recent months, there are a few dynamics that routinely spoil the political progress and threaten the prospects for a more sustainable political establishment in the country, these include: the presence of foreign fighters and mercenaries, Haftar's role, international and regional actors' interference, a lack of consensus on the election laws. All of these (and more) set the stage for continued gridlock.

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Chapter 9

Algeria versus the Uprisings: The Algerian Regime and Opposition Dynamics During the 2010s

Tahir Kılavuz

Introduction

Early in the last decade, Frédéric Volpi (2013) penned an article in *Journal of Democracy* titled "Algeria versus the Arab Spring" where he described how the Algerian regime remained in power by benefiting from its patronage system and repressive capability in responding to the protest movements that rocked the region. While Volpi's early analysis successfully pinpointed the Algerian regime's resilience in face of the Arab Spring, the country was shaken by an even more challenging massive protest movement, the Hirak*,* in 2019. Even though the regime appeared to be on the brink for a time during the Hirak protests (Daoud 2019), the end result was not much different from the experience at the beginning of the decade. As a result, despite these two major protest waves and some changes on the surface, the Algerian regime is still in power entering the tenth year of the Arab Spring.

Why, then, has there been no successful process of democratisation in Algeria despite two waves of protests in the course of a decade? What are the main strategies and tools of the Algerian regime in responding to the challenges? Why and how have opposition actors in Algeria failed to bring the regime down and pursue democratisation unlike their counterparts in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen? Was the lack of democratisation in Algeria inevitable?

This chapter seeks to answer these questions by examining the main tools and strategies of the regime and the opposition in Algeria during two major challenges in the 2010s. It proposes that the persistence of authoritarianism in Algeria in the last decade was the outcome of both regime strategies and the opposition's weaknesses. First, the Algerian

regime used a set of tools of authoritarian control and co-optation in response to popular challenges. These tools include a certain level of repression thanks to a strong and effective coercive apparatus and co-optative tools such as redistribution of oil rents, promise of liberalising reforms, and utilising the flexibility of its hybrid regime structure. Second, despite the popular movements, the organised opposition in Algeria failed to benefit from the momentum and could not force the regime into a pacted transition, in which the regime actors and opposition agree on a regime change. Therefore, with the regime's successful tactics and the opposition's inability to bring significant change, the Algerian regime remained in power despite the two challenges during the 2010s.

Regime persistence following the Arab Spring is clearly not particular to Algeria. Almost all attempts to transform the political system failed in differing degrees and authoritarianism has persisted across the region. Algeria, in particular, provides us an interesting case as the regime remained in power despite two major challenges and can theoretically inform our knowledge through both the regime's and the opposition's strategies and activities.

Algeria Before the 2010s

Algeria was ruled under the single-party regime of the *Front de Libération Nationale* (National Liberation Front – the FLN) for about 30 years following independence from French colonial rule in 1962. During the FLN's single-party rule, all opposition parties and political organisations were illegal. Even though there were different political currents in the country such as the Islamists, leftists (both socialists and Kabylies [1]), and nationalists, most of their activities were either illegal or carried out through the FLN.

Widespread protests in October 1988 marked the beginning of a very significant break in Algerian politics. The government initiated a series of reforms for political opening following these protests, leading to an unexpected process of democratisation (Quandt 1998). Opposition

parties, civil society organisations, and private media were all allowed under a constitutional change in 1989 and for the next two years, Algeria enjoyed a fairly open political field for the first time since independence. This process led to consecutive victories of the *Front Islamique du Salut* (Islamic Salvation Front – the FIS) in local and legislative elections over the following two years. The generals of the Algerian army, with fears of losing their authority as well as to avoid Islamist rule, intervened in the political process and staged a coup d'état in early 1992. Following the cancellation of the elections, sacking of the president and the banning of the FIS, the Algerian experience with democratisation came to a bitter end and led to an almost decade-long civil war between the army and the various Islamic factions, claiming an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 lives (Roberts 2003).

During the rocky 1990s after the coup d'état, the Algerian regime reconfigured itself (Kilavuz 2017). The post-coup regime could have easily reverted to its former version under a single-party rule and a closed political arena. However, the leaders of the regime preferred to update the regime into a new form. Unlike the single-party rule with a direct military presence of the previous decades, the Algerian regime allowed for an electoral system with formal opposition and a fair level of freedoms of expression and association. With a façade of civilian politics, the army reconsolidated its authority during this period (Volpi 2004; Cavatorta 2002).

The ascent of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika in 1999 marked the end of the civil war as well as the reconfiguration of the regime. Bouteflika, who is not from a military background, became the civilian face of the regime. Through this, the Algerian regime presented an image of a what is called a personalistic regime (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014) rather than a military regime, despite the heavy presence of the military in the background. Indeed, during Bouteflika's tenure, the army was not directly involved in day-to-day politics. Despite the army's seemingly limited role, the regime has continued to persist.

Bouteflika's 20-year tenure that ended in 2019 had its ups and downs. He was first seen as a saviour and was dubbed as the architect of peace following the civil war. The 2000s was a time when Algeria found a certain level of peace, stability, and economic development. As a result, Bouteflika became quite popular during his first decade in power (Tlemçani 2008). However, his second decade was marked by two major popular movements: the Arab Spring protests and the Hirak. With regards to the former, the Algerian regime successfully resisted while the latter ultimately witnessed the fall of Bouteflika. Importantly, despite sacrificing Bouteflika and his so-called *clan*, the Algerian regime as a collective remained in power despite the Hirak. Examining the regime's strategies and the opposition activities is important to understand why and how the regime has been able to endure despite two major challenges.

Strategies of the Algerian Regime and Opposition

With multiple waves of democratisation during the 20th century, and especially with the Third Wave when dozens of countries in Latin America, Eastern Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa had transitions to democracy, the literature on political regimes focused more on democratising forces such as economic development, social classes, institutional structure, international drivers and elites' roles (Geddes 1999). However, the post-Third Wave era has shown that many authoritarian regimes persisted despite democratising forces. Hence, the literature shifted its focus to understanding the factors that make authoritarian regimes more durable by looking at regime dynamics (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007). Bringing these two different trends in the literature together, a good understanding of a regime change, or lack thereof, depends on understanding both how the regime resists and how democratising forces operate.

In light of these, this chapter proposes that the Algerian regime persisted during the 2010s based on two simultaneous dynamics: the Algerian regime's ability to control and co-opt challenges by using a variety of

tools and strategies and the opposition's inability to propose and push for a genuine alternative to build a new regime. This section explains why these two dynamics matter and the next sections illustrate these dynamics during the Arab Spring and the Hirak protests.

The Algerian regime's use of tools and strategies are similar to those of other authoritarian regimes in the last decades. The main purpose of an authoritarian regime is to survive. Authoritarian leaders rule the country, manipulate the political arena and appease challengers at the same time (Mesquita et al. 2004; Svolik 2012). For this, they need to rely on authoritarian control and co-optation (sometimes called power-sharing) (Magaloni 2006; Svolik 2009). Authoritarian control can be described as activities designed to prevent the rise of challengers to power through coercion, repression, intimidation, and surveillance (Svolik 2012). Co-optation, on the other hand, is absorbing challenges from other elites or the masses by allowing them to benefit from the regime (Gandhi and Przeworski 2006). Sometimes, this is done through sharing political powers such as granting opposition forces a degree of space and giving them certain posts in government or state institutions. On other occasions, co-optation is done through economic means such as providing private or public goods and the distribution of resources. As the challenges to authoritarian regimes vary from case to case, the coercive and co-optative tools that regimes use vary as well. Sometimes using a few tools such as repression is enough for survival but having a variety of tools in the inventory provides a more enhanced protection from different challenges and helps autocrats survive. Hence, most authoritarian regimes diversify their tools and combine control and co-optation.

The Algerian experience is a good example of the use of a variety of tools to remain in power (Volpi 2004). As I argued elsewhere (Kilavuz 2017), thanks to the reconfiguration that took place during the 1990s, the regime has a wide variety of tools in its inventory. These tools include some coercive tools thanks to its strong coercive apparatus. The

Algerian military consolidated its power following the coup d'état in the early 1990s in several ways: First, the army had already been the main decision-making body in the country and remained so through the 1990s (Yefsah 1992; Addi 1998; Cook 2007). Second, during the civil war, the army materially reinforced itself by increasing its personnel size as well as its expenditure (World Bank 2017). Third, the generals increased their involvement in business as part of the rising crony capitalism and became major financial players in the country (Entelis 2011b). Finally, the army further reinforced itself through the rise of the intelligence service, *Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité* (the DRS) (Wolf and Lefevre 2013). With these, the Algerian security forces developed the capacity to control both the opposition and the masses through repression, coercion, surveillance, etc.

The Algerian regime's tools also include some co-optative tools. First, the regime uses oil rents to appease the masses. Being one of the top natural resources exporters and an OPEC member, the Algerian regime has used state subsidies to keep the masses content with the hopes of preventing a potential uprising (Hadjadj 2007). Second, the Algerian regime uses political reform as a strategic tool to absorb challenges. While political liberalisation was once seen as a step toward democratisation (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986), it later became clear that authoritarian regimes use liberalisation reforms as a survival strategy (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007). When a potential challenge arises, Algerian leaders promise to make extensive reforms and usually succeed in buying time and turning off the challenge. Third, the Algerian regime significantly benefits from the flexibility of its electoral authoritarian regime with a multiparty system. It allows a wide variety of parties to participate in electoral politics while pushing them towards fragmentation. With that and the widespread electoral fraud (Keenan 2012), Algerian opposition parties remain short of challenging the regime during election times. Furthermore, the two regime parties, the FLN and *Rassemblement National Démocratique* (National Democratic Rally - the RND) provide a level of flexibility to the regime by allowing a swap between the two

when needed. With all these features, the Algerian multiparty system functions as a means for the regime to monitor, manage and appease the opposition.

Along with the regime's tools and strategies, the opposition's inability to offer a real alternative to the regime constitutes another factor for the lack of democratisation. A line of argument in the literature on democratic transitions suggests that the building of a new democratic regime is oftentimes carried out by elites. Whereas some democratic transition processes start with a revolutionary movement, it eventually comes down to negotiations, bargaining, guarantees and power-sharing arrangements between elites across the political spectrum (McFaul 2002). Therefore, it is elite actions, not a general social mobilisation, that define whether and how a democratic regime is built (Bermeo 1997). In this process, the literature suggests, different groups should coexist, negotiate, compromise, and cooperate to build democratic institutions (Higley and Gunther 1992).

While the classical literature focuses more on the interactions between regime and opposition elites, a literature on opposition activities has emerged, focused particularly on opposition coalitions (Schwedler and Clark 2006; Gandhi and Ong 2019; Lust 2011) as a first step of bringing down the existing regime and negotiating regime change. Accordingly, opposition actors should be able to coordinate with each other in order to overcome their differences and pose a more significant challenge to the regime as a stronger front. Otherwise, if opposition actors try to operate in an unorganised and individual manner, it is much easier for the regime to use its divide and rule tactics and prevent the challenges (Lust-Okar 2004).

The Algerian opposition has been largely unsuccessful in forming a united front vis-à-vis the regime. Even though there were two major protest movements to push the regime to the brink, the opposition actors could not acquire a viable authority to negotiate with the regime actors for regime change. There are several reasons for this: First, in part

because of the regime's tactics, the opposition is quite fragmented, even among those belonging to the same ideological camp. There are multiple parties adhering to Islamist, Kabyle, leftist, and nationalist lines claiming to represent the electorate. Second, these parties do not have a clear and common vision for what the Algerian political system should be in the future and their attempts to produce such a vision has been hampered by the power politics and personal interests among them (Kapil 1994). Third, as a result of the above, Algerians neither trust the parties nor consider them as viable options to replace the regime. The results from the Wave IV of the Arab Barometer indicate that a staggering 86.5% of respondents either don't trust the political parties in the country or trust them just very little ("Arab Barometer Wave IV" 2017).

These two main dynamics, the tools and strategies of the regime and the inability of the opposition to counter the regime were in play throughout the previous decade, helping the regime to overcome the various challenges. The next two sections look at how these dynamics were at play during the two protest episodes in the 2010s, the Arab Spring and the Hirak.

The Arab Spring Protests and their Aftermath

Whereas the narratives of the Arab Spring primarily focus on cases such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, the uprisings were more widespread throughout the region. Algeria was not immune to the protests. Throughout the 2000s, there have been localised protests in various regions of the country (McAllister 2013). Similar to its neighbours, there were economic and political grievances toward the regime in Algeria. One of the most cited proximate causes of the protests was related to price increases as the price of sugar and oil saw an increase of about 30% in the last months of 2010 (Parks 2012). Even though the government blamed the private sector for these increases, it was only one among a number of other economic problems that the government could not resolve such as lack of infrastructure, unemployment and the reliability of services (Entelis 2011a; McAllister 2013).

However, while socio economic issues were at the core of the onset of protests, as the Algerian sociologist Nacer Djabi (2011) notes, this does not mean the protestors did not link socioeconomic issues with political ones. The government's inability to produce solutions as well as the distrust of state institutions exacerbated the perverse effects of the socioeconomic problems. Reflecting that, according to the second wave of the Arab Barometer surveys that took place in the midst of the protests in April-May 2011, about 65% of respondents evaluated the economic situation in the country negatively and a majority showed below average trust to institutions such as the government and the parliament ("Arab Barometer Wave II" 2011). As a result, seeing that the masses in their neighbours are taking the streets, Algerians started protesting against the government as well.

Protests in major cities across Algeria started in the early days of January 2011. While early protests were mainly youth taking to the streets without any discernible organisational structure, similar to the neighbouring countries, after the first weeks of the protests several political parties sought to become more involved. Even as the government responded in a number of ways, the protests continued with varying intensity for a couple of months. However, at the end, the protests did not take on a revolutionary character as in Tunisia or Egypt, or even lead to significant political reforms such as in Morocco or Jordan. Some attribute the lack of revolution in Algeria to trauma (McAllister 2013), with the ghosts of the civil war in the 1990s having a significant effect on the direction of the protest movement. In particular, this experience might have led to the shorter lifespan of the protest movement. However, despite the collective trauma, people still took the streets and protested for several months. Furthermore, with my co-authors, I find that the legacy of the 1990s had a more complex impact on protest participation beyond merely being an obstacle. Hence, there must be some other reasons for the lack of democratisation despite the presence of protests for several months. As argued earlier, the lack of democratisation during the Arab Spring was due to the regime's strategic response and the inability of the opposition.

During the opening months of the Arab Spring, the Algerian regime used both repressive and co-optative tools successfully. The regime used controlled repression rather than brute absolute repression, with security forces allowing some protests while preventing them from growing too large, sometimes using force to break up the demonstrations (Entelis 2011a). It was reported that, on certain occasions, security forces outnumbered the demonstrators by ten times to contain the protests (Parks 2012).

While repressive tools were crucial in containing the protests, co-optative tools played a crucial role in absorbing pressure coming from the masses. The first set of such tools were the economic benefits that the regime offered thanks to the natural resource rents that they have. As early as the first week of the protests, the regime decided to lower taxes on sugar and oil (Parks 2012). Subsequently, the government announced measures to create jobs and provide other social security benefits. In May, to finance these initiatives, the government revised the budget by increasing the public-sector spending by 25% (Volpi 2013). Second, the regime used the promise of political reforms as a tool to push for compromise. During the second month of the protests, the government announced the lifting of the 19-year-old state of emergency, responding to one of the core political demands of the protestors (*BBC News* 2011). Later in April, President Bouteflika held a televised address in which he promised extensive political reforms including amending the laws regarding elections, the media, and political parties, potentially paving the way for a more open political system (*Le Point* 2011). Bouteflika's promise of reform played a significant role in decreasing the intensity of protests in subsequent months. Finally, the Algerian regime benefited from its multi-party system successfully during the protests. Unlike some other countries in the region, the Algerian political system allowed for the participation of a wide range of political parties, including Islamists. Since the political parties had already failed to apply pressure on the regime within the system and lost credibility, they could not be a driver for mobilisation (Parks 2012). Moreover, the regime benefitted

from having two parties affiliated with it, the FLN and the RND. As the government was led by the head of the RND, Ahmed Ouyahia, during the onset of the protests, he became one of the targets of the protests. Following the 2012 elections, the regime replaced Ouyahia with Abdelmalek Sellal from the FLN, giving an image of reforming the system.

While the regime's strategic response was important to remain in power, the opposition's inability to build on the momentum of the protests did not help with the hopes of democratisation. Admittedly, the protestors in the early days had no collective ties to political parties or organisations, yet, the established opposition was also not able to represent their demands (Roberts 2011) because of their lack of credibility and strategic mistakes. In fact, both secular and Islamist organizations could not offer enough for the protestors to challenge the regime. Secular parties and organisations came together under the National Coordination for Democratic Change (CNCD) to spearhead the protests. While they organised some of the protests, they did not prove to be effective enough to lead the protest movement (Parks 2012). On the Islamists' side, the situation was not all that different. While they were quite hesitant to take direct part in the protests, the major Islamist parties in Algeria formed an electoral alliance called the Green Alliance going into the 2012 elections. Prior to the elections, partially because of the Islamist victories in neighbouring countries, the expectation was that Islamists would make gains and maybe even be part of a coalition government (Parks 2012). However, the three parties within the Green Alliance could not even improve from their record in previous elections. Ultimately, both secular and Islamist parties were not seen as viable choices for the protestors.

More importantly, despite attempts of cooperation within the Islamist and secular camps, there was no significant attempt at cross-ideological cooperation. During the protests in 2011, opposition groups were unable to form a unified front vis-à-vis the regime. With the lack of

a democratic push from a unified front, this fragmented structure of the opposition facilitated the regime's endeavour to remain in power. However, lessons learned from the failures of the protest movement and subsequent elections led to some changes in oppositional activities in the subsequent years. As part of what is called the Mazafran Initiative, talks among the opposition led to the founding of the National Coordination for Liberties and Democratic Transition (CNLTD) and the Commission of Consultation and Monitoring of the Opposition (ICSO) with the participation of Islamist and leftist parties as well as some significant independent opposition figures. For some of the participants of the Initiative, Mazafran started a civilised dialogue between different groups in Algeria [4]. According to Ali Benflis, the former Prime Minister turned opposition member, there should have been an accord for transition and such initiatives helped such an agreement to flourish among the opposition [5].

Even though this initiative created some hope, and the parties met several times, it ultimately proved to be ineffective because of disagreements among the parties and lack of viable solutions to the regime question in Algeria. According to pundits as well as several figures involved in the initiative, the parties pursued their own political interests over a common initiative for real regime change and carried out the process in meeting rooms of fancy hotels without establishing links with the already disengaged electorate [6]. While the primary ideas for the initiative were promising, they later changed their focus to shorter term benefits such as creating an image of dialogue without really changing anything on the ground [7]. The regime did not even work much to undermine this initiative as it did not pose a serious challenge. Even though the initiative still continues today, some leading figures have already left the platform (Charef 2017). Ultimately, the opposition was unable to pose a serious challenge to the regime during the Arab Spring protest movement due to lack of cooperative attempts and, in the aftermath of the early years of the Arab Spring, due to weak commitment to cooperation and democratic change.

In short, the regime's strategic response as well as the opposition's inability to effectively challenge helped the regime push back against democratisation. With controlled repression and co-optative measures, the regime presented an image of being responsive to protestor demands. This actually paid off in the short term as Algerians' perception toward the economic and political performance of the government became significantly more positive from 2011 to 2013 (Kilavuz and Sumaktoyo 2020). However, the Algerian regime did not keep most of its promises following the first years of the Arab Spring. The economic benefits did not last long, and the economy worsened in the second half of the decade. Bouteflika's promised reforms came only in 2016 with a constitutional amendment that fell significantly short of the expectations (Entelis 2016). However, as five years had already passed after the protest movement and the opposition failed to pose a challenge through initiatives such as Mazafran, the regime got a free pass by these unkept promises.

The Second Attempt in a Decade: The Hirak

While the challenge to the regime during the Arab Spring remained limited and hopes for democratisation waned after a while, the country experienced its second challenge in a decade in 2019, this time with an even larger and more resilient movement. The nationwide protests in 2019, dubbed as the Hirak (literally, "the movement"), have been the closest point for Algerians to attain democracy since the early 1990s. Despite the revolutionary moment in Algeria, the ultimate result turned out to be similar to that of the Arab Spring protests.

The protests in Algeria started in response to the decision of the ailing President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to run for a fifth term. On February 22, 2019, the first major protests took place. Similar to earlier protests, the Hirak emerged as a reaction to the increasing economic hardships, ineffective state services, loss of hope for change as well as the political inaction originated from the regime's internal power struggles in the years prior (Zoubir 2016; Parks 2019). Some observers, including

myself, saw these early protests less as a push for democratisation (Kilavuz 2019) and more as a reaction to the irresponsible actions of the regime and particularly the so-called Bouteflika clan. However, some of the activists dubbed this as a pro-democracy movement early on and, indeed, the protests spiralled into a nationwide pro-democracy movement following the unresponsive attitude of the regime.

At times during the Hirak, Algeria seemed on the way to a democratic transition, especially because of the resilience of the protest movement. In fact, the people successfully played their role by taking the streets in weekly mass protests for more than a year, putting significant pressure on the regime. However, the opposition elites failed to build on the momentum created by the masses and the regime's strategies vis-à-vis the Hirak started to pay off over time. As the protest movement had already started to fizzle out in early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic effectively put an end to the protests in March 2020, finalising that stage of the Hirak without a democratic transition.

Just like in the Arab Spring protests, the regime used both repressive and co-optative tools in facing the Hirak. Frankly, the regime's strategies did not work as they expected at first and the protests continued for a long time. However, over time, these strategies started to show their impact. The regime did not use sheer repression at first. The police tried to prevent some of the protests and particularly blocked roads on Fridays to prevent citizens from moving to larger cities such as the capital Algiers to join massive protests. Following the first weeks, the security forces, showing their resolve for repression, started arresting activists. The summer of 2020 was the time when the regime intensified its targeted repression. Still not using sheer violence in protests, the security forces started arresting independent opposition figures known to have influence on the Hirak as well as journalists [8]. This intensifying targeted repression showed protestors that the regime was willing to use more repression going forward. Our survey conducted over time during the Hirak protests in fact shows that the expectation of

repression increased during the summer months, which coincided with a decline in protest participation (Grewal, Kilavuz, and Kubinec 2019).

The regime relied particularly on its co-optative tools vis-à-vis the Hirak. While the lack of early compromises led to the expansion of the movement, the regime tried to save face with subsequent concessions. First, the government resigned and Bouteflika withdrew his candidacy (Michaelson 2019). Bouteflika then resigned from the Presidency on April 2, following a call from the Chief of Staff Ahmed Gaid Salah, representing what some have called a soft coup (Grewal 2019). This led to the purge of the Bouteflika clan as politicians and businessmen close to him were arrested and subsequently sentenced (Akef 2019). With this, the army sacrificed the Bouteflika clan to save the regime and took control of this potential transition process. Gaid Salah promised elections with an updated roadmap and several regime actors called for dialogue. The regime also used elections and the country's multi-party scene to its advantage. Gaid Salah always proposed that elections would be the way out of the crisis, while postponing the elections more than once in order to bide time. But using elections as a chip paid off as some organised opposition actors as well as figures close to the regime later decided to take part in the proposed elections, providing the regime's roadmap further legitimacy. When the December 2019 Presidential Elections finally took place and a regime figure who is known to be at odds with the Bouteflika clan, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, was elected as the new president, the regime presented this as the realisation of the people's demands and a transition to a new era (Volpi 2020). While some of the protestors remained resilient, these efforts of the regime helped weaken the movement over time.

While the regime used these strategies, the opposition's failures played a major role in the absence of a democratic transition. The Hirak started purely as a leaderless and unorganised people's movement. Different parties and movements participated in the protests and some politicians even tried to portray themselves as leaders of the Hirak. However, as

the Algerian people were wary of the established opposition political parties, they were reactive to the hijacking of protests by political leaders (*Algerie Eco* 2019). Several independent opposition politicians represented the Hirak better and cultivated support of the people as we reported in our survey (Grewal, Kilavuz, and Kubinec 2019); however, the established political opposition and the regime undermined their activities as well.

The Algerian opposition actors actually tried to cooperate with each other building upon the massive protests. A major meeting across opposition figures, including established and independent opposition, took place as early as early March. However, as some old regime figures participated in this meeting and party leaders had differences, disagreements across the opposition became evident early on (*RFI* 2019). Regular meetings with several opposition parties continued over subsequent months but they could not present viable solutions to the political crisis that protestors could rally behind. Two dialogue processes were attempted in July. Early that month, political parties proposed a dialogue for a transition in six months, however as their demands were not as revolutionary as the demands in the streets, this could not attract support from the protestors (AlArabiya 2019; *Jeune Afrique* 2019). Later in the same month, independent opposition figures and former statesmen called for dialogue with demands closer to the demands being articulated in the streets; however, this attempt was not welcomed by the regime (Lyes 2019). Several other dialogue attempts failed in the following months and with the intensifying targeted repression, viable independent politicians were controlled as well. Ultimately, due to their differences and inability to represent the people's demands, the established opposition failed to build on the popular moment and even undermined the actions of the independent opposition. Throughout the Hirak, the protestors led the process and the opposition tried to follow suit but remained far from emulating the protestors' successes.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to present an overview of why two protest movements, the Arab Spring protests and the Hirak, failed to lead to a democratic transition during the 2010s. I argued that the lack of democratisation in Algeria during the decade was due to two dynamics. First, the Algerian regime has successfully responded to the democratic challenges by a combination of repressive and co-optative tools. The usage of these tools varied from one case to the other. However, in both instances, the regime used repression, promises, compromises and benefitted from the multiparty system in the country. Second, the Algerian opposition failed to turn either protest movement into a viable democratic transition. Due to their disagreements, unpreparedness, disconnect with the public, and potentially their weak commitment to real democratic change, the established opposition in Algeria could not form a united front to represent the people's demands. In such situations where the regime uses smart tactics and the opposition fails to counterbalance, despite revolutionary moments in the streets, it is very difficult to attain democratic change. The lack of a democratic transition was not inevitable in Algeria; however, the opposition's inability ultimately helped the regime's efforts to survive.

What is next for Algeria in the next decade? The COVID-19 crisis provided an unexpected opportunity for the Algerian regime to put an end to the initial phase of the Hirak. During these last years, the regime tried to consolidate itself with its new leaders both in the presidency and the army. While it does not seem as strong as it was in the last decade, the main tools of survival are still available: repression, rents (despite a declining trend), the ability of compromise and a still useful multiparty system. On the other hand, the established opposition remains quite weak. Despite the boycott by the Hirak supporters, several opposition parties participated in the 2021 parliamentary elections and received fairly low votes (*France 24* 2021). A glimpse of hope for democratisation in Algeria still rests with the Hirak, as the revolutionary spirit is still alive

(Serres 2021). However, in a potential next challenge, the movement will likely need more elite representation against the regime if it is to ultimately succeed.

Endnotes

[1] Kabyle is an Amazigh ethnic group that is the biggest and most prominent minority in Algeria. Several Kabyle parties operated first underground and then legally representing the rights of the minority Kabyle region in Algeria. For more on this, see: (Maddy-Weitzman 2012).

[2] Author's interview with H'mida Ayachi, public intellectual and writer, February 12, 2017, Algiers.

[3] Based on a study on protest participation in the Hirak, we found that the legacy of mass killings of the 1990s is two-fold: it prevents some Algerians from participating because of the fear of repression; yet, it even encourages others to participate in protests for a longer time due the grievances toward the regime (Kilavuz, Grewal, and Kubinec 2021).

[4] Author's interview with Sofiane Djilali, the leader of the opposition party *Jil Jadid*, December 27, 2016, Algiers.

[5] Author's interview with Ali Benflis, former Prime Minister and former leader of the opposition party *Talaie el-Houriat* February 14, 2017, Algiers.

[6] Author's interview with Mostefa Bouchachi, former Member of Parliament from the FFS and participant of the Mazafran Initiative. January 23, 2017, Algiers.

[7] Author's interview with Mokrane Ait Larbi, writer and former vice-president of the RCD, February 19, 2017, Algiers.

[8] For a list of political detainees published by the National Committee for the Liberation of Detainees (CNLD), see: (Mehheni 2019)

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Chapter 10

Lebanon's 'October Revolution' in the Shadow of Sectarianism

Michael Arnold

Introduction

The end of Lebanon's long and bloody civil war in 1990 ushered in an era of hope for a more prosperous and stable future. However, for many Lebanese, although the shooting stopped, the civil war never actually ended. The state itself was a casualty of the war. While the Lebanese Republic remained and the machinery of state continued to grind along, the state *qua* state had ceased to exert effective sovereignty over the Republic's territory. In the aftermath of the war, what could be considered as sectarian gangs filled the vacuum, assuming some of the more important functions of the state and maintaining a minimum level of public order. And while the 1990s and early 2000s did witness remarkable economic growth and rejuvenation, whatever hope there was for the new Lebanon was violently shattered on February 14th, 2005, with the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. This was followed by a series of high-profile assassinations targeting political officials, journalists, and others, most of whom were openly opposed to the Syrian presence in the country. The July 2006 Hezbollah-Israel war, in which over 1,000 Lebanese civilians were killed and the country's infrastructure left in ruins and the 2008 Hezbollah takeover of Beirut both pointed to the fact that the country's regional and domestic situation remained tenuous. Perhaps most importantly, these events served as a reminder that they country remained divided, both along political and sectarian lines.[1] While the roots of these divisions date back to the late Ottoman period and subsequent French colonial period, they reflect the fact that the country's foundations have been and continue to be

characterised by underlying instability fed by domestic, regional, and international dynamics.

Despite this underlying instability, as the wave of uprisings swept through a number of Middle Eastern states just over a decade ago, Lebanon largely avoided being pulled into the growing maelstrom, even as the situation in neighbouring Syria quickly intensified. While the uprisings that broke out in Egypt and Tunisia in 2011 had a limited impact on Lebanon, the outbreak of violence in neighbouring Syria reverberated through the country's precarious sectarian and political balance, adding significant pressure on a system already on the precipice. However, despite the influx of over one million Syrian refugees - accounting for one quarter of Lebanon's population - leading to increased pressure on already weakened infrastructure and public services, Hezbollah's deepening involvement in the conflict, and a series of bombings claimed by ISIS, Lebanon did not witness a large-scale citizen-led uprising akin the 2005 Cedar Revolution.[2]

There were, however, movements that emerged out of the country's civil society landscape that sought to leverage the momentum of the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere to call attention to corruption and democratic deficits as well as calling for the end to the country's sectarian political system. In what came to be known as the 'Intifada of Dignity', protests were initiated in early 2011 focused on calls for political reform. Organised by the group 'Laique Pride'[3], the protests failed to appeal to the wider public, something that has been a common feature of protest movements initiated by Lebanon's civil society actors, and ultimately failed to generate the momentum needed to turn their protests into a more general uprising. The fact that the country's two main political blocs, March 8th, and March 14th respectively, both formally expressed their support for the broad objectives of the Arab Spring uprisings, despite the clear political differences between them, was a strong indication that none of the major political parties in the country were concerned about the potential of a popular uprising taking

place in Lebanon. Prior to the outbreak of widespread protests in neighbouring Syria, Hezbollah was the most enthusiastic of Lebanon's main political actors in expressing their support for the nascent revolutions in the Arab world, particularly in countries governed by Western-backed regimes. However, as the situation in Syria continued to escalate, existing political divisions in Lebanon solidified and the pressure increased on the country's stability particularly as Syrian refugees began to arrive in the hundreds of thousands, straining already limited public resources and threatening to upset the country's delicate sectarian balance. The Hezbollah-led March 8th alliance's support for the Assad regime and the Shia party *cum* militia's intervention in Syria on behalf of the regime exacerbated tensions in Lebanon, resulting in a deterioration in the political and security situation in the country, including numerous bombings in Hezbollah strongholds and clashes in the northern city of Tripoli.[4] Pressure on the Future Movement-led March 14th alliance from its patrons in the Gulf, particularly as the counter-revolutionary and anti-Iran movement ramped up in the region, served to exacerbate these tensions even further.

Despite this, with the notable exception of the 2015 'You Stink' protests that began as a response to a garbage crisis in the country and quickly expanded in a broader anti-government movement [5], Lebanon was largely able to maintain domestic stability. However, in October 2019 long-simmering popular anger burst out onto the streets of Lebanon's capital Beirut. Triggered by a so-called 'WhatsApp tax' in reference to proposed fees to be levied on the usage of the popular messaging service, demonstrations quickly spread across the country. While the trigger may have been the 'WhatsApp' tax proposed amid an emergent economic crisis, in reality a burgeoning and largely cross-sectarian opposition had been active and bubbling below the surface for some time in response to rampant corruption, cronyism and an all-but-absent state. As the protests spread in both intensity and scope, there was a palpable sense that what was emerging was a display of unprecedented anger and dissatisfaction with the system and those managing it, and that whatever the remaining

legitimacy held by the country's traditional political actors had would be irrevocably damaged. Reflecting the extent to which they political elite in Lebanon had become detached from the realities of daily life, they deployed tried and tested approaches to extricate themselves and protect their interests in the midst of an unprecedented economic and political crisis and as the economic situation in the country continued to worsen, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.[6] And while the protest movement achieved some early victories, the most notable of which was the resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri and the consequent fall of the government, events since - most notably the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in the country, the rapid and devastating economic meltdown that the World Bank has referred to as one of the worst globally in the last 150 years [7] as well as the devastating explosion at the port of Beirut in August 2020 – served to significantly dampen both the ability and the will of Lebanese to take to the streets. While the protests themselves fizzled out due in large part to a complex dynamic involving an interplay between counter-revolutionary push back from the political elite, a rapidly deteriorating socio-economic situation, and Covid-19 restrictions, the core issues that drove ordinary Lebanese to the streets have only continued to fester. And while the country has indeed changed in arguably unprecedented ways, the spectre of sectarianism looms over Lebanon's future as it continues to navigate a historical crisis.

Sectarianism in Lebanon: A Background

Sectarianism is perhaps most simply understood as a phenomenon in which confessional affiliation becomes the primary basis for collective identity in a confessionally diverse environment. Importantly, sectarian-based political movements are distinguishable from those with nationalist objectives in that there is no demand for formal independence in the former. Sectarian discourse is ultimately premised on the concepts of autonomy or rights.[8] In Lebanon, the rise of sectarianism as a social and political phenomenon arguably have their modern origins in the

significant societal changes that took place in the course of the 19th century during which a clear demarcation began to emerge between Muslim and other communities, both in terms of political identity but also in terms of previously shared social and economic histories.[9] It was during this time that the roots of sectarian identities as being the primary vehicles for political and socio-economic identification in Lebanon began to take root.

Both economic and political factors played a role in the emergence of sectarianized identities in the Eastern Mediterranean in the 19th century, particularly as the wealth and prosperity of Christian communities along the coast increased as the Ottoman Empire became increasingly integrated into the world economy. Christian, and to a lesser extent, Jewish communities became the de-facto middlemen in trade with European powers. More importantly, European powers often granted special certificates, known as *berats*, to these communities, which entailed them being covered by the capitulatory agreements signed between various European powers and the Ottoman authorities in Istanbul. Owing to the fact that these merchants acquired the same commercial and legal rights afforded to merchants from European states, they tended to become wealthier than their Muslim competitors. However, economic inequity alone cannot account for the rise of sectarian tensions in the 19th century, particularly in the case of Mount Lebanon which remained relatively isolated from the rest of the region. For this, we must turn to the local impacts of the Ottoman *Tanzimat* period, particularly the *Hatti-i Sharif* of Gülhane and the *Islahat Fermani*, and their promise of equal citizenship to the Empire's various communities. There is a degree of irony in tying the rise of sectarianized identities to what is effectively a policy of social engineering designed to help overcome issues of social cohesion in the Empire. However, the fact that almost immediately following the promulgation of the new policies, provincial notables, religious figures, and even common people began to call for the recognition of political rights promised by the reforms, with hindsight, was an indication of the turbulent road

ahead. As James L. Gelvin argues, these claimants were well aware of the fact that they would gain the support of European states as well as concessions from Ottoman authorities if their respective claims were framed as representing the desires of one or another minority religious community.[10] The consequences of this was that religious communities increasingly came to self-identify as distinct social units holding distinct communitarian interests that differed from those of other religious communities. Ultimately this led religious communities to become political competitors.

This politicisation of confessional identity would have dangerous and long-lasting consequences. Not only did it become increasingly likely that grievances would be expressed in religious-identitarian terms, but it also opened these communities up to the fact that, all too often, prospective communitarian leaders were ready to exploit the situation for their own political purposes. An 1858 incident that began as a conflict between Maronite peasants and Maronite landlords promptly transformed into a Maronite peasant rebellion against Druze notables, and ultimately led to the 1860 massacre of Christians in Damascus and other parts of Ottoman Syria is a case in point. As Druze leaders retaliated, the fighting spread from Mount Lebanon to nearby regions. As tensions rose, previously existing economic and political grievances provided fuel for the massacre of thousands of Christians and the ransacking of European consulates. Although the conflict was primarily between Druze and Maronite partisans in Mount Lebanon, as the conflict spread to other parts of Ottoman Syria, thousands of Christian residents of Damascus were killed at the hands of Druze and Sunni Muslims, precipitating a French-led international military intervention. In 1861 representatives of European governments met in Istanbul in order to impose a solution to the crisis on the Ottoman government. Dismissing the complex roots of the outburst of violence, the European delegates framed the events as merely the latest incident of what they considered to be an age-old problem of the Muslim majority oppressing non-Muslim minorities. Ostensibly in the name of safeguarding the

Christian community, the delegates pushed the Ottoman authorities to grant autonomy to Mount Lebanon under the auspices of a concert of European powers. Thus, Mount Lebanon became a *mutasarrifiya*, a special administrative district that would be governed by a non-Lebanese Ottoman Christian governor assisted by a local council consisting of four Maronites, three Druze, two Greek Orthodox, one Greek Catholic, one Sunni Muslim, and one Shi'i Muslim. This connection between political representation and confessional affiliation would come to form the basis of Lebanon's system of governance until the present day. In 1943, following modern Lebanon's independence from the French mandate, Christian and Muslim political leaders reached an informal understanding known as the National Pact, stipulating, among other things, that the president be a Maronite, the prime minister a Sunni, and the speaker of the parliament at Shi'i Muslim; that the parliament be divided between Christians and Muslims on a ratio of five to six; and that cabinet posts would be divided among the newly independent Lebanese Republic's various communities according to a formula based on a 1932 census, the last taken in the country. Following fifteen years of civil war, in 1989 this formula was adjusted as part of what became known as the Ta'if agreement.

Ta'if and the Cementing of Lebanon's Sectarian Logic

The 1989 Ta'if Agreement represents perhaps the most useful framework for understanding the political side of Lebanon's ongoing crisis. The Document of National Accord adopted at Ta'if envisaged a two-phase solution to the civil war, culminating in the 'Third Republic' in which Lebanon's official political sectarianism was supposed to be abolished. The reality of course is that Ta'if in fact represented a retrenchment of the sectarian dynamic that it was, in theory, meant to overcome. According to the Document of National Accord:

> Until the Chamber of Deputies passes an election law free of sectarian restriction, the parliamentary seats shall be divided according to the following bases: a) Equality between Christians

> and Muslims; b) Proportionately between the denominations of each sect; c) Proportionately between the regions.[11]

Prior to this, the 1943 National Pact, an unwritten agreement establishing the political foundations of modern Lebanon, allocated the Presidency to a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister's Office to a Sunni Muslim, and the position of the Speaker of the Parliament to a Shi'a Muslim.

The maintenance of Ta'if was premised on an assumption that continuous economic growth would allow for wealth to be unofficially distributed according to the sectarian underpinnings of the Document of National Accord. Various inflections in post-Civil War Lebanese history have challenged its underpinnings in various and often markedly different ways. The uprising in 2019, however, was arguably the first time that the premise of the system had been challenged on such a broad level, with many saying that only then had the Lebanese Civil War truly come to end. While this proved to be an overly simplistic interpretation of what was taking place, it became increasingly clear that the extent of the pressure on both the political system and political elite was unprecedented. Ta'if was, in theory, supposed to eventually lead to the promulgation of an electoral law free of sectarian restrictions, the vested interests of Lebanon's various sectarian leaders that the agreement cemented made it so that the very people who were supposed to guide the country towards this end would be undermining their interests and ultimately the basis of their authority in the process. In other words, the division of post-war political spoils on the basis of an ultimately bankrupt notion of confessional and sectarian equality would serve to entrench the logic of sectarianism throughout state institutions.[12] For its opponents and protagonists of the 'October Revolution', what Bassel Salloukh and others have referred to as the "political economy of sectarianism"[13] that involves "a complex of clientelist networks involving both state institutions and private interests" had clearly run its course. However, with no ready and viable alternative waiting in the wings, the system continues albeit in an increasingly decayed form.

‘Official’ Religion

At this juncture, it is worth briefly discussing the role and position of Lebanon’s official religious institutions vis-à-vis the protest movement. An often-overlooked aspect of the modern Lebanese state, these leaders play a complex but pivotal role in the country’s sectarian nexus. In the following the outbreak of the October Uprising, Lebanon’s official religious leadership [14] unanimously expressed their collective support for what they termed “a historic and exceptional public uprising” against corruption and mismanagement.[15] The Maronite Patriarch, Cardinal Bechara al-Rahi implored the government to listen to the demands of the people, adding that he did not believe the people would have risen up had they not been subjected to such suffering and pain. Beirut’s Orthodox Archbishop Elias Audi was quoted as saying that any potential political vacuum “is better than the vacuum we are living in today”, adding that the country was already paralyzed prior to the outbreak of the protests. Both the Grand Mufti of the Lebanese Republic, Abd al-Latif Derian, the country’s top Sunni religious figure, and the head of the Druze community also expressed their support for the protestors and their demands.

This is unsurprising given that the core priority of Lebanon’s official religious leaders has for a long time been the preservation of the state and the countering of sectarian polarisation in the country.[16] This may appear at first glance as counter-intuitive given the fact that Lebanon’s official religious institutions are part and parcel of the country’s confessionally-based political system and, in many respects, contribute to the perpetuation of this system. In fact, the support that the protest movement received, particularly in its early days, from the country’s religious leadership makes sense when it is understood that the institutions they represent are more embedded in the fabric of the Lebanese state than the political class as embodied by its sectarian political leadership. In fact, official religious figures often compete with or have ambiguous relations with more overtly political figures.

Hezbollah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah is perhaps the clearest illustration of this. While Nasrallah is clearly the most powerful Shi'a cleric in the country, he often competes with his more religiously edified counterparts for the ear of the community, despite his relatively minor standing as a religious expert.

In addition to the allocation of key political posts according to the National Pact, Lebanon's political system has also institutionalised confessional representation through religious institutions such as the Grand Mufti of the Republic and the Maronite Patriarch, granting these institutions broad powers over the religious affairs, personal status issues, the employment of religious officials, and management over places of worship – among others – over their respective communities. Their political function is complex and ultimately ambiguous; however, they do not exist in isolation from politics, and although Lebanese religious leaders have a long record of opposing sectarian tensions, there are institutional limits to how far they may be willing to push. Even during the country's civil war, more often than not the Grand Mufti and the Maronite Patriarch shared the agenda, namely that there must be limited reform of the political system to ensure equal participation and negotiated through constitutional channels between fellow Lebanese.[17] This has been a consistent line of messaging through various crises the country has faced. It is important to remember, however, that these figures lead institutions that are both heavily integrated and invested in the preservation of the structure of the state. The primary concern of Lebanon's official religious leaders has long been to prevent the collapse of the state, its institutions, and the official and unofficial arrangements that form the basis of social and political organisation in the country, while also preventing sectarian polarisation.[18] These figures, and the institutions they represent walk a fine line between preserving the social boundaries that are the source of their power and ultimately the basis for how the state of Lebanon is currently organised, while also calling for moderation and good relations between the sects on the basis of their shared Lebanese identity. This is a key point and frames how

their stance towards the October Uprising should be understood. Their position as state representatives *par excellence* facilitates a moderating stance often absent in the country's sectarian political leaders, but one that seeks only to reform the status quo, not undermine its foundations.

The Protest Movement and the Sectarian 'Counter-Revolution'

In the first few months of the uprising, two distinct yet interrelated dynamics emerged. On the one hand, the struggle between what emerged as the broad coalition leading the protest movement, what Bassel Salloukh, a professor of political science at the Lebanese American University referred to as an 'imagined' anti-sectarian community [19] and the sectarian communities as represented by the country's traditional political elite. On the other hand, there emerged an intensified struggle *within* the sectarian communities themselves. The protest movement itself was notable for its geographical extent and the inclusion and solidarity between sectarian communities often thought of as being on opposing ends of the country's sectarian divide.[20] This was particularly true of the first wave of protests in Beirut, which witnessed the participation of young men from the city's working-class neighbourhoods and traditional strongholds of the established political parties that was largely absent from previous protest movements in the country, most notably the 2015 'You Stink' protests. The participation of these young men marked what can be thought of as the more 'radical' phase of the uprising that involved sustained confrontations with the security forces and roadblocks of burning tires being set up at major intersections in the heart of the capital. In the days and weeks that followed, there was a noticeable shift in the makeup of the demonstrators, namely in that the young men from Beirut's working-class suburbs were no longer present in the same way they were in the initial days of the uprising.

A number of observers, including Rima Majed [21], an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the American University of Beirut, understood this shift as reflecting a class, rather than sectarian, dynamic at play.

In effect, it was seen that the protest sites were in some ways 'taken over' by large NGOs as well as members of traditional political parties that had begun to hitch their wagons to the growing protest movement, which served to alienate those young working-class men mentioned above. And while protest movement as a whole were keen to express that sectarian identity was transcended by socio-economic background and citizenship and that the Lebanese needed to recognize that their shared socioeconomic struggles were much more relevant to their daily lives than their sectarian identities, as mentioned, it was socio-economic concerns brought on by decades of corruption, graft, and inept governance, and not the sectarian system per se that was the target of protester anger.

Nevertheless, there were a number of notable achievements of the movement, particularly in the early days, including the resignation of then-Prime Minister Saad Hariri, what initially seemed to be progress in corruption cases bogged down in the country's highly politicised judicial system, and the election of independents to key positions in professional associations, including the election of Melhem Khalaf to the presidency of the Beirut Bar Association. A more implicit sign of early success was the fact that many of the established political leaders claimed to support the goals of the protest movement, however, this was largely rejected by those who had taken to the streets as being too little too late. However, as the initial energy of the protest movement fizzled out due in large part to the Covid-19 pandemic, familiar patterns began to reassert themselves.

The sectarian political class's response to the pandemic is a case in point as it provided a golden opportunity to 're-sectarianize' the public sphere and re-emphasize their relevance to their respective communities. The country's political elite were at the forefront of organising pandemic-related campaigns, not in conjunction with the state, but rather on behalf of their political parties and for their confessionally divided constituencies. Saad Hariri and Najib Mikati led the efforts in the poor

largely Sunni northern city of Tripoli while Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement deployed a range of resources, including testing facilities and medical personnel in their respective strongholds. This provided a display of an oft-repeated pattern in the country wherein in the absence of an effective response from the state, sectarian political leaders have stepped in and thus re-enforced to their respective communities that they are the only ones willing and capable of looking out for their interests. Lebanese Political Science Professor Bassel Salloukh described the situation as follows:

> Ultimately we are reaping what 30 years of post-war 'zombie power-sharing' and its clientelist infrastructures have sown: a state stripped of the bare minimum of credibility, service delivery, and institutional capabilities. You see this in the way some diehards have weaponized the Covid-19 public health crisis along narrow, sectarian, confessional, and regional lines. It also shows the neglect of public health facilities and their limited resources in comparison to the clientelistic capabilities of sectarian parties.[22]

Against this backdrop, the protest movement continued to express a set of general demands focused broadly on political reform and accountability under an inclusive cross-sectarian umbrella. Early demands included the formation of a transition government complete with legislative authority, composed of non-politically affiliated individuals capable of managing the country's economic crisis, the undertaking of measures to ensure the independence of the judiciary, and the promulgation of a new electoral law.[23] In a survey of protester demands gleaned from digital and print-media sources, the American University of Beirut's Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs identified the main demands of the October Uprising as follows: the formation of a technocrat or national rescue cabinet; the resignation of the current cabinet; early parliamentary elections; the promulgation of a new electoral law (civil and non-sectarian); the recovery of stolen public

funds; fair tax and financial procedures; accountability for corruption; upholding the integrity and independence of the judiciary; and the lifting of the country's stringent banking secrecy laws.[24] As the economic crisis in the country worsened in the months that followed, while the more overtly political elements of the protest movement continued to promote these core demands, much of the anger on the streets turned more directly to the banks and the country's financial institutions.[25]

As the manoeuvrability on the street became more constrained, the emerging opposition movement began to mobilise beyond the country's squares. Organising was focused on the country's numerous professional associations in an effort to challenge the stranglehold of established political actors. In November 2019, independent candidate Melhem Khalaf was elected as the president of the Beirut Bar Association, beating out candidates backed by Lebanon's most powerful political parties.[26] Two years later however, in November 2021 a candidate reportedly backed by a number of established parties including the Future Movement, Amal and the Free Patriotic Movement succeeded Khalaf in the position [27], reflecting the significantly more challenging political and economic environment in the country following two years of a pandemic, a historic economic collapse and political manoeuvring on the part of the political establishment. This was particularly the case in the lead up to parliamentary elections held in May 2022, in which candidates who emerged from the 2019 protest movement faced the challenge of growing their appeal in communities where traditional powers have been entrenched. A combination of the unknown quantity of these candidates and the efforts of traditional parties and sectarian leaders to reiterate their centrality to their respective communities represented substantial barriers to electoral success. To the surprise of many however, thirteen civil society/opposition candidates were elected and several traditional parties lost ground.[28]

The spectre of sectarianism, however, will continue to cast its shadow over the Lebanese political scene for some time to come, and while the October 2019 uprising and its aftermath has certainly disrupted the

traditional political order in the country, deeply embedded political dynamics will remain difficult to overcome. History tells us that sectarian identities are constructed and thereby historically contingent, they have arguably been deeply embedded in both the individual and collective psyches of the various communities that make up modern day Lebanon. While the protest movement consisted of a noticeable and largely unprecedented cross-sectarian makeup, pushback on the part of traditional political actors was fierce and widespread. On the ground, sectarian political parties regularly deployed their supporters either to confront protestors, as was the case with most notably with the Shi'ite Hezbollah and Amal parties, or in order to ride the wave of popular anger and attempt to direct it towards their aims, as was the case with supporters of the Christian Lebanese Forces. On one level this is indicative of the fact that the protest movement captured the attention of Lebanon's political elite. On the other, it has been marked by a re-iteration of sectarian boundaries that has not only served to push back against the protest movement, but has also resulted in several notable instances of violence, including gun battles between Hezbollah and Amal on the one side and presumed supporters of the Lebanese Forces on the other.[29] As the economic and resulting social crisis has worsened, the cross-sectarian and socio-economic class-based character of the protest movement has been increasingly challenged. Despite the initial resignation of the government in November 2019, the short-term demands articulated in streets across the country have either been ignored or co-opted by the powers that be. In the intervening years since the 2019 October Uprising, government officials masquerading as technocrats quickly revealed themselves to be either working largely at the behest of traditional political parties or powerless to initiate any meaningful change. The devastating blast at the Beirut Port in August 2020 and the subsequent investigation that has witnessed an ostensibly independent judiciary once again fall victim to whims of the ruling elite.

Political Dynamics and Elite Manoeuvring

In the early days of the October Uprising, Lebanon's traditional political parties all sought to demonstrate empathy, if not support for the protestor's demands. In a strange political dance that seemed like something that belonged in the realm of political satire, the country's political leaders almost all expressed solidarity with protester demands that in reality they were the target of. As the days passed and tensions increased, parties such as the Future Movement, the Lebanese Forces, and Kataeb began to make more overt attempts to cynically jump on the protest bandwagon. At the same time, Hezbollah, Amal, and their allies were growing more openly hostile towards the protest movement, accusing them of being directed by 'foreign embassies'. The Lebanese Forces led by Samir Geagea, was at the forefront of seeking to ride the wave of popular anger in order to push their anti-Hezbollah agenda, becoming the first major party to withdraw from the unity government even prior to Prime Minister Hariri's resignation in November 2019. On October 19, 2019, Geagea withdrew his party's ministers from the government citing a "lack of will to reform" and called on his followers to join the protests, not as members of the LF, but as Lebanese citizens. [30] Kataeb, a Christian party perhaps best known for its involvement in civil-war era massacres of Palestinians, followed a similar strategy under the leadership of Sami Gemayel, scion of the Gemayel family and the son of the former president Amine Gemayel.

For their part, Hezbollah, Amal, and the Free Patriotic Movement all opposed Hariri's resignation, largely due to the fact that Hariri and his Future Movement, although ostensibly opposed to Hezbollah, had provided a cover of international legitimacy on the Lebanese government, effectively shielding Hezbollah from facing more direct international pressure. The Hezbollah-allied Free Patriotic Movement led by the Lebanese president Michel Aoun's son-in-law Gebran Bassil, echoed Hezbollah's sentiments that while protesters had legitimate concerns, they were ultimately compromised by a "fifth column" acting

on behalf of foreign interests.[31] Hezbollah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah gave statements that indicated sympathy with the protesters while also warning that the government's resignation would in actuality derail any potential reforms and ultimately destabilise the country.

Because political life in Lebanon has been so thoroughly dominated by sectarian political leadership, up until recently, there has been a serious lack of viable alternatives. This has repeatedly been demonstrated by the revolving door of former Prime Ministers in particular, from Saad Hariri, who suspended his political career in January 2022, to former PMs Najib Mikati and Minister Fouad Siniora, all have continued to exert significant influence on the country's political scene and on the Sunni community in particular. The October uprising and its aftermath has, however, challenged the ability of the political class to maintain their stranglehold on the country in unprecedented ways. The weaponization of sectarian identity that a number of observers have pointed to was only intensified as the economic situation in the country continued to deteriorate to unprecedented levels, following the historical trend in the country where elites have sought to transform socio-economic divisions into sectarian ones. Despite several notable clashes, the country has largely been spared from the type of violence that many have warned about. In fact, the spectre of civil conflict has been consistently used by political actors as a means of re-asserting their indispensability to the Lebanese political scene. While the sectarianism framework can be helpful in understanding these developments, it is also possible to see them in a broader framework of a counter-revolutionary response to the movement that emerged from the October 2019 uprising. There is a subtle point here, namely that sectarianization continues to be actively pursued by Lebanon's traditional political actors as means of ensuring their power and re-asserting traditional spheres of influence and authority in the face of the first movement to seriously challenge their power since the end of the Lebanese Civil War.

Geopolitics and the 'Axis of Resistance'

While the economic crisis and the October Uprising are primarily local affairs, in Lebanon it is all but impossible to escape the gravitational pull of regional geopolitical dynamics. These dynamics are not new to Lebanon per se, however, the ongoing crisis including the October Uprising and its aftermath has brought them into sharp contrast and arguably amplified their characteristics. Lebanon's history - both prior to and after the formation of the modern state - has been characterised in large part by a kind of global-local dynamic.[32] Its small, diverse population, historical precedent as well as current developments are demonstrative of the fact that political life in Lebanon is determined by a push and pull type of dynamic between local and regional/international concerns.

The legacy of the Cold War period looms large in this respect. It was during this time that the majority of states in the region that had been under colonial mandates achieved their independence. For its part, Lebanon acquired its formal independence from France in 1943 as France was under Nazi occupation. A post-colonial framework quickly came to dominate the political calculations of the newly independent states as each sought to address their particular economic, social, and political needs as they struggled to consolidate their independence. Both the United States and the Soviet Union saw this emerging Arab landscape as fertile ground upon which to compete for allies in an effort to gain the upper hand in the region. It was the convergence of the needs of the newly independent Arab countries for outside support, and the available supply of that support from the United States and Soviet Union, that largely shaped the geopolitical dynamics of the contemporary Middle East. However, it was the collapse of the Cold War order that arguably delivered the most potent geopolitical shock to the region, the consequences of which continue to be felt today.

A combination of former Soviet allies being forced to seek new formulas for legitimacy along with unchecked American power created

an imbalance in the region. One of the consequences of this was the emergence of the so-called ‘resistance block’ consisting of Iran, Syria and, in Lebanon’s case, Hezbollah, which positioned itself against the US and its regional allies. Lebanon’s diversity and its history of fractured politics meant that no party could attain a hegemonic position, and with the US, Saudi Arabia, and Iran and their patronising of their own partners in the country, Lebanon was destined to be caught up in the emergent rivalry. While this dynamic has not determined all political outcomes in Lebanon since, it has played a significant role and continues to do so. Since the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005, Lebanon has been politically divided into the March 14th camp - led by Saad Hariri’s Future Movement - and the March 8th camp led by Hezbollah. Broadly speaking, March 14th has historically enjoyed the patronage of France, the United States and Saudi Arabia, while March 8th has been more closely aligned with Syria and - via Hezbollah - Iran. In May 2008, as an 18 month long political crisis continued unabated, Hezbollah launched an attack on Sunni militiamen allied with the government following the government’s decision to dismantle Hezbollah’s autonomous communications system and the removal of the head of security at Beirut’s airport. Hezbollah scored a decisive military victory, but more importantly, with the signing of the Doha Accords in the aftermath of the incident, scored a significant political victory. The accords, mediated by the Qataris, effectively imposed the tradition of national unity cabinets as being the new norm in the country. Hezbollah now had a major stake in the preservation of the status quo in Lebanon.

This would prove to profoundly affect the counter-revolutionary response to the October Uprising. In the two years prior to the popular uprising in Lebanon, Hezbollah had been faced with what could be termed a ‘soft war’ led by the US as part of its ‘maximum pressure’ campaign against Iran and its allies in the region. In was this context that framed Hezbollah’s ultimate response to the uprising, albeit after initially voicing solidarity with the socio-economic grievances of the

protesters.[33] In subsequent speeches given on October 25th [34] and November 1st, the latter following on the heels of Saad Hariri's resignation, Hassan Nasrallah indicated that the protest movement had been infiltrated and was in fact engaged in subverting the geopolitical achievements of the resistance axis and that a political coup against Hezbollah and its allies was being attempted.[35] From this moment on, Hezbollah was largely able to dissuade their constituents from participating in the street protests not only served a security function (i.e. protecting their ranks from infiltration from hostile intelligence agencies, for example), but also, as articulated by Bassel Salloukh, to corral its followers back into a more controlled environment.[36] In Salloukh's words:

> The presence of some parts of Hezbollah's mujtama' al-muqawama (resistance society) in Martyr Square exposed the party and its supporters to security and political penetration. Nasrallah's demonization of the protests as part of a larger domestic and geopolitical coup, coupled with aggressive sectarian mobilisation, was thus meant to retrieve the party's 'street' from Martyr Square's open spaces back to the party's immune citadel and its controlled environment.[37]

In the midst of continued street demonstrations and a worsening economic crisis, Iranian Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani was assassinated in Iraq. Although in no way connected to events in Lebanon, this event served to further complicate an already complicated geopolitical dynamic in Lebanon. For its part, Hezbollah sought to leverage the assassination and its aftermath as a means of mobilizing in a way that it had hitherto been unable to through the course of Lebanon's now three-month old popular uprising. The fact that posters commemorating the 'martyr' Qassem Soleimani appeared across Hezbollah strongholds throughout the country provided an indication as to the extent they sought to capitalise from the incident. In effect, Soleimani's assassination facilitated a re-establishing of

the party's core political identity, namely their central role in the so-called 'Axis of Resistance'. This served to ensure the focus of their core supporters remained on the wider regional picture and not merely on the deteriorating domestic situation. In effect, this provided further space for Hezbollah to sacrifice the popular demands of the protest movement for the sake of geopolitics. Thus, in a somewhat ironic twist of fate, the assassination of the head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp's Quds Force served as a counter-revolutionary rallying point in Lebanon in the name of safeguarding the project of the so-called 'Axis of Resistance'.

Situating the 'October Revolution'

Situating what its protagonists have come to refer to as the 'October Revolution' in the wider context of the Arab Spring requires an expanded understanding of the phenomenon beyond the linearity of the narrative that framed the Arab Spring as the struggle of democratic aspirants against tyranny. Revolutions and uprisings are complex social and political phenomena. Relatedly, the motivations and stimulants behind the various uprisings that have broken out across much of the Arab world since 2011 are multifaceted. As Cammett and Diwan have argued, while political concerns such as outrage towards dictatorial rule, repression, and restrictions on basic liberties were certainly factors in many of the uprisings, socio-economic issues were arguably much more salient.[38] This is particularly true in Lebanon's case. Unlike most regional states, Lebanon has a long-standing tradition of democratic practices. Moreover, the confessional makeup and political culture of the country is such that the establishment of one party or one-man rule is all but impossible. However, years of what can only be described as institutionalised corruption, graft, and fragmentation of state power in the years following the Lebanese civil war that is at least partly attributable the agreed upon political structure set up after the war and culminating in the current economic and financial collapse engendered a response among many Lebanese calling for the

ruling class to be held accountable. The more we are able to look back on the last decade in the region, the more it becomes apparent that underlying socio-economic concerns represent the fuel on which the various revolutions and uprisings relied. As far back as 2005, a poll conducted by Zogby International found that increasing employment opportunities, improving access to basic services, ending endemic corruption and graft, were the most important priorities for people across the region.[39] Democracy and human rights-related concerns were also referenced, however, they ranked significantly lower than socio-economic concerns.[40] In the intervening years, multiple surveys have effectively repeated these results, unsurprising given that the pauperization of much of the population has accelerated at alarming rates across much of the region in the course of the last decade in particular.

In Lebanon, the absence of a dictatorial regime and the existence of an active, albeit highly dysfunctional parliamentary system, has meant that public expressions of discontent against the ruling elite have more often than expressed concerns belonging to the latter category. In fact, as Wälisch and Felsch have pointed out, Lebanon's relative stability and record of respecting basic rights relative to other Arab states have contributed to the postponement of reforms including the promulgation of a new electoral law, economic reforms and the improvement of public healthcare and other state-building initiatives.[41] While the unprecedented economic crisis has brought many of these issues back to the forefront, Lebanon's political leaders have repeatedly avoided committing to any serious plan to bring the country out of its current crisis.

The outbreak of protests in October 2019 were largely framed in the international media as being in response to a proposed tax on the widely used messaging service WhatsApp, which would have cost around $6 per month per user. While this may have represented the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back, there were other both immediate

and deeper structural issues that precipitated what was to become an unprecedented popular mobilisation in the country. In September 2019, Lebanese banks began unofficially restricting access to US dollar current accounts following reports of dollar liquidity issues in the country. Out of this, an unprecedented crisis of confidence in the country's banking sector began to emerge on levels not seen even during the country's civil war from 1975-1990. The resulting impact on the daily lives of Lebanese from across the sectarian spectrum resulted in increasingly public and even violent attacks on the country's financial institutions. Other immediate sources of anger in the lead up to the protests included the revelation, in the midst of the country's worst wildfires in decades, that three helicopters donated by the European Union specifically to fight wildfires were kept grounded because they had not been properly maintained despite the provision of budget allocations. This only served to highlight the systematic graft and corruption that has permeated so many of the country's institutions and acted to galvanise the growing frustration of significant portions of the population against the ruling political class.

Concluding Remarks: The Road Ahead

If there is one agreed upon outcome that emerged out of the October uprising, it is that sectarian identities, although ever-present in the country, remain fluid as they have been throughout history. However, there continues to be significant social and legal barriers to overcoming sectarian identities as the primary political category in the country. According to Rima Majed, Professor of Sociology at the American University of Beirut, what she calls 'social sectarianism' is the product of a sectarianism that is both deeply political and legal. [42] In this perspective, citizenship in Lebanon is merely formal. In reality, Lebanese citizens deal with the state as members of sectarian communities. This is an aspect of Lebanese society that veils other types of divisions, namely those of a socio-political nature.

Since the late Ottoman period, there have been at least four shifts in the country's sectarian orientations.[43] During the Ottoman *Mutassarif*, political identities came to be constructed around a Druze-Maronite dichotomy. Since the emergence of 'Greater Lebanon' under the French mandate in 1923, the country has seen the dominant sectarian dichotomies shift from Sunni-Maronite and Christian-Muslim to the Sunni-Shia dichotomy that predominates today. This should serve as a lesson to the international community, in particular, in the sense that any political prescriptions meant to address the country's deeply rooted problems should not be based on the logic of sectarianism as some sort of primordial identity. This is not to say that sectarian identities are simply there to be exploited, but rather that seeing the country through the lens of an essentialized sectarianism will only lead to distorted outcomes. As observed by Shadi Hamid:

> There is a temporal problem with the 'ancient hatreds' thesis […] If there is something constant about a culture and its predisposition to violence, then how can we explain stark variations in civil conflict over short periods of time.[44]

This is a view that is increasingly supported by a growing number of academics, namely that thinking about and devising political systems based on this sectarian logic is absurd, and ultimately serves to perpetuate the problems that have resulted from it in the first place. This is not to say that a complete dismantling overnight of the sectarian system in Lebanon is likely or even desirable, but rather that it is only by approaching the problems of the country through an approach that transcends sectarian identities while not ignoring them altogether, that the established political class will even begin to be dislodged.

Endnotes

[1] See: Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in 19th Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

[2] See: Michael Kerr and Are Knudsen, "Introduction: The Cedar Revolution and Beyond" in *Lebanon: After the Cedar Revolution,* edited by Michael Kerr and Are Knudsen (London: Hurst, 2012).

[3] Laïque Pride is a Lebanese secularist group that advocates for secularism to be the organising principle of Lebanese society. The group advocates for "equality among all Lebanese citizens and the separation of religion and politics" and is opposed to Lebanon's official confessionalism.

[4] Since the start of the civil war in Syria, there have been sporadic clashes in Lebanon's northern city of Tripoli. The majority Sunni and long-neglected city witnessed numerous clashes between young men from the largely poor and Sunni Bab al-Tabbaneh neighbourhood and the largely Alawi district of Jabal Mohsen. Although the conflict predates the war in Syria, the conflict across the border from Lebanon's second most populous city has contributed to an exacerbation of existing tensions.

[5] See: Marwan M. Kraidy, "Trashing the Sectarian System? Lebanon's "You Stink" Movement and the Making of Affective Publics." *Communication and the Public* 1, no. 1 (2016): 19-26.

[6] See: Michael Arnold, "Lebanon's Political Class Still Can't Grasp the Country's New Reality," *TRT World*, November 15, 2019. Retrieved from: https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/lebanon-s-political-class-still-can-t-grasp-the-country-s-new-reality-31397

[7] World Bank, *Lebanon Economic Monitor, fall 2021: The Great Denial,* (Washington DC: World Bank, 2022). retrieved from: https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/36862.

[8] For a more thorough discussion on sectarianism and sectarianization

in the Middle East see: Nader Hashemi & Danny Postal (Eds.), *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2017).

[9] See: Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism;* and Bruce Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[10] James L. Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East: A History* (4th Edition) (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 98.

[11] Presidency of the Republic of Lebanon, *The National Accord Document – The Taef Agreement*, retrieved from: https://www.presidency.gov.lb/Arabic/LebaneseSystem/Documents/TaefAgreementEn.pdf

[12] Michael Arnold, "How sectarian politics overshadow Lebanon's anti-establishment protests", *TRT World*, December 25th, 2019. Retrieved from: https://www.trtworld.com/perspectives/how-sectarian-politics-overshadow-lebanon-s-anti-establishment-protests-32474.

[13] Author Interview with Bassel Salloukh conducted in November 2019.

[14] Lebanon officially recognizes 18 sects. The formal representatives of these sects have a variety of official powers by virtue of their relationship with the state. This includes Sunnis, Shi'ites, Druze, Alawites, and Ismailis, as well as the Maronites and 11 other Christian sects as well as the Jewish community. For more on the historical background of the making of Lebanon's official religious institutions, see: Alexander D. M. Henley, "Remaking the Mosaic: Religious Leaders and Secular Borders in the Colonial Levant", *Religion and Society*, Volume 6, Issue 1 (2015): 155-168.

[15] Bassam Mroue and Hassan Ammar, "Lebanon Protests Receive Backing of Religious Leaders", *Associated Press*, October 23, 2019. Retrieved from: https://apnews.com/article/6ae1f3664f1b45c39b3833fa3e9b9c7a.

[16] See: Alexander D. M. Henley, "Religious Authority and Sectarianism in Lebanon", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 2016. Retrieved from: https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/12/16/religious-authority-and-sectarianism-in-lebanon-pub-66487/

[17] Ibid., p. 15.

[18] Ibid., p. 17.

[19] Author Interview conducted with Bassel Salloukh in November 2019.

[20] Although no official census has been carried out since 1932, a recent attempt to track demographic changes in the country by Information International, an independent research and consultancy firm based in Beirut, reports that Christians as a whole make up 30.6% of the Lebanese population, while Muslims (including members of the Druze community) make up 69.4% of the population. 31.6% of the total population were reported to belong to the Shi'a sect, followed closely by Sunnis at 31.3% and Christians (inclusive of all sects) at 30.6%. These numbers provide context as to why no census has been carried out in seven decades. Current parliamentary allocations, which allocate an equal share of seats to Christians and Muslims, are premised on a near-equal proportional share of the overall population.

[21] Author interview conducted with Rima Majed in November, 2019.

[22] Bassel Salloukh, "You can't imagine a more perfect storm", *The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies*, April 1st, 2020. Retrieved from: https://www.lcps-lebanon.org/articles/details/1790/you-can't-imagine-a-more-perfect-storm.

[23] List of core demands taken from author interviews conducted with activists between November 25th and December 4th, 2019.

[24] Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, *Main Demands of the Lebanese October Uprising* (2019). Retrieved from: https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/news/PublishingImages/20191112-demands-english.jpg

[25] See: Michael Arnold, "Why Lebanese protesters have turned their anger on the banks", *TRT World*, January 23, 2020. Retrieved from: https://www.trtworld.com/perspectives/why-lebanese-protesters-have-turned-their-anger-on-the-banks-33179.

[26] Nour Abdul Reda, "Everything You Should Know About the New Head of Beirut Bar Association Melhem Khalaf", *The 961*, November 18, 2019. Retrieved from: https://www.the961.com/head-of-beirut-bar-association-melhem-khalaf/.

[27] Mohamad El Chamaa, "Candidate said to be backed by Future, FPM, Amal elected president of Beirut Bar Association", *L'Orient Today*, November 21, 2021. Retrieved from: https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1282280/lawyers-elect-nine-new-members-all-from-traditional-political-blocs-to-beirut-bar-association-council.html.

[28] The National, "Lebanon election results 2022 in full: which candidates and parties won?", *The National*, May 17, 2022. Retrieved from: https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/lebanon/2022/05/17/lebanon-election-results-2022-in-full-which-candidates-and-parties-won/.

[29] Sara Dadouch and Nader Durgham, "Day-long firefight racks Beirut, evoking memories of Lebanon's civil war",*The Washington Post,* October 14, 2021. Retrieved from: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/beirut-protest-shots-dead-blast-probe/2021/10/14/7d5c1f2c-2cca-11ec-b17d-985c186de338_story.html.

[30] Press conference of Samir Geagea. (2019, 19 October). *Al Arabiya* (Arabic).

[31] Press conference of Jibran Bassil. (18 October 2019). *eXtra News* (Arabic).

[32] For an in-depth exploration of this dynamic through the history of Lebanon see: Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1988).

[33] This was expressed by Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah in a speech on October 19, 2019. The Arabic text of the speech can be found here: https://almanar.com.lb/5851100.

[34] The Arabic text of the speech can be found at: https://almanar.com.lb/5876433.

[35] The Arabic text of the speech can be found at: https://almanar.com.lb/5905506.

[36] Bassel Salloukh, "The Sectarian Image Reversed: The Role of Geopolitics in Hezbollah's Domestic Politics", *Project on Middle East Political Science*, 2019. Retrieved from: https://pomeps.org/the-sectarian-image-reversed-the-role-of-geopolitics-in-hezbollahs-domestic-politics#_edn21.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Melani Cammett and Ishac Diwan, *The Political Economy of the Arab Uprisings* (New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 6.

[39] Zogby International, *Attitudes of Arabs: An In-Depth Look at Social and Political Concerns of Arabs*(Washington DC: Arab American Institute, 2005).

[40] Ibid.

[41] See: Maximilian Felsch and Martin Wählisch, "Introduction - Lebanon and the Arab Uprisings: In the Eye of the Hurricane", in *Lebanon and the Arab Uprisings: In the Eye of the Hurricane,* edited by Maximilian Felsch and Martin Wählisch (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 1-19.

[42] Author interview with Rima Majed conducted in November 2019.

[43] Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism.*

[44] Shadi Hamid, "The End of Pluralism", *The Atlantic*, July 23, 2014. Retrieved from: https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/07/the-end-of-pluralism/374875/.

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Chapter 11

Regional reactions to the Arab Uprisings: Evidence from the Balkans

Idlir Lika

Introduction

The Balkans provide an interesting empirical setting to observe variation in the reaction of regional countries to the Arab Uprisings and to probe the causes behind the variation. As a sub-region within the broader Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), a geographical space that for almost five decades was under authoritarian/totalitarian one-party communist regimes and that only relatively recently transitioned to democracy, Balkan countries should normally be expected to show at least rhetorical support for the revolutionary changes in the Arab world since 2011 and for the democratic aspirations of the Arab people. Indeed, as noted by Mikulova and Berti (2013, p. 4), the Arab Uprisings "opened the door to a vital new target region for Central and Eastern European democracy support." Moreover, given that all Balkan countries, with the notable exception of Serbia and its client entity within the Bosnian Federation, are firmly Western-oriented [1], one again should have expected Balkan elites to follow the foreign policy line of Brussels and Washington that initially embraced and supported the popular demonstrations and calls for regime change in the Arab world. Yet, the governments in Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia largely ignored the Arab Uprisings and did not articulate an official public stance towards them.

Only Bulgaria and Kosovo did articulate a clear-cut position, went to great lengths to rhetorically support the popular demonstrations, subsequently developed close diplomatic relations with the post-uprising governments in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, and politically supported the armed Syrian opposition against the Assad regime. Why were Bulgaria and Kosovo different from the rest? Relatedly, Bulgaria and Kosovo

themselves differ in a number of important aspects - Bulgaria has a long-established state tradition, is an Orthodox-majority country with a large Muslim/Turkish minority and is both a NATO and EU member, whereas Kosovo is the youngest state in Europe, is a Sunni Muslim-majority country with a significant Orthodox minority, and is neither a NATO nor an EU member – yet both countries showed a similar/comparable level of rhetorical and diplomatic support for the Arab Uprisings. What made Bulgaria and Kosovo similar in this respect?

The chapter proceeds as follows. It first tries to account for the neutral stances towards the uprisings from Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. It then analyzes separately the cases of Bulgaria and Kosovo and explains why they followed a totally different trajectory. The concluding section draws some general points concerning the foreign policy roles of Balkan countries in light of their reactions to the Arab Uprisings.

Neutral Stances in the Western Balkans

By early 2011, Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia all shared a crucial background condition that might explain their neutral stances towards the Arab Uprisings. As mass protests forced the hands of the militaries to depose the autocrats in Tunisia and Egypt (January – February 2011) and as the popular uprisings in Libya and Syria quickly descended into brutal civil wars (post-March 2011), all the four aforementioned Balkan countries were either themselves experiencing massive anti-government protests or there was large popular disapproval of incumbent governments, which were being accused of being corrupt and criminal to being outright authoritarian (Bieber 2020). The Arab Uprisings in a sense had reinforced the emergence of a global trend against authoritarianism, democratic backsliding, and the ills of economic globalisation that had started with the anti-austerity demonstrations in several EU members in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis (Voice of America 2011). In that respect, the incumbent elites in Belgrade, Podgorica, Skopje, and Tirana might

have feared the implications of the revolutionary upheavals in the Arab world for the preservations of their own power and that may be the reason why they had a neutral stance towards the uprisings.

Serbia provides perhaps the clearest example to illustrate the argument above. Since 2008, the country had been ruled by a pro-EU coalition government led by the centre-left Democratic Party of Serbia (DP), the same party that ousted Milosevic in October 2000. President Boris Tadic is arguably the most pro-Western president post-Milosevic Serbia has had. Yet, starting from February 5, 2011, a date when the anti-Mubarak uprising in Egypt was in full swing, Belgrade was rocked with massive anti-government protests organised by the Serbian opposition, calling for early parliamentary elections amid a worsening economic crisis in the country (Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty 2011). What is important for the argument here is that the then-Serbian opposition, among other factors, made a clear reference to the popular protests taking place in Egypt to boost their demands. "Elsewhere in the world people are telling governments they should listen to the people", averred Tomislav Nikolic, leader of the main opposition Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) (AlJazeera 2011). What is somewhat striking is that the SNS elites, who used the protests against authoritarianism in Egypt as an example, were former allies of Slobodan Milosevic during the 1990s, and SNS itself was founded in 2008 after it split from the Serbian Radical Party, the party led by the convicted war criminal Vojislav Seselj.

Eventually, the SNS managed to win both the parliamentary and presidential elections of May 2012 and is currently still in power. However, upon assuming power, the SNS government preserved its largely neutral stance towards events in the Arab world – it did not forge close relations with the post-uprising democratic governments in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, and in the case of the ongoing civil war in Syria, Belgrade steered clear of identifying with any of the warring sides. In a sense, this is somewhat puzzling, since Kosovo, as I am going to elaborate on further below, developed particularly warm relations

with revolutionary forces in the Arab world. Given this, one would have expected Serbia to be closer to the counter-revolutionary forces. However, officially at least, this was not the case. Belgrade's official neutral stance under successive SNS administrations might be explained by the fact that the SNS and President Aleksandar Vucic, unlike the DP and Boris Tadic, followed a much more balanced approach in foreign policy trying to play Russia and the West off against each other (On Serbia's foreign policy under Vucic see Bechev 2017, pp. 51-86). The only clear instances in which Belgrade semi-officially supported one of the counter-revolutionary forces in the Arab world, namely the Assad regime in Syria, were in April 2018 when the Vucic government opposed the U.S.-led strikes against Syria's suspected chemical weapons facilities, strikes that revived memories of the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia (Balkan Insight 2018). Second, and most controversially, in June 2019 an official delegation of the Serbian Orthodox Church paid a visit to Assad in Damascus, praising "the principled and firm support" of the Assad regime in backing Serbia with regard to Kosovo [2] (TRT World 2019). Through this visit, Belgrade semi-officially condoned the Assad regime's (and Russian and Iranian) propagandist discourse that the Syrian civil war is an attempt by foreign/Western-backed terrorists to unseat the legitimate Syrian government (On the Assad regime's official discourse see Gelvin 2015, p. 129). Indeed, Belgrade's official discourse towards Kosovo's independence is almost identical: an illegitimate act of terrorists supported by NATO / the West. Other than these two instances, Serbia's official stance towards events in the Middle East, in general, has been neutrality. As President Vucic himself put it in 2018, "Our policy of military neutrality, which the state of Serbia has established, is [because] we understand our place in the world, we are a small nation, we have to talk to everyone, to have partnerships with everyone" (Balkan Insight 2018).

Turning to the three other Balkan countries which initially also displayed neutrality, developments in Albania, firstly, followed a similar trajectory to those in Serbia. On January 21, 2011, a date when Ben Ali

had already been deposed in Tunisia and protests were about to begin in Egypt, the incumbent centre-right Democratic Party of Prime Minister Sali Berisha was facing massive anti-government protests organised by the opposition Socialist Party of Edi Rama over corruption and fraud scandals. Unlike Serbia, though, here the protests turned violent as three protesters were killed by the police forces (BBC News 2011). Notably, the opposition party led by Rama did not make any reference to the events occurring simultaneously in the Arab world to boost the demands for government change. In brief, fearing the implications of even rhetorically supporting the Arab Uprisings for preserving power, Berisha saw it opportune to simply ignore them. The Berisha government survived for two more years and was eventually unseated following the parliamentary elections of June 2013. The new Rama-led Socialist government then closely followed the Western policy line concerning subsequent developments in the Arab world. For instance, Tirana did not characterise the military dictatorship that overthrew the first elected Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi in July 2013 as a coup. Likewise, Tirana was quick to throw its rhetorical and moral support behind the U.S. – led strikes against Syria's suspected chemical weapons facilities in April 2018. "We support our allies and the determination of President Trump for the protection of people's lives, human rights, and any action which not only punishes barbarous acts but also creates more security and stability all over the world", averred Albanian President Ilir Meta (Balkan Insight 2018).

Montenegro was also facing anti-government demonstrations by March 2011. The Montenegrin setting was arguably unique, though, as the then incumbent Democratic Party of Socialists led by Milo Djukanovic (the communist successor party) had been ruling uninterruptedly since 1990 and was unseated only very recently following the August 2020 parliamentary elections (Lika 2021, p. 14). Unsurprisingly then, the ruling elite in Podgorica has been almost totally silent concerning the Arab Uprisings. Lastly, in North Macedonia, the opposition Social Democratic Union (SDSM) had been boycotting the parliament from

January to May 2011 (the four critical months during which dramatic events were unfolding in the Arab world) over alleged corruption, criminality and, on top of it all, over a new exclusionary nation-building narrative [3] that the then-incumbent VMRO government of Nikola Gruevski had been implementing since 2008 (Lika 2021, p. 18; Aktürk and Lika 2020, p. 16). The Gruevski regime somehow survived for two subsequent electoral cycles (June 2011 and April 2014) but opposition to his policies, societal polarisation and inter-ethnic tensions in the country only worsened. Similar to the Montenegrin case, the ruling political elites in Skopje were almost totally silent concerning the Arab Uprisings for fear of potential domestic repercussions. Indeed, Erdoğan Saraç, an MP of Turkish descent in the Macedonian parliament from 2011 to 2014, claims that during his mandate the question of the dramatic events occurring in the Arab world was not raised even once in parliament. Saraç also opines that the Gruevski regime's generally friendly relations with Russia might have affected Skopje's neutral stance towards the Arab Uprisings [4].

Bulgaria: the EU's Interlocutor with the Arab World

Diametrically opposed to the stance of the four Western Balkans nations described above, Bulgaria followed a very active and assertive foreign policy towards the Arab Uprisings by not only rhetorically supporting the revolutionary forces, but also by forging particularly close relations with post-uprising democratic governments in Tunisia, Libya, and to a lesser extent Egypt, and by diplomatically supporting the moderate armed Syrian opposition fighting against the Assad regime in Syria. It bears emphasis, though, that this foreign policy activism and assertiveness was strictly channelled through Brussels and Washington. Still, what made Bulgaria different?

To begin with, unlike the political situation in the Western Balkans, by the time popular protests began in Tunisia and quickly spread to Egypt and Libya, Bulgaria was not facing political instability or anti-government protests. On the contrary, since July 2009 Bulgaria was

ruled by the single-party GERB (Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria) government of Prime Minister Boyko Borisov. At the time GERB was a brand new political formation that had been elected on an assertive anti-corruption and rule of law platform (BBC News 2009). Thus, the Arab Uprisings provided a good opportunity for GERB to publicise and boost its pro-democratic agenda externally. Second, and most importantly, Bulgaria had a rich history of relations and economic interactions with several Arab states that during the Cold War had been governed through variants of Arab socialism: Algeria, Egypt (under Nasser), Iraq, Libya, Syria, and (south) Yemen. Indeed, among the former communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, Bulgaria had arguably the closest relations with the socialist Arab countries, mainly because it was the most obedient Soviet satellite [5], but also due to its geographical proximity to the Mediterranean Arab states. While arms sales were the most prominent aspect of Bulgaria's interactions with the socialist Arab states (Stankova 2013, p. 111), Sofia also admitted a large number of Arab students to universities, institutes, and military schools as part of its policy of "socialist solidarity with the fraternal people" (Zhelyazkova 2004, p. 29). Many of the Arab students remained in Bulgaria and today they constitute the bulk of the estimated 35,000-strong Arab diaspora community (the majority of whom are Syrian) that hold Bulgarian citizenship (Zhelyazkova 2004, p. 10). Once Bulgarian foreign policy shifted entirely from Moscow to Brussels and Washington with the end of the Cold War (Katsikas 2011), Sofia's potential to act as an interlocutor with the Arab world could now be harnessed for the benefit of the EU and the U.S. The Arab Uprisings provided a window of opportunity to harness such potential [6].

In light of the preceding discussion, it is not surprising that in April 2011, the EU sent the then-Bulgarian Foreign Minister Nikolay Mladenov [7] (GERB) as its special envoy to Syria and Yemen to act as a mediator between the regime and opposition forces in the very early stages of the civil wars (Radio Bulgaria 2011). As Mladenov's calls for an immediate stop to violence and for a negotiated solution

to the crises came to nothing, Western-backed Bulgaria shifted course. One month later, in May 2011, Mladenov spearheaded the founding of "Sofia Platform" [8], a high-level policy forum holding regular meetings with revolutionary leaders across the Arab world, with the attendance of several EU Foreign Ministers and UN Secretary-General Ban-ki Moon, that aimed to discuss and promote regime transitions in the Arab world based on the experience of Central and Eastern European democracies (Bechev 2013a, p. 202). For instance, for the post-uprising transitions in Tunisia and Egypt, Mladenov highly publicized and recommended Bulgaria's model of "roundtable" talks [9] whereby the incumbent communist party and the anti-communist opposition in 1990 had succeeded in containing the escalating inter-ethnic tensions and in paving the way for a smooth political transition (Brookings Institution 2013). The founding of the "Sofia Platform" denoted that Bulgaria had moved past expressions of mere rhetorical and moral support for Arab revolutionaries to provide concrete institutional support. In that respect, Mladenov's rhetoric during the February 2011 demonstrations in Cairo's Tahrir Square urging Europe to "support Egypt on the road to reforms and change in the name of a greater participation of society" became somehow institutionally grounded with the "Sofia Platform" (Mikulova and Berti 2013, p. 9).

Subsequently, in February 2012, Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov became the first EU head of government to visit Tunisia following the ousting of Ben Ali in January 2011, even offering technical assistance to Tunisia in its efforts to draft a new constitution (Novinite 2012). In Tunis, Borisov also opened the "Tunisian School of Government", a civic organisation in the area of political education for democratic transitions, and appointed Zheliu Zhelev as Bulgaria's special envoy [10]. Sofia's outreach to post-uprising Tunisia was followed by the official visits of Mladenov to both Cairo and Tripoli, where he reiterated Bulgaria's and the EU's support for the popularly elected governments [11].

Yet, Bulgaria's most assertive, and perhaps also most controversial, role during the Arab Uprisings were in the support given to the moderate armed Syrian opposition in its fight against the Assad regime. In this respect, in late May 2012, in the wake of the Houla massacre, Mladenov hosted in Sofia a meeting of different armed opposition groups affiliated with the moderate Free Syrian Army (FSA), with the aim of improving coordination between them as well as to urge the international community to take "a more active intervention for ending violence" (Bulgarian Helsinki Committee 2012). The explanation Mladenov gave for organising the meeting deserves emphasis:

> We cannot continue to stand idle and see these massacres continue. All those who have been involved must understand that they will be prosecuted and judged for their deeds […] It [Bulgaria] has a strong connection to the people in Syria. Bulgarians and Syrians have lived and studied together for many years, many of them studied in each other's countries, we have a long history of cooperation. We also want to provide not just support to those who want to build a new free and democratic Syria, but also to share the experience which we have from our own transition, the challenges that we have faced here so that we can help our friends move forward. (Deutsche Welle 2012b)

What is less known is that such meetings were convened also to coordinate the CIA's and Gulf countries' covert programme of supplying weapons to armed opposition groups in Syria. Bulgaria played a critical role in this organisation due to its enormous Soviet-style weapons industry and due to its geographical proximity to Syria. Recent investigative reports by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), a network of local NGOs, has revealed that from 2012 to 2015, the United States, United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Saudi Arabia bought more than € 400 million worth of Soviet-style weapons and ammunitions from Bulgaria

"for use by local forces they support in the war in Syria, and possibly also the conflict in Yemen" (Petkova 2015). The same reports reveal also that in addition to Bulgaria, Bosnia, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Romania (all former communist countries) sold large quantities of weapons to be used in war-torn Syria – a lucrative arms trade estimated altogether to be worth € 1.2 billion (The Guardian 2016; Deutsche Welle 2016; Balkan Insight 2016). Needless to say, such an enormous weapons supply programme was in breach of the arms embargo that the EU had imposed on Syria from May 2011 to May 2013. Through this programme, Bulgaria essentially resumed its old lucrative arms business with Middle Eastern states.

When on July 18, 2012, a suicide bomber killed seven people on a bus transporting Israeli tourists outside the Burgas Airport in Bulgaria [12], the incumbent GERB government and especially Foreign Minister Mladenov came under heavy fire domestically by the opposition Socialist Party (BSP) and by the far-right, xenophobic Ataka party on the grounds that Bulgaria's heavy involvement in the Middle East had turned the country into a target of international terrorism (Bechev 2013b). Although not expressed openly, the Russian-friendly BSP was not happy with the support the government was giving the anti-Assad armed factions in Syria [13]. It would be inaccurate, though, to conclude from all that was said that Bulgaria, for all its activism, was following an independent and ambitious policy towards the Arab Uprisings. As already stated at the beginning of this section, Bulgaria's activism and assertiveness were strictly channelled through Brussels and Washington. Sofia never followed a foreign policy line that contradicted that of its two geopolitical allies. Two additional examples prove this point. First, for all its heavy pro-democracy rhetoric during the Arab Uprisings, Bulgaria refrained from labelling the military dictatorship that overthrew Morsi in July 2013 as a coup [14], subscribing instead to the view held in Brussels and Washington that the alleged illiberalism of President Morsi was a greater evil than the military dictatorship that replaced him (for the U.S. reaction to the coup in Egypt in comparative

perspective see Yegin 2016, pp. 413-4). Since then, Sofia has had normal diplomatic and economic relations with the al-Sisi regime. Second, once the Obama Administration ended the covert weapon supply programme to the FSA in 2014 (alleging that the weapons were falling into the hands of the extremist groups) and ruled out regime change as the U.S. goal in Syria in favour of supporting the Kurdish PYD / YPG in the fight against ISIS (Gelvin 2015, p. 143), Bulgaria also scaled back its pro-opposition rhetoric and its arms sales to the Middle East were substantially reduced. In brief, Sofia was mostly a follower during the Arab Uprisings, and its potential to act as an interlocutor with the Arab world was harnessed by both the EU and the U.S.

Kosovo: The Assertive Newborn

Kosovo's foreign policy role during the Arab Uprisings was very similar to that of Bulgaria and diametrically opposed to that of its Western Balkans neighbours. Kosovo was quick to throw its rhetorical support behind the popular protests in the Arab countries, forged close diplomatic relations with the post-uprising elected governments in Egypt and Libya, politically supported the armed Syrian opposition and called for Western military intervention to overthrow the Assad regime. At first sight, such foreign policy activism might appear puzzling for a nation which was the newest and poorest in Europe - having declared independence from Serbia only three years before the Arab Uprisings began - was neither a NATO nor an EU member, and unlike Bulgaria, had no history of interactions with Arab states. However, it was precisely Kosovo's recent experience of having waged a revolutionary war against the dictatorship of Slobodan Milosevic and Kosovo's need for external recognition of its independence that pushed the country to undertake such an active foreign policy towards the Arab Uprisings. As in the Bulgarian case, though, such activism strictly followed the line of the U.S., Kosovo's main geopolitical ally and the most powerful promoter of Kosovo's independence internationally.

Unlike its neighbours who were all experiencing political instability and massive anti-government protests, Kosovo had just elected a new government when the Arab Uprisings began in January 2011. The new coalition government led by the centre-right Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) of Prime Minister Hashim Thaçi (a former Kosovo Liberation Army commander) was somehow similar to GERB in Bulgaria in having been elected on an anti-corruption and rule of law platform. Similar to GERB again, the Thaçi government was quick to voice its support for the popular uprisings that began in the Arab world. The greatest diplomatic asset Kosovo had in this respect was that it drew parallels between the struggle of Arab people against authoritarianism and its own recent armed struggle against Milosevic's dictatorship in Serbia. As the then-Kosovo Foreign Minister Enver Hoxhaj [15] explicitly stated: "We were among the first governments in Europe who were supporting the opposition in Libya and in other Arab countries last year because we were fighting for the same aspirations, for the same values" (Reuters 2012). The ruling elite in Pristina strongly supported the UN Security Council-authorised NATO military intervention against Qaddafi in Libya (March 2011) and by April 2012, Foreign Minister Hoxhaj received a delegation from the moderate Syrian armed opposition in Pristina (Radio Evropa e Lire 2012). While Hoxhaj reiterated Kosovo's strong political support for the "re-building of a democratic Syria", opposition representatives promised that once the Assad regime was overthrown, Syria's recognition of the independence of Kosovo would be a priority for the new democratic regime (Radio Evropa e Lire 2012).

All this evoked a strong response from Russia, whose UN Ambassador Vitaly Churkin warned the Security Council that Kosovo was becoming a "training centre for rebels", allegations that Hoxhaj dismissed (Deutsche Welle 2012a). Kosovo's political support for the Syrian opposition reached its peak with an article minister Hoxhaj published in *Foreign Policy* in August 2013, in the wake of the horrendous chemical attack by regime forces in Ghouta, where he called for Western military

intervention to overthrow the Assad regime just as NATO had bombed Serbia in 1999. In this article carefully titled "It's 1999 in Syria", Enver Hoxhaj (2013) argued:

> The U.N. Security Council has stood idly by as more than 100,000 people have perished in Syria since 2011. Kosovars know all too well the cost in human lives brought by such a wait-and-see approach […] The NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999 serves as a model for our allies in the West and the Arab world to end Syrian suffering. The intervention in Kosovo also affirmed that, even without the mandate of the U.N. Security Council, countries should act to prevent regimes from abusing human rights … My country, though small and young, is poised to help in the days and years after Assad's regime falls. We can use our recent and successful experience building our own state to help the Syrians rebuild theirs. That is what Kosovo can offer […] Syrians deserve to live in a peaceful and democratic Syria. My country is ready to help, but first, we need the international community to do what they did for us 14 years ago — mobilise political will and military might to bring down the regime of a brutal thug.

As in the Bulgarian case, though, all this heavy rhetoric and moral support did not serve much since Kosovo eventually scaled back its support when the official policy of Washington towards Syria changed in 2014. The same pattern was also observed in the particularly warm relations Pristina initially forged with the short-lived Morsi government in Egypt. To be sure, Kosovo had one major goal in its outreach to the post-uprising elected governments in the Arab world: recognition of its independence. It is very significant to point out that *before* the Arab Uprisings began in January 2011, *none* of the Mediterranean Sunni-majority Arab states (Syria, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and

Morocco) had recognized the independence of Sunni-majority Kosovo. By contrast, all the Gulf Arab states, with the exception of Iraq and Yemen, had recognized Kosovo [16]. The non-recognition from Hosni Mubarak's Egypt and Ali Abdullah Saleh's Yemen (also from Qaddafi's Libya to a lesser extent) is particularly puzzling and it contradicts recent findings in the literature (Siroky et al. 2020) because they were staunch regional allies of the U.S. It was only, very significantly, *after* the autocrats were overthrown in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen that each of the post-uprising governments in these countries recognized Kosovo [17]. Among the countries that underwent transition during the Arab Uprisings, only Tunisia did not (and still does not) recognize Kosovo's independence.

The case of Egypt is particularly instructive. As already stated, Pristina initially forged warm relations with the Muslim Brotherhood government led by Morsi. Kosovo's Prime Minister Hashim Thaçi on February 6, 2013, even paid an official visit to President Morsi in Cairo, pleading for Egypt's recognition of Kosovo (The Prime Minister Office 2013). Four months after this meeting, the Morsi government did recognize Kosovo on June 27, 2013, however, only six days later (July 3, 2013) Morsi was overthrown in a bloody military coup. The al-Sisi regime did not revoke the recognition of Kosovo's independence and the ruling elite in Pristina, closely following Washington's line, refrained from labelling the overthrow of Morsi as a coup and eventually established normal diplomatic relations with the new military regime in Cairo. In brief, during the Arab Uprisings, Kosovo, even more than Bulgaria, was a classic follower in foreign policy despite all the activism it showed.

Conclusion

This chapter analysed the different reactions that the Arab Uprisings evoked in the Balkan countries. It empirically showed how political instability and massive anti-government protests in Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia during the same time that the Uprisings were taking place led the ruling elites in these countries to

adopt a neutral stance towards the events in the Arab world. Bulgaria and Kosovo, by contrast, followed a completely different course by actively supporting the democratic aspirations of the Arab people, by forging close relations with post-uprising governments in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia, and by diplomatically supporting the armed Syrian opposition. Bulgaria took advantage of its past close relations with the Arab world and its geographical proximity to the region to act as an interlocutor for the EU and the U.S. Kosovo's activism, on the other hand, was driven by its own recent experience of having waged a revolutionary war against a dictatorship and mainly by the need for external recognition of its independence. Pristina was hoping that pluralist, democratic Arab regimes would be more likely to recognize the independence of a fellow Sunni Muslim country, and the post-uprising developments in Egypt, Libya and Yemen proved this point. For all the pro-democracy rhetoric and activism of Bulgaria and Kosovo, however, this chapter showed that it was activism taking place within the strict limits imposed by the EU and the U.S. foreign policy positions. Bulgaria, and certainly Kosovo more so, do not have the resources to back up a foreign policy independent of their geopolitical allies (regarding the Bulgarian case, see Bechev 2013a, p. 190). While it has been shown elsewhere that the EU and the U.S. often face limits in influencing domestic outcomes in the Balkans (Aktürk and Lika 2020; Lika 2021), when it comes to foreign policy Balkan countries are mostly classic followers.

Endnotes

[1] All Balkan countries, with the exception of Bosnia, Kosovo, and Serbia, are NATO members, and all of them, with the exception of Bosnia and Kosovo, have the status of EU candidate country. Bulgaria has been an EU member country since 2007.

[2] Needless to say, the Assad regime's non-recognition of Kosovo is anything but principled. Assad is merely following the foreign policy line of its external patron, Russia. The regime's non-recognition of Kosovo but its recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia's

two breakaway provinces, at the same time proves this point beyond any doubt.

[3] According to this new narrative, contemporary Macedonians are descendants of ancient Macedonians, thus they have non-Slavic roots. By contrast, SDSM holds the view that contemporary Macedonians are a distinct South Slavic people.

[4] Online interview (via WhatsApp) with Erdoğan Saraç, 9 June 2021.

[5] Indeed, during the Cold War Bulgaria was informally labelled as the Soviet Union's "sixteenth republic" (Grashkin 2020).

[6] Online interview (via Google meet) with Hayri Emin, Foreign relations expert at the Bulgarian Office of Grand Mufti in Sofia. 10 June 2021.

[7] Nikolay Mladenov, who is of half-Jewish-descent, is arguably the most heavyweight Foreign Minister post-communist Bulgaria has had. Before he became Foreign Minister in 2010, Mladenov had extensive past experience as an NGO official in a number of Arab countries and for one year served as Bulgarian Minister of Defence (2009-2010). After he left the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry in 2013, Mladenov was appointed as Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Iraq (2013-2015), then as UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the UN Secretary-General to the Palestinian Authority (2015 – 2020).

[8] Detailed information on the platform can be reached through its official website http://sofiaplatform.org/

[9] For more on the Bulgarian "roundtable" talks, see Aktürk and Lika (2020, pp. 13-14).

[10] Zhelev was "a francophone ex-dissident philosopher" and the first popularly elected president in post-communist Bulgaria (Bechev 2013a, p. 202).

[11] Online interview with Hayri Emin

[12] On February 5, 2013, Bulgarian authorities officially accused

Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shia militia-cum-political party, of having perpetrated the terrorist attack (Bechev 2013b).

[13] Unsurprisingly in this respect, the Arab diaspora community in Bulgaria (most of whom are supporters / sympathetic to the Assad regime) has traditionally voted heavily for BSP and Ataka (Online interview with Hayri Emin).

[14] Online interview with Hayri Emin.

[15] Not to be confused with the name of the Albanian communist dictator Enver Hoxha. The spelling of both names is the same with the exception of the last letter "j" that the Kosovo Foreign Minister's last name has in addition.

[16] See the official website https://www.kosovothanksyou.com/

[17] The first was Yemen which recognized Kosovo on June 12, 2013, then Egypt followed suit on June 27, 2013, while the Tripoli government recognized Kosovo on September 25, 2013 (https://www.kosovothanksyou.com/)

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Chapter 12

The Arab Spring as a World-Historical Event

Şener Aktürk

In his article on the "French Revolution as a world-historical event," the late Immanuel Wallerstein argued that the real significance of the French Revolution was not its consequences for France itself, but the terrible fear and hope that it provoked in the elites of the Euro-American "core" and the masses of the "periphery" in the world-system, respectively.[1] As examples of the revolutionary enthusiasm and hope that it provoked in the periphery, Wallerstein discusses the uprisings in Egypt, Haiti, and Ireland, all three of which were initially suppressed, including some with shocking brutality and bloodshed. In what follows, I argue that the anti-authoritarian uprisings that engulfed Middle East and North Africa starting in late 2010, popularly known as the Arab Revolutions or the Arab Spring, constitute a similar world-historical event of perhaps even greater significance than the French Revolution in the long-term. These uprisings and the attitudes different actors adopted in relation to them served as a litmus test not just for the various Arab elites and masses or for the Middle Eastern states and societies but for all the neighbouring regions and indeed for the world at large. What happens when hundreds of millions of people, who may be considered as global subalterns, take up and act on the promises of the internationally hegemonic discourse of democratic emancipation and force the core states and societies of the world-system to take a side in their struggle for dignity, equality, and justice? More than a decade after the beginning of the Arab Spring, one can clearly observe that rather than assisting and or even remaining neutral in this honourable struggle, the great powers of the Euro-American core joined forces with the regional nodes of authoritarianism to violently suppress the Arab uprisings with a mixture

of direct military interventions, military coups, and proxy wars, among other punitive measures that contributed to mass suffering.

The Arab Spring has been arguably, if not undoubtedly, the defining world-historical development of the 2010s, and it is still too early to tell whether a new wave of the Arab Spring may define the 2020s. The Arab Spring already had vast ideational and geopolitical consequences, some of which I try to lay out in this necessarily brief examination. Dispelling the myth of the Western actors as democratisers, undermining Iran's mythical image and "soft power" as an allegedly revolutionary and Islamic regional actor that was carefully cultivated since 1979, unmasking the Arab elites' inveterate hostility to democracy and disregard for Arab self-government across numerous polities, Egypt's loss of its historic status as the centre of the Arab world, the securitization and persecution of Sunni Muslims at large, the rise of Türkiye as the patron of Sunni Arabs, and the disconfirmation of religious-political moderation. These are among the momentous consequences of the Arab Spring. The attitudes toward anti-authoritarian uprisings across the Arab world served as a critical litmus test for numerous actors within and beyond the Middle East. In many ways, then, the Arab Spring provided a brute awakening and a reality check, distinguishing the friends and enemies of majority-rule and self-determination in the region, and put the long-running international debate on democratisation in the Middle East on a more realistic footing.

The Great Disillusionment: The "Failure" or the "Suppression" of the Arab Spring?

The Arab Spring followed a decade, the 2000s, which was defined by the "War on Terror" that targeted Muslim-majority countries of the "greater Middle East," as well as Muslim minorities worldwide, with Afghans and Arabs being its most prominent targets. In a bitter irony, the peoples of the greater Middle East, and especially Sunni Arabs, were attacked and victimised by foreign powers in the 2000s for not having

democratic regimes ("to spread democracy"), and yet in the 2010s they were victimised again by many of the same foreign powers for demanding democracy in the course of the Arab Spring. One estimate put the number of deaths due to the U.S.-led "War on Terror" alone at around 900,000 people.[2] When the human costs of earlier U.S.-led "War on Terror" is combined with the death tolls of the later Russian, Iranian, U.S., French, Emirati, and Saudi military interventions to suppress the anti-authoritarian uprisings during the Arab Spring, the death toll of foreign interventions would easily exceed a million civilians. Equally important, more than ten million civilians have been displaced in Syria alone, with the number of displaced Afghans, Iraqis, Libyans, Yemenis, and others comprising millions more. As if in a cruel international experiment to discredit and stigmatise the notion of democracy in the greater Middle East, tens of millions of ordinary civilians were made to pay a terrible price first for not having and then for demanding democracy.

The Arab Spring and the international coalition that suppressed it finally put to rest the illusion that Western actors, and especially the United States, despite their imperfections, are ultimately in favour of democratic self-government and against authoritarianism in the Middle East. Many previous episodes of Western backed restoration of authoritarianism and suppression of democratic aspirations, such as the coup against Muhammad Mosaddeq in Iran,[3] were known but still sometimes dismissed as aberrations from the otherwise virtuous path of liberal internationalism led by the United States. The concerted and systematic suppression of the revolutionary uprisings against authoritarianism across numerous Middle Eastern polities in the course of the Arab Spring demonstrated without a doubt that the great powers' suppression of democratic movements in the Middle East is not the exception but the rule in international politics.

The overwhelmingly anti-democratic role of external interventions

in the Arab-Islamic Middle East contrasts with the felicitous role that the Western powers arguably played in other parts of the world, with the formerly communist Eastern European states and the defeated Axis powers after the Second World War being two sets of frequently cited examples. The democratization of Germany, Italy, and Japan through imposition from above during the U.S. military occupation following the Second World War were invoked as a felicitous precedent and justification for the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq for purposes of democratization.[4] The anti-authoritarian uprisings of the Arab Spring were fundamentally different, however, since they were not imposed as a result of a foreign occupation. A much more appropriate comparison would be with the anti-totalitarian uprisings that overthrew communist dictatorships across six Eastern European polities in 1989, which I turn to next.

The Overthrow of Communism in 1989 and the Arab Spring Contrasted: The Critical Role of External Intervention

When one compares the successful overthrow of the communist party dictatorships across Eastern European countries formerly under Soviet influence in 1989 with the failed attempts to end authoritarian dictatorships across the Arab Islamic Middle East between 2010 and 2022, the most significant difference between the two sets of cases appears to be the critical role of external (foreign) interventions in opposite directions. Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's decision to abandon the Brezhnev Doctrine in the late 1980s was an absolutely necessary precondition for the end of Communist dictatorships across six Eastern European countries (Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, East Germany) in 1989. According to the Brezhnev Doctrine, the Soviet Union had the right to militarily intervene in any socialist country in order to preserve and protect its socialist regime from being overthrown. It was formulated by the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev (1964-1982) as the justification for the Soviet intervention to suppress the Prague Spring in 1968. The Brezhnev Doctrine was also used to

justify the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that began approximately a decade after the Prague Spring, as the Soviets ostensibly sought to protect the self-proclaimed socialist regime led by Babrak Karmal in Kabul. Gorbachev's decision not to intervene to preserve the communist regimes abroad enabled anti-communist elites and masses to end the communist one-party regimes within the same year (1989) across six Eastern European countries previously known as the Soviet satellite states.

Rather than the overthrow of the communist regimes in 1989, however, the trajectory of the Arab Spring resembles the outcome of the Prague Spring, which was suppressed by the Soviet military in 1968. Both Western and non-Western actors significantly contributed to the suppression of the Arab Spring. The countries that actively participated in the suppression of the Arab Spring and the defeat of the anti-authoritarian uprisings by deploying armed forces included Russia (primarily in Syria, and through proxies in Libya), Iran (in Syria, and through proxies in Iraq[5] and Lebanon[6]), Saudi Arabia (Bahrain and Yemen), and the UAE (Yemen, and also Libya). Saudi Arabia and the UAE were staunch followers of the U.S.-led regional alliance network coordinated by Israel (through the Abraham Accords, among other manoeuvres), whereas Iran and Russia constituted what is sometimes dubbed as the "Axis of Resistance;" however, both Western and Russian-Iranian axes played critical roles in the suppression of the Arab Spring. In the case of Syria specifically, in addition to Russian and Iranian forces, Western militaries also played a direct role in defeating the anti-authoritarian uprisings. U.S. and French military forces actively supported the YPG-PYD, which has been a regular collaborator of the Assad-regime and an opponent of the Syrian opposition (e.g., Free Syrian Army / Syrian National Army) fighting the Assad regime.[7] The U.S. played a decisive role in derailing the anti-Assad uprisings in North and East Syria, roughly corresponding to one-third of Syria, on the eastern banks of the Euphrates river (Table 1).

Table 1: Foreign Military Interventions to Suppress the Arab Spring Uprisings

Arab Spring Uprisings in…	***Suppressed* by the military intervention(s) of…**
Syria	Iran; Russia; proxies of the United States and France
Yemen	Saudi Arabia; United Arab Emirates
Libya	Proxies of France and Russia
Bahrain	Saudi Arabia
Iraq	Proxies of Iran

Türkiye has been only country that militarily intervened to support the groups that led anti-authoritarian uprisings in Syria and Libya: First and foremost, the Syrian opposition fighting against the Assad regime in Syria, and secondarily, the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya fighting against the warlord Khalifa Haftar, who had the support of the Egyptian military dictatorship, France, and the UAE.

Vicious Seesaw: Collaborative Competition between Western and Russian-Iranian Axes

Another dynamic that became increasingly apparent during the course of the Arab Spring is the collaborative competition, or what one might call the "vicious seesaw," between "pro-Western" (Saudi-Emirati, often supported by the U.S., France and/or Israel) and pro-Russian-Iranian forces in various Arab-Islamic countries, most notably, in Syria. What makes the collaborative competition between these two blocs particularly destructive and hopeless for the average person is the fact that both blocs oppose even a minimal electoral democracy based on

majority-rule and instead they consistently support militarised minority dictatorships. Thus, the victory of either side is likely to perpetuate the persecution of the majority, and yet the continuation of militarised conflict also furthers the suffering of the masses. Thus, in the absence of a third force that intervenes to support the majority, the best-case scenario is often an immediate cease fire and a "cold peace" that would result in a so-called "frozen conflict." Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen are most likely to be stuck in such a vicious seesaw, being pressured by two equally anti-democratic axes.

In a second set of countries that experienced popular uprisings, the Saudi-Emirati axis succeeded in suppressing the democratic demands from below, at least in the short term, without fracturing the territorial integrity of the polity. Egypt, which will be discussed in greater detail further below due to its momentous significance, and Bahrain, belong to this second category where the Saudi-Emirati axis succeeded, with the connivance of Western powers, in restoring a repressive authoritarian dictatorship based on a military intervention.

In a third set of countries, there is another, a "third power" or a "third axis" in favour of majority-rule, which is often Türkiye with the support of Qatar, and therefore the struggle against either one or both of the authoritarian axes (e.g., Saudi-Emirati and/or Russian-Iranian) continues more than a decade after the beginning of the Arab Spring. Syria and Libya most obviously belong in this category (Table 2).

Table 2: **Militarised Conflict Zones of the Arab Spring and Geopolitical Influence, 2021**

	Emirati-Saudi and/or "pro-Western"	Russian-Iranian	Turkish-Qatari
Egypt	**XXX**		
Bahrain	**XXX**		
Yemen	**XX**	**X**	
Iraq	**X**	**XX**	
Lebanon	**X**	**X**	
Syria	**X**	**XX**	**X**
Libya	**X**	**X**	**XX**

The groups that carry the anti-authoritarian legacy of the Arab Spring appear to be defeated across seven militarised conflict zones, with the notable exception of Libya and the partial exception of Syria, where they survived thanks in great part to the military support of Türkiye and financial support of Qatar.

The End of a Revolutionary Myth? Iran as a Leading Counter-Revolutionary Force

Even in its alleged "failure," the Arab Spring transformed geopolitical identities and mass attitudes across the Middle East in very fundamental ways that may prove resilient for several generations, if not irreversible in the foreseeable future. One of those critical transformations relates to the perceptions and the role of Iran in the regional political imaginary at both the elite and the mass levels. Ever since the Islamic revolution of

1979, Iran exerted a magnetic attraction for Muslims, including Sunni Muslims who constitute the large majority in most Muslim polities, who had economic, political, and other grievances against the status quo broadly defined, at the global, national, and regional levels. The deep inequalities that the liberal international order regularly generated and perpetuated due to its structural contradictions lead to a large reservoir of systemic resentment, and Iran became a key actor that exploited such anti-liberal and illiberal resentment among Muslims in particular. Many Muslims in search of an alternative and a more just international order turned to Iran as a potential model and inspiration in the decades following 1979. Iran amassed significant "soft power" across not just the Middle East but worldwide, in locations as far as Latin America.

A major consequence of the way in which Arab Spring unfolded in its first decade resulted in a significant loss of Iran's "soft power" across the non-Shiite, particularly Sunni Muslim, audiences and countries across the Middle East. In Türkiye, several popular preachers and opinion leaders, who previously had significant influence among religious audiences saw their popularity dramatically decline upon expressing opinions implicitly or explicitly supporting or condoning Iran's intervention in Syria against the Syrian opposition.[8] The participation of Hezbollah, widely perceived as a pro-Iranian proxy, in suppressing the Syrian opposition throughout the Syrian civil war the protests in Lebanon in 2019,[9] also tarnished Iran's image. In short, Iran's direct and indirect participation in suppressing popular protests, particularly in Syria but also in Iraq and Lebanon, significantly damaged Iran's popular appeal ("soft power") as a pro-Islamic and potentially emancipatory force in the region.[10]

The Hegemony of the Islamic Opposition: Arab, Islamic, or Middle Eastern Spring?

The main opposition in almost all the countries that experienced mass protests during the Arab Spring, including Egypt, Syria, and Tunisia,

had a very clearly Islamic, rather than Arab nationalist, Arab socialist, or secularist character. In terms of the ethnic composition of its participants, too, the protest movements included not only Arabs but also Berbers and Kurds among other non-Arab peoples of the Middle East. Moreover, a similar wave of popular anti-authoritarian protests, known as the Green Movement or the Green Wave, also engulfed Iran following the 2009 presidential elections. Against this background of ethno-national heterogeneity and common Islamic appeals to justice, it is somewhat curious that the broader protest wave has been conceptualised as the "Arab Spring" rather than the Islamic Spring or the Middle Eastern Spring, or a combination of the two such as the Arab-Islamic Spring.

The hegemony of the Islamic opposition across the Middle East has been a widely noted political pattern for many decades, but the Arab Spring and the following attempts at transition to electoral democracy brought more international attention to this pattern. For example, Tarek Masoud seeks to explain what he conceptualizes as the "Islamist monopoly" and the "Islamist dominion" in electoral politics with a focus on Egypt with reference to the Islamists' comparative advantage in reaching potential voters, who could otherwise be considered as potential voters for leftist parties due to the rampant poverty and sharp economic inequalities that prevail in the country.[11] One of the two main reasons for the Islamist monopoly or dominion, according to Masoud, is the weakness of leftist "forms of collective life ["such as labour unions and mutual-benefit associations for workers and farmers"] in most of the Middle East, and in Egypt in particular."[12] Moreover, voters perceive Islamists as being more likely to pursue economic policies that will benefit the poor, or to put it more provocatively, "voters think Islamists are leftists."[13]

Regardless of the causes of Islamic or Islamist parties' electoral hegemony, they were not allowed to fully govern even for a year in Egypt, given the competitive division of powers between Supreme

Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) and president-elect Morsi between June 2012-13,[14] were only allowed to govern in a coalition with secular actors for a couple of years before being overthrown in Tunisia, and were violently suppressed before even having a chance to electorally contest power in Syria. Moreover, even if Islamic parties were to maintain a decades-long electoral hegemony, there is nothing inherently undemocratic in competitive elections that produce one-party dominant governments for long periods of time, as both Japan (ruled by the LDP between 1955-1993, 1995-2009, and 2012-2022/continuing) and South Africa (ruled by the ANC ever since the end of Apartheid in 1994) have shown. However, this is a purely theoretical question in the Arab world, where Islamist parties have been violently suppressed from Algeria to Syria, from Egypt to Tunisia, and were never allowed to win elections and govern for consecutive terms.

The electoral and popular hegemony of the Islamic opposition is the proverbial "elephant in the room," without which any explanation of the Arab Spring and its "failure," or rather, its "suppression," would be incomplete and utterly unconvincing. Thus, it should be critically noted that the conceptualization of this world-historical development as the 'Arab Spring' might mask its multi-ethnic but overwhelming Islamic, or Muslim democratic. The multi-ethnic but overwhelmingly Islamic nature of the anti-authoritarian mobilisations that characterised the Arab Spring is critical in explaining not only the foreign interventions that ultimately suppressed it everywhere except for western Libya and north-western Syria, but, as the next section briefly discusses, also the domestic authoritarian machinations to defeat it.

Democracy as Majority Rule and the Authoritarian Co-optation of Minorities

The Arab Spring demonstrated that the primary dilemma of democratisation in the Middle East is almost the opposite of the dilemmas of democratisation in the most consolidated Western democracies. The

most consolidated Western democracies such as the United Kingdom and the United States firmly established the principle and the culture of majority rule as the expected and accepted norm of democratic politics. In the 300 years since this office was established,[15] every British prime minister has been Protestant Christian,[16] demonstrating an astounding level of religious *and* sectarian uniformity at the level of the chief executive of the oldest and most consolidated modern democracy. Similarly, in the 245 years since its founding, 44 of the 46 US presidents have been Protestants, and the other two have been Catholics.[17] Candidates for president and vice president from other religious minority backgrounds, such as Greek Orthodox (Michael Dukakis), Mormon (Mitt Romney), and Jewish (Joe Lieberman), failed to get elected, even when they were nominated by one of the two largest parties (Democrats and Republicans). Against such a historical tradition of majority-rule where religious-sectarian minorities did not have any presence in the chief executive office, and were underrepresented in the legislature, a key challenge for deepening democracy in the West has been to ensure minorities proportionate representation and symbolic equality with the majority. Thus, many progressive efforts to deepen democracy in Western polities aim at improving the social and political status of historically disadvantaged and severely underrepresented minorities.

Authoritarian regimes in the Middle East have often co-opted religious sectarian minorities and included them in their governing coalitions. Thus, the long-time Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister of Iraq, the "right hand" of the brutal dictator Saddam Hussein, was an Assyrian Christian.[18] Authoritarian Egypt likewise had a Coptic Christian, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, as a Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and Acting Foreign Minister, who went on to became the Secretary-General of the United Nations. The Al-Assad family, who have been ruling Syria since 1970, as well as a disproportionate percentage of the military elite, hail from the Alawite minority, which make up only about 12% of

Syria's population. In short, the authoritarian elites in the Middle East often include members of religious (e.g., Christian) and sectarian (e.g., Alawite) minorities, sometimes in very prominent political positions. The authoritarian regimes' co-optation and instrumentalization of religious sectarian minorities in the Middle East has very significant consequences. First, it provides a partial explanation of the religious minorities' support for authoritarianism: "Based on survey research and a comparison of minorities in Turkey, Egypt, Morocco, and Jordan," Ceren Belge and Ekrem Karakoç "find that linguistic minorities tend to be less supportive of authoritarianism while religious minorities tend to be more supportive of authoritarianism."[19]

This also means that an excessive focus on "minority rights," inspired by the challenges of some Western polities at an advanced stage of consolidation and deepening of democracy, may be counterproductive in authoritarian Middle Eastern countries struggling to take the very basic first step of transition to majority-rule. An authoritarian dictatorship is by definition "minority rule," and it is very common for Middle Eastern dictators to recruit disproportionately among minority communities to cultivate a base of support and a sense of identification between the authoritarian regime and the interests of these minorities. Moreover, when threatened by mass popular challenges seeking to unseat them, authoritarian dictators such as Assad and Mubarak often attempt to split the opposition by appealing to and appeasing minority groups within it. This is what the Assad regime successfully did by surrendering much of northeast Syria to the YPG-PYD, with the goal of luring away Kurds from the mainstream Syrian opposition so that they no longer pose a threat to the survival of the Assad regime. This pattern was, and still is, very much observable in key countries that experienced the Arab Spring and authoritarian restoration, including most prominently, Egypt and Syria.

The Egyptian Turning Point, January 2011-July 2013

On June 24, 2012, Mohammed Morsi was elected as the president of Egypt, becoming the first democratically elected chief executive in thousands of years of Egyptian history. Morsi's election to the presidency followed 60 years of military dictatorship, which began with the overthrow of the monarchy in 1952, and it would be tragically followed by the restoration of another military dictatorship with a coup in just about a year later, on July 3, 2013. For many international observers, the trajectory of the failed attempt at democratisation in Egypt was synonymous with the Arab Spring itself. The ouster of the authoritarian dictator Hosni Mubarak on February 11, 2011, only 18 days after mass protests began in Cairo's Tahrir Square on January 25, 2011, was a momentous development. It was also highly unexpected and thus perplexing for the political scientists studying Egypt, since the Mubarak regime was considered as a particularly resilient and stable authoritarian regime at the time.[20] This disconnect between the predictions of social science scholarship and the apparent ouster of authoritarian leader may be comprehensible and excusable in part once one recognises the fact that Mubarak's departure was not tantamount to the end of authoritarianism since substantive power simply passed to the military elite, organised under the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), rather than to any genuinely civilian or popularly accountable person(s) or group(s). Moreover, it must be emphasised that the Egyptian military was able to eliminate the possibility of president Mubarak's son, Gamal Mubarak, from assuming power, as he was expected to, and thus succeeded in engineering a "change in the regime" rather than a "regime change,"[21] as most if not all protesters in Tahrir Square were seeking in demanding the ouster of Mubarak. The military prevented a nepotistic, albeit civilian, transition of power to the son of the long-reigning autocrat, while reasserting its role as the most powerful political actor, the arbiter of national discord and kingmaker. Nonetheless, the removal of Mubarak through mass demonstrations opened up a popular democratic window of opportunity.

What followed was almost two-and-a-half years of tug-of-war between civilians pushing for transferring more genuine authority to the elected civilians on the one hand, and the military, the judiciary, and the bureaucracy fastidiously holding onto their privileges as unaccountable authoritarian elites and ultimately successfully thwarting demands for democratisation from below on the other.

Bureaucracy, Judiciary, Media and the Military: Obstacles to Democratisation

The failure of the Arab Spring in Egypt demonstrated without a doubt the critical role of the triad also known as the "unelected components of government"[22] in derailing or allowing democratisation: the bureaucracy, judiciary, and the military. To these three one may add the media, which is also known as the "fourth estate." In the case of Egypt, all four of these pillars of power were positioned against the Muslim Brotherhood, and the political arm and the presidential candidate of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) and Mohammed Morsi, respectively. The FJP won a landslide victory in the parliamentary elections that took place between November 2011 and January 2012, and it was only rivalled by a more religious conservative "Salafist" party, al-Nur.[23] "With the overwhelming Islamist victory in the fall 2011 parliamentary elections… [t]he legislative branch, now dominated by the MB [Muslim Brotherhood] and the Salafis, began to clash with the most powerful sectors of the Egyptian state—the judges and the military."[24]A Cairo Administrative Court dissolved the first constituent assembly on April 10, 2012, and "the Supreme Constitutional Court denied the legal existence of the first freely elected parliament since the revolution… by invalidating the electoral system that had produced the People's Assembly" on June 14, 2012, which was followed by the SCAF generals "taking over the legislative branch" with a "supplementary constitutional declaration."[25] In the evocative metaphor of Rougier and Lacroix, "the judiciary thus resorted to institutional guerrilla warfare in the spring of 2012 to limit

the consequences of a possible election of a president from the ranks of the MB."[26] In short, the judiciary and the military working in tandem, supported the bureaucracy and the national media dominated by anti-MB actors, succeeded in depriving the presidency of many levers of political power, in particular by facilitating SCAF's takeover of the legislature.

Liberals against Democracy and in favour of a Coup: An Egyptian or Regional Pattern?

The Egyptian liberals' silence if not open support for the military coup led by General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi that overthrew the Morsi government in July 2013 has been critically noted by several observers. As Rougier and Lacroix maintain, "Liberals hailed him [General al-Sisi] as 'Egypt's de Gaulle,' the only man capable of saving the country from disaster…"[27] Faheem Hussain critically described in detail how "Egypt's liberal coup" does not pose an ideological contradiction or dilemma for the Egyptian liberals who supported the coup, since Egyptian liberals adhere to a national(ist) vision of Egypt that fundamentally depicts the Muslim Brotherhood outside of the nation and furthermore, as a subversive constituency not worthy of toleration, much like the Catholics in John Locke's *Letter concerning Toleration*.[28] "On the Selling of the Egyptian Coup to Liberals," Ken Silverstein analysed "[h]ow the mass killing of Islamists is being justified in America" by using ostensibly liberal arguments.[29] In a comparative observation that sheds light to the apparent hypocrisy of Western attempts to promote democracy in the Middle East while simultaneously condoning or even supporting the violent suppression of political actors that have a popular following, Silverstein argues that, "[w]e may not like the Muslim Brotherhood, but we can't have democracy in Egypt without it, and the same holds true for Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine."[30] Shadi Hamid has argued that if the international community is serious about desiring democratisation in the Middle East, it has to be prepared to accept

"illiberal democracies" across the region.[31] In fact, Hamid argues that, compared to the illiberalism of late Hugo Chavez in Venezuela or Viktor Orban in Hungary, which he sees "primarily… a function of the struggle for power," the Islamists' "illiberalism would be deeply felt, the product of a different worldview and a different, if somewhat submerged, political tradition."[32] Thus, the liberals' opposition to democracy defined as a majority-rule or popular government indeed appears to be a systematic pattern across the Middle East, and this antagonism appears to be rooted not only in tactical, strategic, and social concerns of the liberals but perhaps it has deeper ideological roots in their interpretation of liberalism, nationalism, and democracy.

"Egypt is no longer the heart of the Arab world": A New Arab World in Exile

Egypt has long been considered, culturally, demographically, geographically, politically, and symbolically, as the heart of the Arab world. "The mass demonstrations in Tahrir Square inspired the throngs in Benghazi as well as in Syria's cities and Pearl Roundabout in Bahrain," and as such, "Cairo was the epicentre of a revolutionary phenomenon that sent shockwaves through the entire Maghreb, the Mashriq, and the Arabian Peninsula."[33] However, with the overthrow of the first and only popularly elected president of Egypt, Mohammed Morsi, and the restoration of the military dictatorship under Sisi, "Egypt is no longer the heart of the Arab world"[34] as Basheer Nafi argued, and this alone is a major, perhaps world-historical, outcome of the Arab Spring. The free spirit of the Arab Spring is no longer focused on Tahrir Square in Cairo or even in Egypt at large. Where did the Arab dissidents go? There is a new Arab world in the making in exile. Perhaps the most prominent centre of Arab dissidents in exile is Istanbul: "A century after Türkiye lost the Middle East, Istanbul is an Arab capital again," proclaimed *The Economist* in late 2018.[35] Türkiye is home to the largest number of Syrian refugees in the world, and Istanbul alone may be home to more than a million Arabs, including "a former presidential

candidate from Egypt… Kuwaiti MPs stripped of their citizenship and a crop of former ministers from Yemen."[36] According to Nawaf al-Qudaimi, an Arab publisher who spoke to the *Le Monde Diplomatique* in 2021, "Istanbul's Arab communities are more diverse than Cairo's and Beirut's were," and while "Lebanon remains the undisputed centre of Arabic publishing… Istanbul is where its intellectuals now choose to live and create."[37] Many other Arab dissidents made the United Kingdom[38] their new home.[39] Only time will tell whether and how the Arab opposition in exile will serve as the engine of democratisation in more successful iterations of the Arab Spring in the future.

The Tunisian Experience: The Nail in the Coffin of Political Moderation Theses?

Theoretical arguments, projections, and vindications based on the "successful" democratisation of Tunisia contrasted with the "failed" democratisation of Egypt that filled the pages of academic journals and semi-scholarly and popular magazines throughout the 2010s necessitate a comprehensive reassessment and critique, and for their authors, a critical introspection at the very least. Rachid "Ghannouchi, the long-time leader of the Ennahda party, was a moderate's moderate, and throughout the first, and as it turns out the only, decade of Tunisia's democratic experiment in the 2010s, "Ennahda was giving up some of what it stood for while receiving little in return."[40] This is because, as Hamid argued, the so-called secular opposition, which originally consisted of the coalition of Nidaa Tounes, "tended to view Ennahda not just as an opponent to be challenged in elections but as an existential threat to be defeated."[41] This is very similar to the perception of the Muslim Brotherhood by its opponents in Egypt, even though Ennahda was far more "moderate" than the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and it further moderated during the transition while conceding many of the most important political offices, such as the presidency, to its secular opponents as a gesture. Despite these and many other signs of political moderation and compromise, the Tunisian president "Kais Saied's

de facto dissolution of parliament in July 2021, abandonment of the constitution, and targeting of the opposition are clear signs that Tunisia is no longer a democracy and has returned to the authoritarian playbook of Arab leaders past and present," as the leftist former president, Moncef Marzouki wrote.[42] Thus, the poster child of moderation and compromise, Tunisia, also experienced the suppression of popular democratic demands by the military as in every other country that experienced the Arab Spring.

Stigmatisation of Sunni Muslims and Sunni Arabs

Another key observable pattern in the Western reactions to the Arab Spring and the collaborative suppression of the popular democratic demands by international and domestic actors is the stigmatisation of the Sunni Muslim, and in particular Sunni Arab, masses. The stigmatisation of Sunni Muslims, and Sunni Arabs in particular, certainly predates the Arab Spring itself, however, the militarised suppression of the Arab Spring with significant international support exposed the status of Sunni Arabs as the primary victims of mass political violence. As of 2022, the tens of the millions of Sunni Arabs of Iraq and Syria, in particular, do not have a state that they can consider their own, or a state that considers them more than second-class citizens or undesirable subjects, in the territories that they historically inhabit. The political entities that reign in Baghdad, Damascus, Erbil, and Qamishli are strongly associated with Shiite, Alawite, and Kurdish identities, and Sunni Arabs have been disenfranchised, discriminated against, and persecuted by all of them, albeit to varying degrees. The systematic discrimination, including deportations and mass killings of Sunni Muslims, and in particular Sunni Arabs, is not only undertaken by these local political entities either. The mass aerial bombing of Mosul and Raqqa by the United States that killed thousands of civilians was a crime against humanity, but the fact that it did not receive nearly as much international scrutiny as the attacks on Yazidis may have to do with the fact that the thousands who were killed were overwhelmingly Sunni Arabs. The stigmatisation

of the Sunni Muslim, especially Sunni Arab, masses, complements the pronounced Western preference for non-Sunni partners in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria. Thus, Hazaras are preferred over Pashtuns in Afghanistan; Kurds, Shiite Arabs, and Yazidis are preferred over Sunni Arabs in Iraq; Copts are preferred over Muslims in Egypt; Maronite Christians are preferred over Muslims in Lebanon; and Christians and Kurds are preferred over Sunni Arabs in Syria.

One of the seemingly surprising developments in the context of their international stigmatisation has been Türkiye's emergence as a haven for and protector of Sunni Muslims of Syria, Iraq, Egypt, and the greater Middle East. Not only that, Türkiye hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees in the world, and it also militarily intervened in Syria to protect the north-western Syrian pocket where millions of mostly Sunni Arabs persecuted by the Assad regime fled. The demographic and political consequences of these twin developments are already quite dramatic and likely to be even more so in the future: As of 2022, approximately a quarter of Syria's pre-war population either lives in Türkiye or in north-western Syria under the protection of the Turkish military and its allies organised under the Syrian National Army (formerly Free Syrian Army). Türkiye's open-door policy vis-à-vis Syrian refugees also had vast domestic repercussions, some of which are particularly ominous. In seeking votes from an electorate feeling overburdened by three and a half million Syrian refugees, several opposition politicians and parties have adopted an anti-refugee rhetoric and advocated proposals aimed at deporting refugees. In a most dramatic public call that carried anti-refugee rhetoric and proposals to the political mainstream, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the leader of the main opposition party, the CHP, announced that should they come to power, they will send back all the Syrian refugees back to Syria within two years.[43] Only time will tell whether Türkiye will be able to maintain its stance in favour of the protagonists of the Arab Spring for much longer, given its extraordinary economic troubles, which have been attributed to the refugees and "Arabs" at large by opportunistic political and societal actors.[44]

Restoration of Authoritarianism with International Collaboration

August 2013 was a turning point marked by two horrific massacres that signalled the violent suppression of the Arab Spring in Egypt and Syria, and the Western responses confirming that the perpetrators of these crimes would not be punished as previously claimed. The attack on Rabia al-Adawiya Square, where supporters of president Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood gathered, resulted in the massacre of over 1,150 protestors in August 2013. According to the *Human Rights Watch,* "[t]he gravest incident of mass protester killings occurred on August 14 [2013], when security forces crushed the major pro-Morsi sit-in in Rab'a al-Adawiya Square in the Nasr City district of eastern Cairo… police and army personnel… opened fire on the protestors, killing at least 817 and likely more than 1,000," in what constitutes "one of the world's largest killings of demonstrators in a single day in recent history."[45] The United States did not suspend military aid to Egypt, the second largest recipient of U.S. aid in the world, in reaction to the military coup in July or the Raba massacre in August of 2013. In contrast, Western allies in the region, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in particular, provided billions of dollars to aid the nascent military dictatorship of al-Sisi, which committed these heinous crimes.

Only a week after the Raba massacre, on "August 21, 2013, news broke of a catastrophic chemical-weapons attack in Syria; within a matter of days, the [U.S.] intelligence community had a "high confidence assessment" that a sarin gas attack had killed more than a thousand people in a suburb of Damascus, and that the Assad regime was responsible."[46] Despite his previous unequivocal statements that the use of chemical weapons was a "red line" that if crossed would provoke military intervention by the United States, President Barack Obama decided not to intervene against the Assad regime. This was a critical signal for all the international actors involved and a turning point in what one analyst described as "Obama's disastrous betrayal of the

Syrian rebels."[47] The United Kingdom and France also decided not to intervene, contrary to their previous statements, and at least in the case of France, in part due to Obama's non-intervention. In contrast, Iran and later Russia also provided massive military support to the Assad regime to defeat the Syrian opposition in a war where roughly half a million civilians were killed and more than ten million civilians, roughly half of the country's population, have been internally displaced.

These two critical and tragic developments in August 2013, the Western powers' decision not to take any deterrent or punitive action in reaction, and both Western and non-Western actors' active support to the autocrats massacring their domestic opposition, provide a pithy summary of how the Arab Spring was violently suppressed by the autocratic regimes and their international collaborators. The fact that the Arab Spring uprisings persisted for so long despite such massive repression from both domestic and international actors is a testimony to the strength of the popular demands sustaining these protests, which leads one to be optimistic for their future revival. The Arab Spring did not "fail" but was rather "suppressed" with massive violence by an international coalition, and it already had significant consequences of world-historical significance in its first decade as I tried to briefly outline in this chapter.

Endnotes

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[11] Tarek Masoud, *Counting Islam: Religion, Class, and Elections in Egypt.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

[12] Masoud, *Counting Islam*, p.6.

[13] This is part of the title of Masoud's Chapter 6, "Islam's Organizational Advantage? Or, Why Voters Think Islamists Are Leftists," *Counting Islam,* pp.155-182.

[14] John Higley, *Elites, Non-Elites, and Political Realism* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), pp.105-112.

[15] Anthony Seldon, *The Impossible Office? The History of the British Prime Minister* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

[16] Şener Aktürk, "Comparative Politics of Exclusion in Europe and the Americas: Religious, Sectarian, and Racial Boundary Making since the Reformation," *Comparative Politics* 52, no. 4 (2020): 695-719.

[17] The two Catholic presidents of the USA have been John F. Kennedy and Joseph R. Biden.

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[20] Masoud, *Counting Islam,* p.126: "After all, despite all the predictions and prophecies of social scientists, the Mubarak regime, that poster child of durable authoritarianism (Brownlee 2007; Blaydes 2010), had fallen."

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[22] Lowell Barrington (ed.), *Comparative Politics: Structures and Choices* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2013), Chapter 7, "Unelected Components of Government: Judiciaries, Bureaucracies, and Militaries," pp.195-226.

[23] Masoud, *Counting Islam,* pp.132-33.

[24] Rougier and Lacroix, *Egypt's Revolutions*, p.7.

[25] Rougier and Lacroix, *Egypt's Revolutions,* p.7.

[26] Rougier and Lacroix, *Egypt's Revolutions,* p.7.

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[31] Shadi Hamid, *Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[32] Hamid, *Temptations of Power*, p.7.

[33] Rougier and Lacroix, *Egypt's Revolutions,* p.1.

[34] Basheer Nafi, "Egypt is no longer the heart of the Arab world," *Middle East Eye,* 16 May 2017. Retrieved from https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/egypt-no-longer-heart-arab-world

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[40] Hamid, *Temptations of Power*, p.8 and p.203, respectively.

[41] Hamid, *Temptations of Power*, p.204.

[42] Moncef Marzouki, "Coup in Tunisia: Is Democracy Lost?." *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 1 (2022): 5-11.

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The Arab Spring is not a development limited to one ethno-national, geographic, or linguistic space, but rather a global and world-historical phenomenon both in its origins and its outcomes. The twelve authors who contributed to this volume, hailing from five countries on three continents with very diverse backgrounds and experiences, provide empirically rich and theoretically sophisticated analyses of the Arab Spring in its first decade from different viewpoints. Although the patterns they observe and the predictions they express may indeed be rather different, they share the belief that the Arab Spring is far from over, with its first decade only a prelude to other major developments to come. Looking at the past, present, and equally importantly, the future, of the Arab Spring, this edited volume provides reasons for cautious optimism despite broken promises, betrayals, mass suffering, and international apathy and complicity. Just as the catastrophic destruction of the Second World War gave birth to the most impressive scheme of regional integration in Europe, which finds its institutional embodiment in the European Union, one hopes that the current doom and gloom in the aftermath of the first Arab Spring will motivate and enable similar if not even more robust forms of peaceful cooperation, prosperity, and reconstruction in the region. This volume offers new conceptual and explanatory tools and diverse viewpoints for readers around the world who struggle to make sense of one of the most important epochal development of our times.

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