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LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR: TAKING STOCK OF THE ARAB SPRING, TEN YEARS ON



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Dear Readers,

This year marks the 10th Anniversary of the Arab Spring, the seismic uprisings which rocked the Middle East and North Africa. The uprisings were triggered by the tragic self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, an individual pushed to the brink by state corruption, repression, and poverty. His suicide sparked a region-wide wave of sympathy, which was quickly galvanised into a political call to recognise the cause his desperation i.e., the long-term failure of Arab states to deliver on popular demands for democracy, good governance and economic development.

While failing to deliver a quick and smooth transformation that many had hoped, the ongoing tremors of the 2011 Arab Spring continue to inform the discussions on the future socio-economic and political development of the Middle East and North Africa. This issue of the Near East Bulletin gathers a range of expert voices that have engaged extensively with the political, economic, and social dynamics in the region over the last decade, to reflect upon the repercussions of the Arab Spring, and draw projections for the future of the region, ten years on.

Our contributors, each of them a specialist in their chosen country-study, offer robust and intriguing inquiries into the key themes of the past decade, brought forward by the Arab uprisings, that continue to have significant bearings on the current power dynamics in the region.

As their analyses suggest, the issues that sparked the Arab Spring remain very much relevant, but also that instability and discontent continue to typify the region. There is thus an opportunity to pause and reflect on what can indeed be considered a long-term transformation, or perhaps a 'revolutionary process', and the challenges that lie ahead in delivering on the aspirations of the people of the Middle East and North Africa. We hope that this issue of the Near East Bulletin provides just that.

Acknowledgement: I wish to express my sincere gratitude for our Board Member, Prof. Nur Köprülü for taking the lead as the Guest Editor of this issue of the Near East Bulletin; without her professionalism and hard work, this timely intervention would not have been possible.



THE ARAB UPRISINGS TEN YEARS ON WHY DOES THE ARAB SPRING STILL ECHO?



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The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has traditionally been conceptualised and represented as one with a democracy deficit and/or authoritarian resilience. Cultural exceptionalists, for example, have attributed authoritarian resilience and persistence in the MENA region to Oriental despotism, religion and issues of cultural authenticity;¹ other scholars, meanwhile, have drawn attention to the absence of key prerequisites to democratic transition in the region, such as a modernised society, social mobilisation, urbanisation and a bourgeoisie class.² The onset of the Arab Spring has, however, revealed that what we either were told or grasped about the MENA region before had exclusively focused on regime types and universal conditions for democracy; but the Arab Street has wanted to tell us another or “its story” since 2011.

The Arab Spring was sparked in Tunisia with a tragic event when a street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, set himself on fire on 17 December 2010. The popular demonstrations swiftly spread to almost the entirety of the MENA region in 2011,

bringing large-scale public protests to the streets with demands to combat corruption, reducing unemployment and granting more freedom.

The key slogans of the Arab Uprisings revolved around two main demands from the Arab Street: bread and freedom. It is in this sense vital to underscore that the protests have something in common across the region, which legitimises the label “Arab Uprisings”, or an Arab matter!



¹Huntington, S. (1984), “Will More Countries Become Democratic?”, *Political Science Quarterly*, 99 (2): 193-218; Sharabi, H. (1988), *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society*, New York: Oxford University Press.

²Almond G. and Powell, G.B. (1966), *Comparative Politics: A Developmental Approach*, Boston: Little, Brown, pp. 255–332.

One of the main questions the Uprisings have prompted has been to what extent these public protests and the popular calls for political opening would result in democratisation, or would thwart authoritarian rule in the MENA region. Although the 2011 Uprisings paved the way for a new moment of social activism, the regimes in the MENA region did not undergo similar trajectories during and after the popular protests.

Having said that, republican regimes have been more fragile as they cope with public unrest and anti-government demonstrations such as in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria; the monarchies – the Kingdom of Jordan and Kingdom of Morocco – have been more resilient in containing the public demands by putting in force economic reforms. Since 2018, however, the resurgence of internal unrest in the form of street demonstrations in Arab countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, Algeria and Kuwait has signaled that the Arab Spring is not completely over yet. As a matter of fact, according to the Wave 7 Survey conducted by the World Values Survey (WVS), the democratic government style is supported by 60% of the population precisely in Lebanon, Jordan, Tunisia and Egypt. For instance, in Jordan only 16.2% of respondents found their form of government to be “fully democratic,” while in Egypt 6.1%, in Tunisia 5.0%, and in Lebanon at 1.8% of respondents felt this way.

Although the steps for further reform programme was initiated by some of the countries in the post-Arab uprisings era, these figures explicitly show that the people’s demands for change and democracy throughout the Arab geography are yet salient.

Four broad outcomes have, hence, emerged through the 2011 protests. First of all, it has become apparent that the “old” political institutions have been weakened, such as parliaments and elections. The political arena has been replaced by protests from cross-cutting segments of the societies. As the corollary of this, the Arab Uprisings have made it clear that studying merely regime typologies would not be sufficient to understand and theorise what is happening at the domestic and regional level. Instead, it is indispensable to scrutinise what is happening at the wider societal level. In this regard, it is imperative to refer to the collective volume edited by Fatima El-Issawi and Francesco Cavatorta on *The Unfinished Arab Spring*, who argued that the micro-dynamics, or precisely “the disruptive power of the human agency” behind the Uprisings have to be taken into consideration.³

Thirdly, the socio-economic disparities within the societies have to be considered as the root of the uprisings and the key motivator of the protests. In other words, people’s call for ending both corruption and unemployment has to be linked not solely to the regional order, but also to the MENA region’s positioning within the world economic structure.

Last but not least, the Arab uprisings have demonstrated that people’s demands for bread and freedom retain their validity after ten years, which are a signal of the longer-term spillover effects of the events.

³El-Issawi, F. and Cavatorta, F. (eds) (2020), *The Unfinished Arab Spring: Micro-Dynamics of revolts between change and continuity*, London: GINKO, p.6.



In line with this aim, this Special Issue published by the Near East Institute on The Arab Spring Ten Years On - Why Does the Arab Spring Still Echo? postulates a review and implications of the Arab Spring on the region since 2011, as well as on selected country studies. We owe a special thanks to Assoc. Prof. Dr. M. Moncef Khaddar for committing to write an in-depth analysis on the case of Tunisia. In his paper, he highlighted the fact that, despite constitutional constraints, the survival of a culture of presidential dominance led to recurring political stalemate in the country.

In addition, we thank both Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ayşe Ömür Atmaca from Hacettepe University and Assoc. Prof. Dr. Özüm Sezin Uzun from İstanbul Aydın University. The former underscored, on the one hand, the failure of the Arab Uprisings to have a transformative impact on Palestine's domestic politics, and on the other how Israel became the actor that benefited most from the situation; the latter examined both the Iranian perspectives on the causes of uprisings and the impacts of the Arab Spring on Iranian foreign policy.

TUNISIA AND THE 'ARAB SPRING':

POWER STRUGGLE FOR 'DEMOCRATIC' TRANSFORMATION BEFORE AND BEYOND THE 2010 'JASMINE REVOLUTION'

The diachronic overview of Tunisia's longstanding autocratic-authoritarian system needs to be scrutinised throughout the early years of autocracy, under the first autocratic President Bourguiba, 1957-1987, as well as at the subsequent different stages of its consolidation into a police-security state under the second President-autocrat, Ben Ali, 1987-2011.

Understanding Tunisia's current political developments require the above reminder regarding the former ruling authoritarian and autocratic elites who played a decisive role in shaping a specific undemocratic state-society relation under the 1st and 2nd President and left an indelible mark, structurally and ideologically, on Tunisian polity beyond the 2010-2011 popular uprisings.



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It is worth mentioning that since the early days of the 'Jasmine Revolution' in 2010 and onwards, Tunisians lived under a state of emergency almost 78% of the time. In addition, recurrent extensions of the state of emergency, regulated initially through a Presidential Decree, under Bourguiba, in 1978 'Black Thursday' and resorted to later in 1984, during the general strike, became a routine and an alarming practice.

The 2014 new Tunisian and post-revolutionary era constitution, that succeeds the 1959 one, was considered, at first, by many as the cornerstone of a post-autocratic new political order. Nevertheless, later it became a bone of contention. In the context of the end of the Ben Ali regime, the drafters of the 2014 constitution established a system of government that combines elements of parliamentary and presidential regimes. Consequently, the previous decades-long 'hyper presidentialism' and personalistic authoritarian rule gave room, at least constitutionally, to a semi-presidential regime as a bulwark against authoritarian drift. Thus, a dualistic executive with attributions shared between the Head of State and the Head of Government was instituted with their

respective seat in the Carthage Palace and 'La Kasbah'. The PM, it is assumed within this constitutional framing, to be inaugurated after obtaining the vote of the Parliament, located in 'Le Bardo', (Assembly of the Representative of the People, ARP). This latter is presently chaired by the Speaker, R. Ghannouchi, leader of Ennahda.

Despite the above-mentioned constitutional constraints, the survival of a culture of presidential dominance led to recurring political stalemate. This materialised through the confrontation between the President and the Prime Minister regarding their respective attributions. This a case in point that shows that the days of the mighty president autocrat are gone. Tense negotiations and opportunistic deals between the President of the Republic, the Head of the Government and the Speaker of the Parliament, called the 3 'presidents', evolved lately at the expense of the Head of State's attributions that are mainly centered on defense and foreign affairs.

Although Tunisia was regarded as having completed its 'democratic transition' following the Arab Spring with the adoption of the 2014 constitution and the holding of competitive elections, the institutional blockages have intensified under the presidency of Essebsi who died before finishing his 5-year mandate, in July 2019. By October of the same year, voters showed dissatisfaction with the major parties and thus elected a deeply fractured Parliament, and immediately afterward, academic Kais Saied as an outsider President.

In August 2020, President Saied designated Hichem Mechichi as prime minister. It did not take long for this latter to fall out with the Head of the State after his government kept tottering from economic to political crisis as it struggled to deal with the expanding Corona pandemic.



In 2021, government, Mechichi, was dismissed on the National Day of Celebration of the Republic on July 25, 2021. The President also suspended the Parliament, citing articles 77 and 80 of the Constitution regarding 'national security' and related to his 'duty to protect the state and the national territory from all internal and external threats'. More precisely, article 80 concerns 'exceptional circumstances' "[...] in 'the event of imminent danger that threatens the nation's institutions, the security or independence of the country that hampers the normal functioning of the state'".

The problem here, at the procedural level, is that the Head of Government and the Speaker of the Parliament, both denied having been consulted, as well as was excluded the requirement of informing the president of the still missing Constitutional Court. The declaration of the state of emergency, for 30 days, probably renewable under some conditions, by President Saied, while the Parliament is frozen, was qualified by *Ennahda* and other parliamentarians as 'a coup'.

The supporters of the President's 'intervention' applauded it as a tour de force aiming at rectifying the derailed course of 'the 2010 revolution' justified by the aim to 'unblock' the political stalemate. For the President himself, a *"Facebook post by the Tunisian presidency said Saied told the US officials that 'the measures he had taken were within the framework of implementing the constitution and responding to a popular will considering the political, economic, and social crises, and rampant corruption and bribery'".*¹



Today, new questions are formulated in different terms. What are the implications of the participation of the Tunisian army, security forces and intelligence services in the post 25 of July political arena? Is it a coincidence that the anti-Arab Spring camp, led by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, continue backing the Tunisian President? How to understand the Diplomatic ambiguity of the EU and the US while Turkish officials, close from *Ennahda*, speak of 'a coup'? Is the polarisation between 'secular' and 'religious' political movements increasing from within and without? Is Tunisia heading to authoritarianism?

Is Tunisia's turmoil 'a coup' on Islamists? Saied is launching a 'crusade' against 'political corruption' and 'crony capitalism', but some ask why today everything lies on 'the will of one man' who, almost like before him, Presidents Bourguiba, Ben Ali, and even Essebsi, enjoy posing as 'the Guide' and 'the Savior'?

Given that the deadline, for the expiration of the State of Emergency (30 days) is imminent and still no PM, responsible only to the president, has been appointed, which of the following scenarios, thought of by observers, is more credible: extension of the SoE, call for anticipated elections and a referendum?

¹ US calls on Tunisia's Saied to appoint PM, restore democracy", Al Jazeera, 14 August 2021, available online at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/14/us-calls-on-tunisia-saied-to-appoint-pm-restore-democracy> [Last accessed: 20 December 2021]

PALESTINE TEN YEARS AFTER THE ARAB SPRING

The Arab uprisings that commenced in Tunisia on 18 December 2010 with the demands of bread, freedom and justice rapidly spread in waves to the Middle East region leading to revolts in Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria. Such a sweeping political movement in the Middle East that has altered regional balances of power as well as traditional alliances would no doubt impinge upon Palestinian politics and the Israel-Palestine conflict.

In the politically divided Palestine, the uprisings created high expectations for a better future particularly among the dissatisfied young population. In the protests that began in the West Bank—which were concentrated particularly in the cities of Ramallah, Nablus, Tulkarm and Bethlehem—the demonstrators urged the Palestinian government to account for the continuing political fragmentation, deteriorating living conditions and corruption. While a reconciliation agreement was signed between Hamas and Fatah, the Arab uprisings failed to have a transformative impact on Palestine’s domestic politics due partly to the lack of determination needed for the continuation of demonstrations, and partly to the fact that the Palestinian government avoided to devise a satisfactory policy that would meet the demands of the demonstrators.



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On the other hand, in the course of the protests, which challenged the domestic politics in the country, crucial decisions for the future of Palestine were under way on various international platforms. As demonstrations continued on the Palestinian territories, President Mahmoud Abbas applied, on 23 September 2011, to the United Nations (UN) for full membership. A year later, on 29 November 2012 the UN General Assembly (UNGA) voted on Resolution 67/19 that granted Palestine “non-member observer state” status. Such decision has de facto resolved the question of Palestine’s statehood, which was already recognised by 136 out of 193 UN member states.



After the 2012 UNGA vote, the Palestinian Authority (PA) began to seek explicit support from the parliaments of European states. By 2014, the parliaments of the UK, Spain, France, Ireland and Portugal approved draft resolutions calling upon their respective governments to recognise the State of Palestine. On 30 October 2014, Sweden became the first European Union (EU) member state to recognise the State of Palestine, and on 13 May 2015, the Vatican declared its recognition of the State of Palestine. Following these favourable developments, the European Court of Justice removed Hamas from the list of terrorist organisations, which was a decision highly welcomed by the Palestinian government.

One of the most significant outcomes of the Palestinian diplomatic efforts under the leadership of Mahmoud Abbas in the period after Palestine became a non-member observer state to the UN was the admittance of the State of Palestine to the ICC. The State of Palestine signed the Rome Statute on 1 January 2015, and officially became the 123rd member of the Court on 1 April 2015.

These developments, which are of significance for Palestine, can be interpreted as consequences of the Arab uprisings on the Palestinian problem. The PA's referral of the problem to the international community, no more limiting it to the context of bilateral negotiations may be regarded as an implication of the Palestinian people's reaction towards failed peace negotiations that had been carried out for over twenty years.

In the post-2011 period, a re-launch of peace negotiations between Palestine and Israel has frequently been pronounced, and even a series of concrete initiatives have been undertaken to initiate peace negotiations under the US leadership during the last term of President Barack Obama. Despite these efforts, no effective step has been taken to ensure the healthy progression of negotiations. When the Republican Donald Trump came to power in the US in 2017, the new government reflected on changing the conditions in favour of Israel and lost its status as an honest broker for the Palestinians. By moving its embassy building from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, the Trump Administration legitimised to the claim that Jerusalem is "the eternal capital of Israel".

On the other hand, as the Syrian Civil War ensued the Arab uprisings, the Palestinian question has arguably declined in importance and come to occupy a secondary place on regional agenda. President Trump's peace plan is one of the tragic consequences of this perception. Arab states abandoned the old Arab common peace plans, which envisaged a solution to the Palestinian issue, and adopted a plan called "Deal of the Century" within the framework of the US-Saudi Arabia-United Arab Emirates-Israel agreement which imposes a political-free Palestinian solution through "economic development" and does not recognise the right of the Palestinian people to form a state. In the late 2020, Sudan, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Morocco established secret and open relations with Israel. At the end of the day, occupied, isolated and divided Palestine found itself as abandoned by its Arab allies.



To sum up, it can be argued that the last decade can be divided into two parts regarding the Palestinian issue. In the first half of the decade, between 2011 and 2017, we can see the Palestinian diplomatic efforts to isolate Israel in the international community. The granting of “non-member observer state” status to Palestine as a result of the historic vote at the UNGA in 2012, and its subsequent admission to the ICC as a member in 2015 are considered as examples of the Arab uprisings’ positive impact on the Palestinian question.

However, between 2017 and 2021 the tide turned against Palestine. The former US President Trump’s decision to move the US embassy building to Jerusalem, his official recognition of the Israeli annexation of the Syrian Golan Heights and the

decision of the four Gulf countries to normalise their relations with Israel caused Palestine to be stuck in the region despite all its international efforts. Moreover, the recent violent confrontations in the city of Sheikh Jarrah show that Israel’s discriminatory policies towards the Palestinians are now perceived by the international community as Israel’s domestic issue.

While it was quite sceptic about the Arab uprisings due to the political uncertainty and the strengthening of the Muslim Brotherhood in the region, it can be argued that Israel became the only actor that benefited the most from the situation.

A DECADE AFTER THE ARAB SPRING: IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY



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Starting in Tunisia, uprisings in the MENA countries unpredictably changed both internal politics and regional geopolitics. Since the beginning of uprisings, Iran's stance is quite noteworthy to understand its regional envisions. This paper firstly explains Iranian perspectives on the causes of uprisings. Secondly, it analyses the impacts of Arab Spring on the Iranian foreign policy, taking into consideration opportunities and challenges.

Iranian Perspectives on the Uprisings

The collapse of authoritarian regimes was welcomed by international community as a potential first step for democratisation process in the MENA countries. Iranian decision-makers, however, saw Arab uprisings as being inspired by the Islamic Revolution of 1979, so it is named in the Iranian policy discourse as "Arab Islamic Awakening." Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamaneı, for instance, has identified Islam and sense of anti-Zionism and anti-Americanism as driving forces behind the popular movements.¹

Therefore, uprisings in the Sunni Arab countries were welcomed by Iran for expanding revolutionary principles throughout the Muslim world. When demonstrations began in Egypt, Foreign Ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast, for instance, stated that "Iran expects Egyptian officials to listen to the voice of their Muslim people, respond to their rightful demands and refrain from exerting violence by security forces and police against an Islamic wave of awareness that has spread through the country in form of a popular movement."²

In addition to Islam, Iranian decision-makers explicitly described popular movements as having anti-American feature. Therefore, Iranian officials, such as former Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati, do not prefer the use of the term "Arab Spring," which is seen as attempts of Westerners to ignore the role of Islam and liken it to the "colour revolutions" in Eastern Europe.³



Views of Iranian conservatives and reformists on the uprisings are also different. While conservatives emphasise the role of anti-Americanism in uprisings, reformists underline political and economic reasons to raise against the regimes. In addition, they have different claims on Iranian influence on uprisings. As aforementioned, while conservatives relate Arab uprisings and Islamic Revolution, reformists point to the Green Movement, demonstrations for free and transparent elections in Iran in 2009.

Green Movement's leading presidential candidate, Mir Hossein Mousavi, for instance, stated Egypt received the slogans of the Iranian nation who took to the streets in 2009.⁴

Arab Uprisings: Opportunities or Challenges for Iran?

Until the uprising breakout in Syria, changes of regimes were seen as creating opportunities for Iran to support its regional ambitions.

1 Uzun, S. Ö. (2015), "The 'Arab Spring' and Its Effects on Turkish-Iranian Relations," *Ortadoğu Etütleri*, 4 (2): p. 150.

2 "Egypt Protests Draw Mixed Reaction in Region", *CNN World*, 29 January 2011, <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/01/29/egypt.middle.east.reaction/index.html> [Last accessed: 20 December 2021].

3 "Arab Spring' Not Proper Term For Uprisings in Mideast, North Africa: Velayeti", 6 December 2011, *Tehran Times*, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/394548/Arab-spring-not-proper-term-for-uprisings-in-Mideast-North> [Last accessed: 20 December 2021].

4 Jaseb, H. (2011), "Iran Says Egypt Events Herald Islamic Middle East", *Reuters*, 1 February, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-egypt-iran-idUKTRE7102UA20110201> [Last accessed: 20 December 2021].

First of all, Iranian description of uprisings as “Islamic Awakening” represents regional power role for itself. Changes in the Arab world would mean to end isolation of Iran, caused by the Islamic Revolution in 1979. However, it seems that Iran’s emphasis on the role of Islam did not result in its expectations. In contrast to Iranian claims, the leader of al-Nahda Party, for instance, said in 2012 that they were not looking to establish sharia in Tunisia. Furthermore, Arab activists did not respond positively Iranian reformist claims of influence, despite they have more sympathy to Green Movement than Islamic Revolution.⁵ Still, Iran aims to strengthen its regional soft power through broadening its respect and sympathy among the revolutionaries.

Another opportunity would be the replacement of US-backed monarchies by more friendly regimes to Iran. After cutting ties with Egypt as a result of the 1979 Camp David agreement with Israel, the Morsi Presidency was seen as a new phase for restoring bilateral relations on the basis of Non-Aligned Movement. Therefore, attendance of President Morsi at the Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Non-Aligned Movement in Tehran in 2012 increased the expectations for the rapprochement in bilateral relations.

However, by the Sisi administration, which is backed by the United States, the normalisation process in Egypt-Iran relations lost its momentum.

At this transition period of region, Iran’s foreign policy in some Arab Spring countries, such as Libya, Yemen and Syria, lies on the securitisation of identity politics, rather than peaceful transformation. This is also an extension of its fight against the United States. Uprisings in those countries became challenging task for Iran to balance its relations with the regime and the revolutionaries. For instance, “Islamic Awakening” was not used for the case of Libya, instead opposition to Western intervention was emphasised. Yemen became a battlefield of Iran’s proxy war. Syrian case, in which Iran prioritised maintaining Assad regime, also represented a shift in Iranian foreign policy towards Arab Spring. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, for instance, stated in 2012 that “The Americans and certain Western countries want to take revenge on Syria for their recent defeats in the region, including Egypt and Tunisia...



The main purpose of the U.S. plot in Syria is to deal a blow to the resistance front in the region because Syria is supporting the resistance of Palestine and the Islamic resistance of Lebanon.”⁶ As seen, uprisings in Syria are perceived by Iran as tools of Westerners for their own sake.

Syrian case did not only change Iran’s foreign policy to Arab Spring, but also made conflicting views to become more apparent in Iranian politics. Ayatollah Ali Mohammad Dastgheib, member of the Assembly of Experts, condemned sending “the national wealth of Iran to Syria and wasting it on the repression of the Syrian people, instead of providing this aid to the Iranian people.”⁷ A member of Parliament, Ahmed Avaei, also criticised Iran’s foreign policy to Syria in 2011, stating that “The reality of the matter is that our absolute support for Syria was a wrong policy... The people protesting against the government in that country are religious people, and the protest movement there is a grassroots movement.”⁸

A year later, a member of Parliament, Mohammad-Reza Tabesh, stated that “We must support the government of Syria, which is at the frontline of the struggle against Israel...But we should support it as long as the government of Syria does not treat the people of Syria badly and the rights of the people are not violated.”⁹

Uprisings in the Arab world obviously did not successfully result in as expected democratisation process in those countries. They also affected regional geopolitics that became more complicated for Iran’s foreign policy.

At the initial days of uprisings, they were seen as creating opportunities for Iran to increase its soft power across the region and to fight against the United States and Israel. In contrast to expectations, Arab uprisings did not turn to Islamic Revolution as happened in Iran in 1979. Moreover, the collapse of authoritarian regimes did not lead to neither more friendly regimes to Iran, nor hostile regimes to US or Israel.

In conclusion, on the one hand, Iran involved in regional affairs with its hard power as well, in the means of supporting some opposition groups and militias militarily, logistically and financially, since uprisings turned to civil war in some countries.

This creates further economic burden on Iran’s economy that was already damaged by the sanctions. On the other hand, Iran’s political influence has apparently expanded in the region in the last decade and current regional political circumstances would most likely trigger Iranian demands for balancing domestic and foreign policy priorities.

5 Kurzman, C. (2012), “The Arab Spring: Ideals of the Iranian Green Movement, Methods of the Iranian Revolution,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 44 (1): 162-165.

6 Nada, G. (2012), “Iran’s Evolving Policy on Syria,” *The Iran Primer*, 30 July, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2012/jul/30/iran%E2%80%99s-evolving-policy-syria> [Last accessed: 20 December 2021].

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

A DÉJÀ VU IN JORDANIAN POLITICS? THE KINGDOM BETWEEN REFORMS AND PROTESTS



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The 2011 Arab Uprisings that swept through most of the countries in the Arab Middle East did not ultimately engulf the countries with monarchical rule, precisely the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in the Mashreq and the Kingdom of Morocco in the Maghreb region. The monarchies, before and after the Uprisings, drew attention from the scholarship, as they tried to isolate the reasons that they escaped the most serious effects of the public riots.¹ This country profile, thus, aims to analyse the ongoing protests and spill-over effects of the earlier uprisings, as well as reforms in the case of the Jordanian monarchy.

Jordan has been historically regarded as the most stable country and monarchy of the region, despite its economic vulnerability and dependency on external rents. The Jordanian monarchy employs a decades-old strategy of regime-survival to cope with increased opposition in the country. What is new, however, in Jordanian politics since the 2011 Uprisings, is the mobilisation of East Bank groups, instead of Palestinian-origin Jordanians, who were historically considered as the key threat to the monarchy. This new phenomenon in Jordanian

politics, in fact, dates back to incidents in Maan in 1989 and 2002, and has snowballed day by day due to economic crisis and regional challenges. The kingdom's response – sooner or later – towards this new group of activism is, thus, rooted in what is termed the monarchical reflex – as an integral part of authoritarian learning – a tool that Arab republican regimes are deprived of.

Early on, the demands of the demonstrators around the Arab World primarily centred around fighting unemployment and corruption, as well as asking for more space in the political arena. In the case of Jordan, the protesters did not vocally call for regime change, but rather demanded genuine political and economic reforms. Having said that, the huge influx of Syrian refugees into Jordan (following the eruption of civil war in Syria after 2011) enormously exacerbated the existing socio-economic and political cleavages in the post-uprisings era.



Whilst Jordan represents one of the most stable regimes in the Arab Middle East, the effects of the war in Syria and a decline in foreign aid provided by Jordan's traditional protectors (such as the Gulf countries) have been that the Kingdom has become more susceptible to socio-economic cleavages since then. Jordan today hosts 672,809 refugees, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees² (whereas the unofficial records show that this number exceed 1 million), who have crossed into the country since the outbreak of the war in Syria. This means that, after Turkey and Lebanon, Jordan hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees worldwide. Jordan –which has served as a homeland for Palestinians since the 1948–49 Arab-Israeli War, and for Iraqi refugees since 2003 – is presently reputed to have one of the highest numbers of refugees per capita of any country in the world (along with Lebanon).

A Déjà vu in Jordanian politics: Jordan's 'new' opposition and the regime's responses

The public demonstrations first took the streets in Jordan on 11 January 2011, called The Day of Anger. As had been the case during the 1989 riots, the kingdom re-exploited the policy of a "return to democracy" as a regime-survival measure as soon as the public outcry emerged, each time successfully preserving the stability of the monarchy. One of its key aims was to replace Prime Minister Samir al-Rifai with Marouf Bakhit immediately after the riots. Since then, Jordanians have seen seven different prime ministers. Although it experienced the large-scale protests mainly on 11 January and 24 March 2011, Jordan was not one of the countries to be engulfed by the public unrest. Nevertheless, the Arab riots also triggered the mobilisation of different societal segments; their key target was the government rather than the monarchy. As stated by Sean Yom, the protests were comprised of:

newer protest groups led by East Bank urban elites, such as the March 24 Movement, followed this approach of moderation, emphasising a gradual approach to political reform rather than immediate action. Furthermore, these demonstrations were more stage-managed exercises than spontaneous revolts, complete with fixed marching routes, pre-distributed slogans, frequent utterances of loyalty to the throne, and cordial relations with police, many of whom infamously provided water bottles to thirsty protestors.³

¹ Anderson, L. (1991), "Absolutism and the resilience of monarchy in the Middle East", *Political Science Quarterly*, 106 (1): 1-15; Köprülü, N. (2012), "Consolidated monarchies in the post-Arab Spring era", *Israel Affairs*, 20 (3): 318-327; Kuhnhardt, L. (2012), "The resilience of Arab monarchy", *Policy Review*, 173: 57-67.

² "Operational Data Portal: Refugee Situations", <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/36> [Last accessed: 20 December 2021].

³ Yom, S. (2014), "Tribal Politics in Contemporary Jordan: The Case of the Hirak Movement", *Middle East Journal*, 18 (2): 2, p.232.

The kingdom was, however, increasingly alarmed by the early June 2018 protests, which included calls for the dismissal of Prime Minister Hani Mulki, and to lift the new tax law imposed by the government. In fact, the roots of these protests trace back to March 2018, when a group of Jordanian lawyers from the Jordanian Bar Association (JBA) rejected the arrest of activists who took part in the January demonstrations challenging the government's lifting of bread subsidies. The JBA considered the arrests a violation of freedom of expression and called for the protestors' release. At first glance, these public protests seem to have been motivated by the "new tax law", which would raise citizens' income tax from 4.5 to 10%, but, in fact, the people's demands were closely intertwined with the so-called late Spring in Jordan, or the second wave of Uprisings in the region as a whole.

Jordanians' call for political opening still retains its salience today. There exist several major fault lines to be analysed in Jordanian society. In fact, the constitutional reforms and internal cleavages (discrepancies among including urban/ rural as well as East and West Bankers) have historically hindered processes of political liberalisation in the country. As a result of the huge influx of Palestinians after the Arab-Israeli wars, there is a cleavage between East and West Bankers (i.e. Jordanian-origin and Palestinian-descent Jordanians citizens) in the country. Since the incorporation of the West Bank into the Kingdom of Jordan in 1950, Palestinians numerically outnumber East Bank Jordanians (or Jordanian-Jordanians) in the general population. From time to time, the monarchy has managed to immunise itself against enormous public anger by exploiting this division between East Bankers and West Bankers.

Despite the constitutional amendments, the trend towards political reformation in the post-2011 era has been at standstill in Jordan. The opposition today openly demand for both the amendment of the 1993 Electoral Law and also economic reform package fostering job opportunities for the young generation. What is new in the case of Jordan, however, is the emergence the independent group known as Hirak Shababi (a youth movement comprising young people aged 25 to 35) with the support of 33 professional associations and civil society groups. These groups also include the Kingdom's two key pressure groups, Jordan's Engineers Association and the Jordanian Teachers Syndicate, with approximately 300,000 members.



Another important actor in Jordan's politics is the Muslim Brotherhood (al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin). The Jordanian branch of the Brotherhood has been a long-standing neutral ally of the monarchy, and until recently had never been regarded as a threat to the survival of Hashemite rule. It was precisely the fact of the regime's dependency upon the Ikhwan at the height of Pan-Arabist forces and the civil war of 1970-71 that allowed the Brotherhood to be designated as a charity organisation, and to attract new members even before the ban on political parties was lifted in 1992. The toppling of President Mohammed Morsi in Egypt in July 2013 and the designation of the Ikhwan by Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as a "terrorist" organisation urged Jordan to take serious steps to contain the Jordanian branch. In so doing, the Kingdom cracked down on some offices of the Ikhwan in the country for not renewing the organisation's license, and asked the Brotherhood to register. One of the fundamental reasons behind this move by the monarchy was the detachment of the newly formed Jordanian "new" Brotherhood led by Thunaybat in 2015 from the "old" one, which was affiliated with the Egyptian Ikhwan. The head of the Al-Quds Centre for Political Studies centred in Amman, Oraib Al-Rantawi, told Al-Monitor that, *"What the media does not tell you is that the power struggle is between two distinct groups [East Bank Jordanians and Jordanians of Palestinian origin], and the government has taken sides, although the new society has no grass-roots support."*⁴

What's Next?

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan today serves as a good example of consolidated monarchies in the Arab World in spite of the aforementioned societal divisions. A Committee for political reform was formed by King Abdullah II recently in June 2021, which is responsible for launching the constitutional reforms. To run a genuine reform package, the Committee has to take critical steps.⁵ This country profile is, therefore, aimed at addressing the motivations behind Jordan's first and second wave of uprisings since the 2011 Arab Spring and the socio-economic disparity baggage that triggered the more recent protests since June 2018. Some have argued that Jordan is exempt from the Arab upheavals; however, the recent demonstrations have made it clear that no country in the region is, in fact, immune from the protests. What makes the case of Jordan different from others is still, by some estimations, the 'red line' of the protests, that it was the incumbent government instead of the monarchy that was targeted directly. In this regard, Jordan would be one of the litmus tests for the post-Arab Spring era, wherein long-standing cleavages and economic dependency on external actors have not posed a threat to the Kingdom's stability, but the growing new-generation opposition in the form of Hirak demonstrates that, unlike the former regime-led reform packages, a genuine reform initiative is extremely necessary.

⁴ Al Sharif, O. (2015), "Jordan takes sides in Islamist rift", Al Monitor, 12 May, available online at: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/05/jordan-government-side-muslim-brotherhood-society-split.html#ixzz3wrLKg7Do>

[Last accessed: 20 December 2021].

⁵ Al Sharif, O. (2021), "King appoints new commission for political reform in Jordan", Al Monitor, 17 June, available online at:

<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/06/king-appoints-new-commission-political-reform-jordan> [Last accessed: 20 December 2021].

