

CENTRE for MEDITERRANEAN, MIDDLE EAST and ISLAMIC STUDIES

# MEB #39

MiddleEastBulletin

A Greek Review of Middle Eastern Affairs

January 2021

THE ARAB UPRISINGS: BREAK ON THROUGH TO THE OTHER SIDE



UNIVERSITY OF THE PELOPONNESE

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# INTRODUCTION



Stavros Drakoularakos

**O**N THE EVE of the ten-year anniversary of the Arab Uprisings of 2011, CEMMIS has opted to commemorate the event via a series of analyses focused on the repercussions and developments related to Middle Eastern countries during the previous decade. One should note that the CEMMIS *Middle East Bulletin 39* is titled *The Arab uprisings: Break on through to the other side for several reasons*. The first is that it is a very catchy title and references to a song which – as the Arab uprisings – influenced an entire generation. The second is that the purpose of the Bulletin is to shine a light on the countries, as well as on the people directly affected by the Arab uprisings but were nonetheless subjected to their aftereffects. The third reason is that although the Arab Spring is commonly associated with the countries which saw their regimes toppled, its repercussions influenced and still drive policies and social movements throughout the Middle East and beyond. As a result, the current issue will abstain from examining Tunisia, Egypt, Libya or Syria, as these countries bore the immediate brunt of the Arab Spring developments, for better or for worse.

Instead, the Bulletin intends to shift the attention both on the countries which saw their established regimes or political systems as being challenged by the possibility of the reproduction of the uprisings in their territories, as well as on those which viewed the Arab Spring as a springboard from which they could increase or accrue their clout in the wider Middle Eastern region. In addition, the effects on society, in regard to political ideology, culture, social movement and artistic expression, are not left out of the loop, as, to say the least, they represent the very factors which led to the uprisings in the first place.

Moreover, the analyses that follow place emphasis on three axes of the Arab Uprisings; first, the impact on the population as it pertains to ideological, political and artistic expression; second, the ways with which unaffected countries attempted to use the uprisings' message for their own interests; and, third, the influence of the uprisings throughout the previous decade in regard to rights movements and the relationship with the state itself.

Hence, the geopolitical aspects of the uprisings are examined through the lens of the struggle for cultural, ideological, and political regional hegemony in *Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood: Bonding through ideology*, *'The Saudi Spring': a new political order and an aspiring regional hegemon*, *The Arab Spring's transformative impact through the lens of the UAE and Qatari distinct trajectories*. Accordingly, one cannot but address the European reaction and stance – or lack thereof – to the Arab Spring developments in *Europe goes with the flow in the Mediterranean*. Furthermore, the next six papers undertake the task of showcasing the impact and the influence of the Arab uprisings in regard to socio-political developments and reforms in Middle Eastern countries. Thus, *Lebanon: a delayed uprising?*, *A 'Kurdish Spring' amid 2011 Arab uprisings?*, *Sugarcoating authoritarianism with reforms: Who benefited from the 2011 demonstrations in Morocco?*, *On the impact of the Arab Spring on the Palestinian movement*, *Iran and the Arab Spring and The Arab Spring and the Case of Jordan* distill and paint a picture of the nascent societal movements either born out or further enhanced and inspired by the original 2011 demonstrations. As such, the analyses *Theater and the Arab Spring: a revolutionary stage and The Arab Spring on the Walls* illustrate the impression left by the Arab uprisings on artistic society to great effect. The final analysis *The Arab Spring: A re-appraisal* reflects on the origins of the Arab uprisings, the challenges related to political Islam, state and non-state actors, acting as a fitting cap to the bulletin.

In other words, the Arab uprisings and their ten-year anniversary cannot and should not be viewed as a one-time, temporal or regional limited event. Its repercussions and developments paved the way for the restructuring of the way that one is able to understand and view the Middle Eastern world for the decades to come. As such, it goes without saying that the twenty-year or thirty-year anniversaries of the uprisings will certainly be even more interesting and poignant, as history will serve as the final(?) say regarding the impact of the Arab Spring.





# The Arab Spring's transformative impact through the lens of the UAE and Qatari distinct trajectories

Ilias Mitrousis

The Persian Gulf monarchies were -with Yemen's exception- spared from the protracted instability which the other Arab countries faced during and following the Arab Spring protests. They however did not remain untouched. The UAE and Qatar are two prime examples of countries that, while being domestically calm, have nonetheless been impacted and participated significantly in the regional events since 2011. The article aims to examine their diverse responses to the Arab Spring and the outcomes thereof as a reflection of the uprisings' massive regional impact.

**S**INCE THE DAWN OF THE 2011 PROTESTS, the Emirati ruling families were already watching the swift regime changes and the Muslim Brotherhood's political Islam resurgence in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen with unease. However, the Arab Spring's quick spillover in Bahrain with massive demonstrations, and Qatar's active foreign policy and its growing support for resurgent Islamists across the MENA region, were the two catalysts which shaped the UAE's threat perception. In Bahrain, the uprisings' demands quickly evolved from reforms to the overthrow of the Kingdom's ruler Hamad Bin Isa al-Khalifa. It was a clear-cut example of how the Gulf monarchies' legitimacy could be questioned in the same manner as the Arab republican states.<sup>1</sup> The UAE's ruling families quickly realized that, and so did Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ), Abu Dhabi's crown-prince, who is widely considered to be the country's de-facto ruler.

What followed was a swift crackdown on any form of dissent that could threaten the status quo. Along with several vocal liberal intellectuals, the 'Al-Islah' movement –the Muslim Brotherhood's offshoot in the country– was the crackdown's primary recipient. After all, political Islam is considered the strongest delegitimizing alternative to the Gulf's monarchical system. The movement's presence in the country dated back to the 1970s, and it enjoyed relative support in the northern –and less well-off– Emirates of Fujairah and Ras al-Khaimah. It had established a notable presence in student and professional associations, as well as within state institutions, and was increasingly outspoken in its criticism of the Emirati rulers.<sup>2</sup> While the state had tightened its grip on the movement since MBZ was appointed as deputy crown-prince in 2003, the 2011-2012 Arab uprisings presented the Emirati rulers with a 'golden' opportunity. Hence, Al-Islah was officially outlawed and disbanded on the basis that it aimed to create a 'state within the state' on account of foreign interests, hinting overtly at the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Dozens of its prominent members were arrested and sentenced to prison or stripped of their citizenship. The government's pre-emptive persecution crescendo also included individuals and think tanks with no links to the movement, thus effectively discouraging potential social reactions.<sup>3</sup>

One week after the dissolution of Isla, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), spearheaded by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, intervened militarily in Bahrain to support the al-Khalifa family. The protests were dubbed as sectarian and the intervention was legitimized through Hamad al-Khalifa's official request for assistance. Potential protracted instability in Bahrain caused by Shia -albeit not entirely- dominated protests was something the UAE -and Saudi Arabia- could not afford, given their already intense competition with Iran and the latter's active support of Shia militias throughout the region.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the US failure to support its former autocrat allies such as Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt was bitterly conceived by the UAE elites as a policy shift and prompted them to focus more heavily on the self-help principle. As such, the intervention in Bahrain took place through the prism of these rationales. That was the first sign of the MBZ-led UAE assuming a military-oriented interventionist foreign policy in areas it considers vital for its national security. Following Bahrain, the UAE's anti-Islamist, anti-Iranian and pro-autocratic regional interventionist policy unfolded further, thus rendering the UAE a driving force of authoritarian resurgence in the MENA region. In Libya, the Gulf country joined the coalition to ouster Gadhafi in 2011 and supported several emerging non-Islamist militias, and later on Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar. In Egypt, it supported the military overthrow of democratically elected and Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated President Mohammed Morsi. In Yemen, the UAE joined the Saudi coalition to battle the Houthi insurgency and later backed the southern anti-Islamist se-



cessionists. Of similar nature was the country's involvement in the Syrian civil war. The Emirates backed secular and anti-Islamist groups and later adopted a more pragmatic and toned-down approach towards the Assad regime.<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly though, the UAE were not the only protest-spared Gulf country that attempted to expand its influence in the region on the occasion of the Arab uprisings. Qatar, similarly to the UAE, did not face protest waves. That was largely due to its ability to sustain a prosperous universal welfare state, funded by its massive LNG exports' income.<sup>6</sup> Yet, it followed a completely different path down the Arab Spring from the other Gulf countries. While Doha supported the intervention in Bahrain under the GCC's common rationale, it also actively backed the anti-regime protests in Libya, Egypt, and Syria, and particularly their Islamist elements. Qatar's approach regarding the Muslim Brotherhood was not security-oriented. While the country hosted members of the organization since the 1950s, the al-Thani dynasty had managed to co-opt them. The silent pact ensured that the organization was free to maintain its cross-border links and activities on the condition that it would never interfere in domestic politics.<sup>7</sup> What is more, since 1995, former Qatari Emir Shaikh Khalifa bin Hamad Al Thani exploited the country's enormous wealth and the vast regional connections of the Qatari-based Brotherhood members to upgrade the country's soft power as a steadfast international mediator. The country's capacity as an intermediary for indirect negotiations was evidenced in multiple cases; between the US and the Taliban, Hamas and Israel, as well as in Lebanon (2008), in Darfur (2008-2010), and Yemen (2008-2010). Yet, as the Muslim Brotherhood rose to prominence in the Arab uprisings' initial phase, Qatar quickly sought to capitalize on its aforementioned links. By early-picking winners and supporting Islamists in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Syria with considerable largesse, Doha soon found itself on the opposite side of the other Gulf monarchies; specifically, Riyadh and the Emiratis.<sup>8</sup>

Qatar's 'pro-Islamist' foreign policy eventually backfired. Although the new Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani had seemingly agreed with the Emiratis and the Saudis to stop supporting regional-Islamists in 2013, the monarchies remained unconvinced of Qatar's credibility in the mid-term. Despite specific conciliatory steps that involved the deportations of several Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated individuals, the Al Jazeera network persisted in criticizing the Egyptian military regime, and Doha maintained its links with Islamist organizations and individuals across the region.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, Qatar's relationship with Turkey, which is considered by the UAE and the Saudis as a revisionist power with an Islamist ruling party and president, continued to grow. In fact, Qatar has hosted a contingent of Turkish troops since 2015. The GCC's disenfranchisement culminated in the forceful blockade imposed on the country in 2017. Spearheading the blockade were MBZ's UAE along with Saudi Arabia. Ironically, the intervention's punitive nature pushed Qatar even closer to Turkey and –to some extent– Iran, which



actively helped the Emirate to resupply and continue its commercial activities. Doha and Ankara even signed a defense cooperation deal in June 2017.<sup>10</sup> However, the GCC's intervention did manage to impact Doha's international standing and defame its credibility as a mediator, hence limiting its ability to project soft power.

To sum up, MBZ's security-oriented reaction to the Arab Spring's regional events has encouraged the adoption and execution of an interventionist foreign policy. This policy transcends the UAE's traditional sphere of influence, and to a certain extent, even points to emancipation from the Saudis.<sup>11</sup> This is tellingly reflected in the Emirati involvement in Libya and the recent normalization of relations with Israel. Qatar also sought to turn the crisis into an opportunity to realize its aspirations of greater regional clout. Yet, by using existing and establishing new links with Islamist elements across the Arab sphere, it eventually drew the other Gulf monarchies' ire. However, Qatar's punishment for 'punching above its weight' did not break it; instead, it opened inroads of influence for other powers, a fact that only adds tensions in the Gulf region. All in all, the Arab Spring did not present the UAE and Qatar with domestic challenges. However, its transformative dynamics certainly triggered divergent responses that influenced their foreign policies and will continue to impact the regional balances for the years to come.

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# THE SAUDI SPRING



## a new political order and an aspiring regional hegemon

In the wake of the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia was considered to be amongst the countries that were untouched by popular dissent and the wave causing regime change sweeping the Arab world. Despite that, Riyadh wasn't as bulletproof as it seemed at first and had to respond to domestic challenges and adjust to new conditions in the Gulf regional sub-system. After tackling short-term effects that could destabilize domestic politics and its immediate neighborhood, Riyadh was presented with a new geopolitical status quo that posed an opportunity in reversing Iranian influence. Ten years after the popular uprisings, Riyadh and its new Crown Prince have moved to consolidation of power, an aggressive foreign policy and renewed aspirations for regional hegemony.

Alexandra Nikopoulou

**S**AUDI ARABIA WAS FACING similar challenges with other Arab countries and in the wake of popular uprisings, authorities in Riyadh were afraid of a possible spillover effect that would threaten the status quo both in the country and the wider Gulf region. Corruption, unemployment, a growing young population, human rights violations, particularly among Shias, and discrimination against women coupled with an isolated, aging leadership, created an explosive mix. All factors that could lead to widespread protests and a revolution were there. However, in contrast with other Arab states, Saudi Arabia had the - mainly financial - means to largely silence voices of dissent. Riyadh was particularly quick in its reaction to provide an increase in pay for public servants, monthly stipends to the unemployed, housing for low-income people and support to religious organizations that were feared to become rising centers of power as it happened in other Arab countries. Following the crackdown on protests in the Shia'-majority Eastern Province and securing the leadership in neighboring Bahrain-a move that was a prelude to Riyadh's strategic moves moving forward- Saudi Arabia was ready to assume its role as an aspiring leader of the Gulf.<sup>1</sup>

What is interesting is the contrasting perception of the Revolution domestically and foreign policy-wise. While it posed a challenge for the leadership of the country internally, externally it proved to be a great opportunity for counterbalancing Iranian influence and assuming a more active role across the Middle East. Prior to the Arab Spring, Riyadh was acting as a regional coordinator, and in the light of expanding Iranian influence in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and even Palestinian territories, it was limiting its initiatives in the Gulf region.<sup>2</sup> Popular uprisings, particularly in the Gulf, were considered as an Iranian attempt to attack and topple legitimate Sunni governments by mobilizing the Shia population in those countries. Thus, Saudi Arabia had to urgently re-claim its role as a leader of the Gulf and ensure it would benefit from the changing political order. Quickly, Riyadh became the leader of a counter-revolution by approaching Jordan and Morocco to participate in the GCC as a way to stabilize their monarchies, providing a \$4 billion grant to the military government of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in Egypt and later on leading a military intervention in Yemen and supporting Syrian opposition.<sup>3</sup> Even though initially Saudi Arabia feared that the Arab Spring could lead to a destabilization of the region's political order, Riyadh was able to utilize the opportunities to take on a more active regional role and claim the hegemony of the Middle East. As Iranian-backed regimes were facing popular dissent and local conflicts could be perceived along sectarian lines, the Saudi regime was able to extend its influence and question the Revolutionary Axis formed by Tehran since early 2000s.

On the domestic front, the impact of the Arab Spring was not as obvious. Apart from immediate attempts to respond to people's demands with financial means, initial efforts for reforms were limited to cosmetic changes. Despite that, in the mid-term, the events of the Arab Spring played a pivotal role to the ascendance in the kingdom and the rise of Mohammed Bin Salman as Crown Prince of the country in 2015. Muhammed Bin Salman is a crucial element of the next day in Saudi Arabia and holds the most significant role in the new era for the Kingdom. The rise of a young Crown Prince signaled the end of the old political order, as MBS is appealing to the young population of the country and represents change. Following his appointment as new Crown Prince, MBS, who became the de facto head of the Saudi state, took on initiatives that would address economic challenges and restore the Kingdom as a leader in the Middle East. His renowned Vision 2030 aims at tackling corruption and unemployment, while the Crown Prince also focused on



attacking the old political establishment, by creating an anti-corruption committee. Despite this being presented as an effort to respond to systemic failures in the country, it was rather an effort to consolidate power and send a clear message to his opponents. The arrest of fellow princes, technocrats and businessmen not only weakened any form of opposition but also signaled that no one is above reach and that MBS was rather willing to take on all his possible foes to ensure his successful rule. As a consequence of the Arab Spring and the rise of the religious establishment, MBS even claimed that he was willing to return to moderate Islam, thus distancing himself from Wahhabi religious leaders and ensuring they do not pose a threat to the regime.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, MBS ensured his hold to power through the consolidation of military and security control in the country.<sup>5</sup>

At the foreign policy level, MBS has been characterized as the architect of the intervention in Yemen, while his rise also coincided with the blockade of GCC to Qatar and rising tensions with the Iranian-leaning state. Both cases worked as a way to counter Iranian influence in the Gulf and were also in line with the sectarian rhetoric adopted by the state. As the new order was emerging, Saudi Arabia found a window to challenge Iranian dominance and engaged in several proxy conflicts and attacks towards its enemies in an effort to extend its leadership. Despite that, certain fronts proved harder to win than others. The Al-Assad regime in Syria managed to survive, while the war in Yemen became MBS's nemesis.<sup>6</sup>

Even though Saudi Arabia was not deeply affected by the wave of popular dissent, it did face both domestic and regional challenges. At the domestic level, the Kingdom was quick to address the issues, albeit inadequately. Protests had a more long-term effect that led to the transformation of the country's leadership and the rise of a new political order that, contrary to other Arab states, revolved around a sole actor, the new Crown Prince. Even though events of the Arab Spring did not destabilize the Kingdom, they sparked a sense of insecurity that led to further consolidation of power in an effort to leave little room for the extended political elite to challenge the palace. This perception also resulted in more aggressive initiatives at regional level that did not always work to the Saudis' favor. The main consequence of the Arab Spring was the damage in the country's relations to the U.S., as Washington stood in favor of the Revolution –particularly in Egypt- and had to work its way in regaining Saudi trust.<sup>7</sup> Ten years since the Arab Spring, Riyadh has managed to restore and forge a closer relationship with its western allies and Israel, has overcome the pitfall of domestic unrest and is the undisputed leader of the Gulf. 2010 was a pivotal moment that opened new opportunities for Riyadh,

despite the fact that its overexpansion has damaged the reputation of the Kingdom and could prove risky in the long-term.



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# IRAN & IRAN

## THE ARAB SPRING

Although Iran's reaction to the Arab uprisings was initially enthusiastic, cautious and calculated, soon the Islamic Republic took up a central role in countries like Syria and Yemen. At the same time, the last decade of upheavals in the region have overshadowed the Iranian Spring of 2009, which pre-dated the Arab one and which gradually is attempting to resurface.

Eleni Ntarvis-Tampar

### Was Iran For or Against the Arab uprisings?

**IN THE BEGINNING OF THE ARAB UPRISINGS**, Supreme Leader Khomeini was quick to support the protests and wanted to portray the image that the Arab Spring was an Islamic awakening and a continuation of the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Even though there were strong secular and leftist elements, soon Islamic powers like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Nahda Party in Tunis gave an Islamic hue to the popular demands. Interestingly, the welcoming attitude of Iran towards the Sunni Islamic parties demonstrated an element of appeasing the Sunni-Shia tensions.

More specifically, the uprising in Egypt was welcomed by Iran, as it viewed the Muslim Brotherhood as a friendly organization with “the perception” of an “equal footing” between the two Islamic centers.<sup>1</sup> The Iranian media referred to Iran and Egypt as “two wings of the Islamic world”. Tehran was hoping that Morsi’s presidency would breathe new life in the Iranian-Egyptian relations and pave the way for better relations among the states of the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, after the Morsi government was overthrown by a military coup by current President Al-Sisi, the relationship between Cairo and Tehran soured, given the former’s anti-Iranian stance. According to Ayatollah Khomeini, Tunisians were inspired by the Islamic Revolution and the ‘oppressed masses’ were moving against the corrupted autocracy of Bin-Ali. The Islamic Republic had a similar reaction to the uprisings in Morocco, Libya, Jordan, Oman, Algeria and, even more so, the Shia-dominated popular uprising in Bahrain. The same perspective existed also for Libya, until Saudi Arabia’s and the US intervention automatically distanced Iran from the scene, as Tehran had limited interests in Libya and no Shia base community that would seek Iranian assistance. In addition, Iran was becoming all the more involved in the crisis of countries that threatened Iran’s interests, such as Syria.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the declarations of supporting the uprisings in their early stages, Tehran’s different stance in Syria agitated Sunni-Shia relations. The Assad regime is an important ally of the Islamic Republic since the Iran-Iraq war and even links Iran with other allies in the region such as Hezbollah in Lebanon. When a hundred thousand protestors took the streets in Syria against Assad’s regime, Tehran’s rhetoric regarding the Syrian uprising changed and was geared towards conspiracy-oriented theories, which suggested that they were driven by foreign actors and their interests. Losing Damascus would be a significant disadvantage for the Islamic Republic and would weaken the Shia Crescent in the region. Consequently, Tehran provided support for Assad’s regime via financial assistance, weaponry and logistical support in order to counter the anti-government groups.<sup>4</sup> The rebellion of the Shia Houthi in Yemen provided an opportunity for Iran to substantiate its rhetoric of encouraging the protests against the oppressor and its interests to expand its influence in the region, which soon escalated into a ‘proxy’ war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iran had no significant involvement in Yemen prior to the Arab uprising. From an Iranian perspective, however, attaining allies close to Saudi’s borders would satisfy its strategic objectives. Under this prism, one may argue that the Arab uprisings offered many opportunities for Iran. Nonetheless, the foreign policy choices of the Islamic Republic, particularly in Syria and Yemen, dragged the country into the turmoil that followed the Arab Spring, adding to the financial woes of Iran.



### What happened to the Iranian spring?

The contradictory stance of Iran vis-a-vis the Arab uprisings had generated frustration and anger among many Iranians, who either criticized the ruling elites for their hypocrisy in supporting the Arab uprisings or who condemned Iran's costly interventions. It should be noted that the Arab uprisings started a year after the Green Movement of 2009. Many Iranians had doubted the outcome of the presidential elections, which ignited massive demonstrations. Similar to the Arab Spring, the Green Movement had high youth participation and used social media to organize the protests;<sup>5</sup> they protested against the establishment of Iran, the financial crisis and the growing unemployment rate.<sup>6</sup> The movement consisted mainly of urban middle class people, which demanded more rights, such as freedom of expression and an end to the political corruption. The Iranian government, in order to suppress the protests, set the Basij Resistance Force, a paramilitary organization under the direct command Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Ayatollah Khomeini, to arrest and use extreme violence, leading to numerous casualties among the protesters, and, instead of reforms in favor of the demands of the protesters, the government increased the political role of Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and enhanced other security services.

At the same time, the increased involvement of Iran's government in the wars in Syria and Yemen burdened the economy of the country. In addition, it should also take under consideration that the US withdrawal from the JCPOA agreement and the sanctions reimposed against Iran increased the country's isolation and accelerated the financial crisis.<sup>7</sup> One of the basic economic sectors of Iran, the crude oil production decreased to 2.08mbpd in 2018, the lowest level since the Iraq-Iran War of 1980. As a result of the high inflation, food prices doubled in 2019 compared to 2016-2017.<sup>8</sup> Not to mention, fuel price increased by 300%. Given the deteriorating economy of Iran, it came to no surprise when anti-government protests started again.<sup>9</sup> In fact, both in 2017 and more recently in 2019, there were protests across 50 cities of Iran as a response to the continuous political corruption, the never-ending economic crisis. Once again, the security forces proceeded with arresting hundreds of people and leaving twenty-one protesters killed.<sup>10</sup> According to Amnesty International, at least 304 people were killed in 2019, while others were tortured and prisoned by



the Basij. Similar to its Arab counterparts, the Iranian government continued to violate human rights, including shutting down the internet for several weeks.<sup>11</sup> Despite the intense momentum of the 2019 protests, the global pandemic has taken a heavy toll on the country and the government had to impose a nationwide movement restriction to tackle the health crisis, shunning any possibility for popular mass mobilization. Nevertheless, these protests show that to some extent the Green Movement or part of it is still alive.<sup>12</sup>

The Iranian government during the Arab Spring attempted



to carve its space in the region as a leading force for all Muslims. Iran was in favor of the developments in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Bahrain because of the expectation of a geostrategic shift in the regional balance of power. Nevertheless, when the Arab Spring reached countries that threatened the Iranian interests in the region, Tehran changed its rhetoric and opted for a deeper involvement in averting the Arab Spring. In turn, this involvement had negative implications on the Iranian economy and, by extension, the society, which reignited protests. Despite the fact that the Arab Spring overshadowed the Iranian spring's efforts, there is evidence that the protests that have been taking place in Iran since the Green Movement of 2009 have many elements in common with the Arab uprisings, despite the different place and time.

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# A “Kurdish Spring” amid 2011 Arab uprisings?

Katia Zagoritou

The effects of the uprisings which erupted throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in 2011 and the ensuing developments have gone beyond the region, affecting neighboring countries, such as Turkey, Iraq, and Iran, and the Kurds living therein. Apart from Syria, where Kurds seized the opportunity of the power vacuum establishing the de facto autonomous region of Rojava, the Kurdish political actors in the other three Middle Eastern states - mostly in Turkey and Iraq- have sought to voice their grievances and demand cultural and political rights, as well as to take advantage of the newly emerged opportunities.

**T**HE “ARAB SPRING” WHICH ERUPTED in late 2010 and the overthrow of the two autocrats in Tunisia and Egypt activated grievances not only among Arab peoples, as its appellation suggests, but also among non-Arab populations of the region such as the Kurds. Yet, in the case of the Kurds who do not enjoy statehood but varying degrees of state-like structures – the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRG) being hitherto the closest to statehood – or local administration, these grievances have been addressed to different extent against the states within they live as well as against the Kurdish political elites.

Considering that the Kurdish political actors have been struggling for cultural, social and political rights for many decades, the Arab uprisings and the ensuing developments provided them with important opportunities to advance their goals. Most importantly, the Kurds in Syria seized the historic opportunity in 2012, amidst the Syrian uprising’s transformation to civil war and the subsequent weakening of the regime, to establish the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), commonly known as Rojava. Yet, although the other three Middle Eastern states – Turkey, Iran and Iraq – did not witness a wave of protests similar to that which swept the region, with the exception of Iraq and the KRG where relatively small-scale protests broke out, the Kurds therein have been varyingly affected by the regional developments.<sup>1</sup>

### **KRG: ‘Kurdish Spring(s)’ in Sulaymaniyah**

When the Arab uprisings erupted, both Iraqis and Kurds mobilized against their governments over economic hardship, corruption and the lack of effective services. However, although they shared similar concerns, their protest movements did not merge and followed different paths. Protests in Iraq broke out in many cities in February 2011 but the participation remained relatively small, partially due to the swift restrictive and repressive measures put forward by the government. Additionally, unlike the Kurdish protests which posed a direct threat to the two ruling parties, the Iraqi protests were rather revolved around the economic grievances and the lack of accountability. Regarding the Kurds, they actually had their own ‘Kurdish Spring’ which was confined though to Kurdistan’s second-largest city, Sulaymaniyah. Indeed, on February 17, 2011, demonstrations – partially led by the Gorran (Change) Party – erupted against the two-party system and the economic woes and lasted almost two months until their brutal crackdown by the Kurdish security forces, which led to the killing of at least ten people. The 62-day uprisings echoed the people’s grievances and the mistrust vis-à-vis the Kurdish leadership in the KRG and broke the crafted image of the “democratic haven” in an autocratic Iraq.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, following the US troops’ withdrawal in late 2011 and the instability that resulted from the developments related to the Arab uprisings, notably the Syrian war and the ISIS’s rise, the Kurds sought to benefit from the weakened central government and to pursue their goals related to self-determination, such as the control of disputed territories and the resources thereof while they were fighting against the jihadist threat in their territories as well.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the territorial gains achieved have been proved fleeting after the miscalculated 2017 independence referendum. Thenceforth, the KRG has been confronted with strained relations with Baghdad alongside to several waves of demonstrations sharing similar demands with those of 2011; the most recent being those that broke out once again in the Sulaymaniyah province on December 2, 2020.<sup>4</sup>



### **Turkey: 'Kurdish Spring' in pause**

In Turkey, which did not witness uprisings at the time of the 'Arab Spring', a wave of protests led by the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) was however in process due to the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) unwillingness to fulfill the Kurdish demands for education in Kurdish, the release of political prisoners, an end to military operations and the election threshold's abolition. Previously, the failure of the Kurdish Opening (Kürt Açılımı) alongside the closure of the Democratic Society Party (DTP) and the arrest of more than a thousand of its members in 2009 had preceded. Erdogan's double standards towards the protests at home and in Arab countries, that is repression against Kurds and statements of sympathy towards the protesters in Tahrir squares, further alienated Kurds. The BDP called for civil disobedience in June 2011 and proclaimed "Democratic Autonomy" one month later in Diyarbakir (Amed). In the meantime, clashes erupted between the PKK and Turkish soldiers which halted the peace talks until January 2013, when a new series of peace talks reopened, this time through the BDP and PKK's imprisoned leader, Abdullah Öcalan. In summer 2013, Turkey experienced high-scale protests, the so-called Gezi Park protests, which were considered as a serious threat to the AKP rule, which in turn violently repressed them. The Kurds' stance vis-à-vis the Gezi Park protests was affected by the peace process at the time and was mostly defined by hesitancy and/or resentment regarding the violence that Kurds have been experiencing all these years. Their participation was therefore rather limited.<sup>5</sup>

As Kavak argues, the 'Kurdish Spring' in Turkey was materialized into "the peaceful incorporation of the Kurdish movement into the mainstream Turkish political structure via the HDP" in 2014 and 2015 with a political agenda promoting the democratization of the entire Turkey alongside Kurdish rights.<sup>6</sup> Yet, the HDP's electoral victory in the 2015 elections was perceived by the AKP as a threat to its hegemony and led to the collapse of the peace talks between PKK and AKP and the renewed violent conflict. Henceforth, the AKP has launched a crackdown against the HDP, which has been intensified after the 2016 failed coup.

### **Kurdish autumn in Iran**

Iran experienced only implicitly the repercussions of the Arab uprisings, mainly after the Syrian and the Yemen conflict. Tehran sought to benefit from the Arab upheavals: Supreme Leader Khamenei initially made statements in favour of the uprisings spreading in the Arab world in an attempt to draw a parallel between them and the 1979 Iranian Revolution reading the upheavals as "Islamic Awakening" and disregarding deliberately a potential link of the former to the more recent 2009 Green Movement.<sup>7</sup> However, the Iranian government sought to prevent large-scale protests by taking measures swiftly.

Iran's particularly repressive environment along with its military operations against Kurdish groups have not left much space for the Kurds to take advantage of the domestic and regional developments. That accounts partially for their relative quiescence compared to their brethren in the other Middle Eastern states. Furthermore, the fact that most of the Kurdish parties' leadership is based in the KRG has led to a somewhat disconnect between them and the Kurdish society in Iran as well as to a high level of dependency from the KRG which hosts it. The latter has certainly affected their activism since they have to seriously take into account the KRG's aspirations.



Moreover, the prioritization of the PKK-affiliated parties has been given undoubtedly to the establishment of Rojava in Syria; thus Rojhelat (Iranian Kurdistan) could be characterized by a wait-and-see tactic considering in addition the US-PYD (Democratic Union Party) alliance. The ceasefire declared by the PKK-affiliated Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) with Iran in September 2011 might be viewed through the lens of this prioritization. Nevertheless, considering the serious efforts of leading political parties, such as Komala and the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) for overcoming the intra-Kurdish divisions in 2013, as well as PJAK's appeal to Kurdish youth, one could argue that indeed Iranian Kurds' quietism is rather relative.<sup>8</sup>

In general, Kurds in Turkey and in Iraq sought to take advantage of the increasing visibility and legitimacy of the Kurds in the Middle East, as well as their strengthened image internationally, notably given their critical role in fighting ISIS in Syria and Iraq, within the Global Coalition against Daesh. The PKK's and its affiliates' participation in this campaign raised international sympathy enhancing, therefore, the PKK's stature, which might strengthen its position in the negotiations with Ankara.<sup>9</sup> Still, international sympathy has not translated into real support for Kurdish statehood by global powers as it was evident in the 2017 KRG independence referendum, highlighting thus the fluid nature of the support towards the Kurds when it comes to aspirations of statehood.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, the strategic alliances among the aforementioned Middle Eastern states against the Kurdish statehood aspirations have undergone serious shifts since the early stages of the 'Arab Spring' due to their involvement in the Syrian war. While Tehran's and Ankara's interests have clashed because of their support to the regime and the opposition respectively as well as their rivalry over regional domination, Ankara's relations with Erbil have deepened, being crystallized in numerous trade, investment and energy deals. This economic penetration is grounded on the Turkish foreign policy's shift from securitization to economic and political engagement in the Middle East, driven by the AKP since 2008. Forging such relations with the KRG, in particular with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), provides Turkey the opportunity to deepen the intra-Kurdish divisions and to gain KDP's tolerance, if not collaboration, against the PKK based in Qandil Mountains.<sup>11</sup>

In conclusion, the 'Kurdish Spring', wherever it erupted, took either the form of protests against the state within which Kurds reside or against the Kurdish elites. The 'Arab Spring's' effects benefited the Kurds in advancing their goals related to self-determination by taking advantage of the power vacuums and the new emerging alliances. Broadly speaking, the international attention and sympathy vis-à-vis the Kurdish battles and achievements encouraged and invigorated the Kurds overall. In light of these, Gunter's statement that "a Kurdish Spring accompanied the Arab Spring since 2011" appears well-grounded; one should remain though cautious considering the region's volatility alongside the fragile nature of the alliances from which have hitherto benefited the Kurds in the region.<sup>12</sup> The KRG's example following the 2017 referendum and its ensuing losses is indicative. Last but not least, the protracted war in Syria, the resurgence of ISIS's cells as well as the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic and the economic problems further strain the Kurdish political actors in the Middle East.

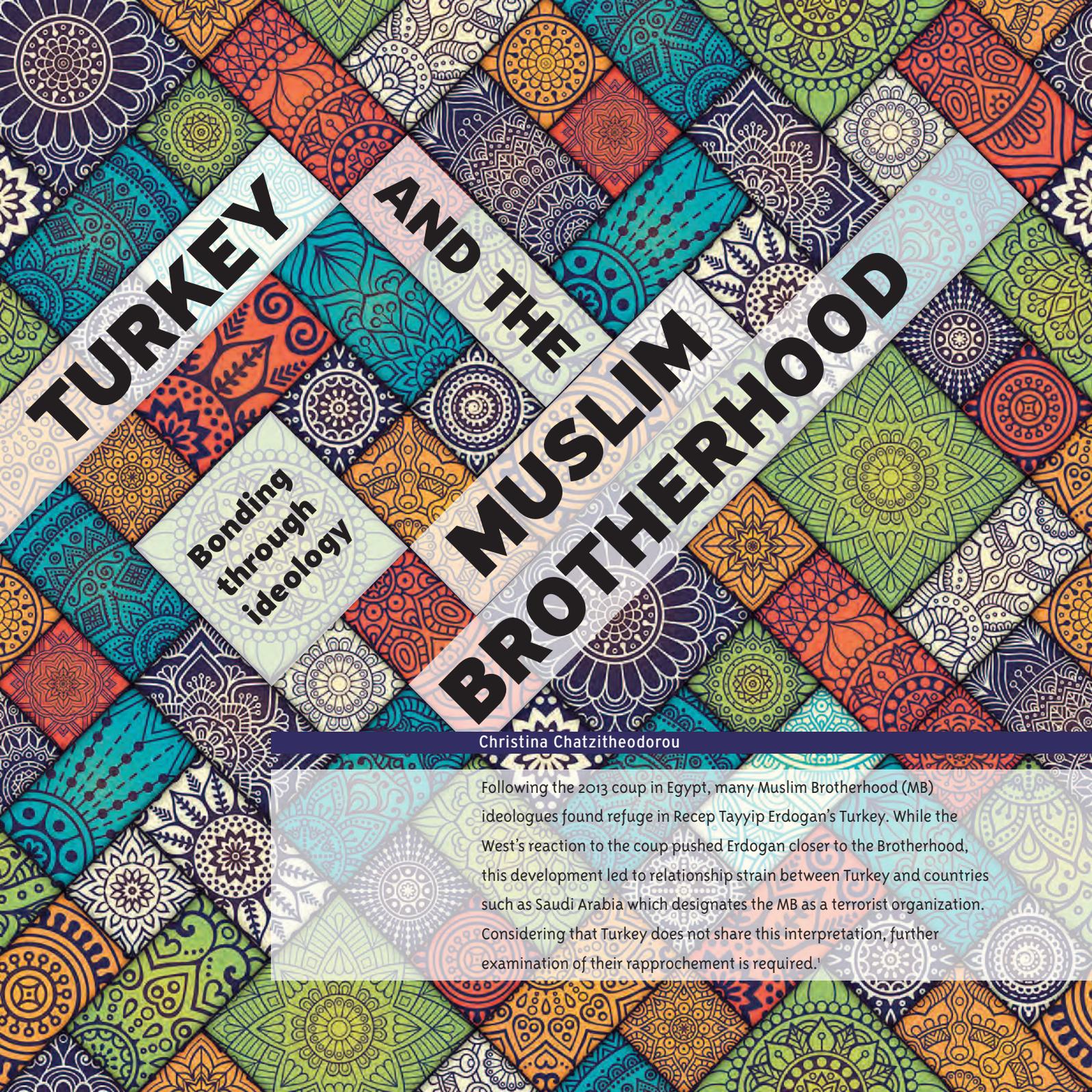


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# TURKEY

# AND THE

# MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD

**Bonding  
through  
ideology**

Christina Chatzitheodorou

Following the 2013 coup in Egypt, many Muslim Brotherhood (MB) ideologues found refuge in Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Turkey. While the West's reaction to the coup pushed Erdogan closer to the Brotherhood, this development led to relationship strain between Turkey and countries such as Saudi Arabia which designates the MB as a terrorist organization. Considering that Turkey does not share this interpretation, further examination of their rapprochement is required.'

**A**S TURKEY HAS BEEN DRIFTING AWAY from the West for the last years, it has reached out to Islamic organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Ibrahim Kalin, the spokesperson of the Turkish Presidency, described Turkey's position right now as "alone in virtue".<sup>2</sup> It can be argued that by "alone", Kalin meant without Turkey's old Western partners, although not isolated.

Attitudes in Turkey towards the Muslim Brotherhood changed following the 2007 general elections when the AKP gained a much stronger mandate. Turkey's major shift in foreign policy became apparent mostly after the Arab revolts of 2011. The AKP became the first state to recognize de jure the MB's electoral victory. This was strengthened by neo-Ottomanism ideology which considers the Middle East as historically related to Turkey due to the shared Ottoman past. This ideology promotes the greater political engagement of Turkey within those regions, as previously internal parts of the Ottoman Empire. In contrast, the previous Kemalist foreign policy focused on the West and, to an extent, to the detriment of its relationship with the Middle Eastern region. In addition, apart from its relationship with the Egyptian chapter of the Muslim Brotherhood, Turkey established a relationship with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood which should be viewed in close relation with the reassessment of Islamism as a driving policy in domestic and foreign affairs.<sup>3</sup>

However, the Muslim Brotherhood was not fully keen on building up relations with Turkey early on. For instance, in 2007, former Egyptian President Morsi published an article refusing to describe the AKP as an Islamist party, and rejecting its ideology. He outlined that the Muslim Brotherhood's aim was to establish an Islamic State while the AKP was promoting the model of the western, secular state.<sup>4</sup> When the AKP first came to power in 2002, domestic policies regarding secularism were not a priority. In retrospect, the Islamic policies of the AKP became more apparent in its foreign policy rather than in its domestic affairs.

Nonetheless, the Brotherhood's attitude began to change after the 2011 Egyptian revolution and particularly after the 2013 coup d'état which stripped it of its mandate and led many MB members to move to Turkey. Meanwhile, as a side-effect of the coup, the Brotherhood's younger members were keen on learning from other actors, including the ones whom their leaders once deemed a "forbidden fruit". Furthermore, no other country in the world had condemned the coup against the Muslim Brotherhood as passionately as Turkey had done. The long history of military coups in Turkey led many Turks to oppose the deposing of Morsi and the persecution of the Brotherhood in Egypt. Since then, normalized and full diplomatic relations between the two states are yet to be re-established, while a temporary diplomat, a chargé d'affaires, serves in the absence of the ambassador.<sup>5</sup>

Simultaneously, there was a clear effort towards Islamization in Turkey after 2011. It is apparent that Turkey's move towards a Sunni-focused foreign policy contributed to parallelly promoting the Turkish Muslim identity at home. More precisely, it was after the Arab uprisings and subsequent elections when the Muslim Brotherhood rose to prominence that the AKP became more open regarding Islamic policies in domestic affairs. Moreover, the presence of Brotherhood members in Turkey, and the close relations between the group's leadership and the AKP in recent years meant that events and policies in Turkey had an influence on the organization. In this direction, Erdogan facilitated the organization of the Brotherhood's conferences in Turkey, sending a bold message to MB enemies that the Brotherhood was still active and enjoyed its legitimacy.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, websites linked to branches of the



Brotherhood have been writing articles in support of Erdogan's domestic and foreign policies.<sup>7</sup> What is more, Erdogan argued that the Muslim Brotherhood was not a terrorist organization but an ideological movement instead.

Despite the crackdown by the current Egyptian administration, the MB has managed to survive. Even with President Sisi's narrative of coining the Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, there are signs of a reemergence, mainly through the MB's consistent calls for non-violent resistance against the secular Egyptian state.<sup>8</sup>

Parallelisms can be found in the AKP's rise to power. In June 2011, the AKP won its third consecutive electoral victory. The ruling party initially refrained from using violence to rise to power. In addition, the ever-present Kemalist influence, once able to rule over domestic issues, was no longer able to even threaten to take action against Erdogan's AKP. Turkey's pre-2013 geopolitical realities had been refocused into a more active role, albeit using shared Muslim religion to gain support from state and non-state actors. Furthermore, both actors are engaged in promoting political Islam as a viable alternative to strict western secularism. Ankara's recent promotion of a pan-Islamist, neo-Ottoman ideology has several implications for the Middle East and its leadership. Just as the Muslim Brotherhood, Turkey is trying to play an important role in the region by promoting its Islamic brand. Both actors came into power via democratic means and have strongly supported that Political Islam and democracy are not at odds with each other. Hence, the only way for Islamists to maintain their legitimacy now is through elections, while they understand that political constraints outweigh ideological commitments.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, both actors have important diasporas around the world, acting as a lobby in regard to international influence. The Diyanet, a department established to administer religious institutions within Turkey, guides the sermons issued by imams worldwide and has considerable influence over diaspora communities. The Muslim Brotherhood maintains networks originally established by Brotherhood pioneers in the West. What is more, Turkey, Qatar, and the United Kingdom are ideological centers of the Muslim Brotherhood, while its exiled leadership remains out of reach for the Egyptian authorities. However, the Diyanet is a formal governmental body, while the networks established by the Brotherhood are more informal in nature and conception.<sup>10</sup>

The bond between Turkey and the MB is characterized by a certain type of Islamism that sees reality through the dichotomy of "us versus them", distinguishing the Islamic civilization from the western one. Both distance themselves from the West due to the history of war and conflict. Through this prism, the West is perceived as a coalition of forces that wants to divide the Ummah. Both blame the West for the past and present turmoil in the Middle East, as exemplified by the decisions related to the post-World War I status quo.<sup>11</sup>

Turkey's willingness to work both with Sunni and Shiite Islamists is likely to pay off strategically. The presence of the Brotherhood strengthens Turkey's clout in the Muslim



world through the promotion of political Islam. Using ideology in political and religious terms is an important factor in determining Turkey's future role in the region. The Muslim Brotherhood's rise to power in 2011 served this policy well. In practice, political Islam was constrained by the reality of the various geopolitical priorities in the region. Currently, the Brotherhood seems to refrain from violent confrontation with the nation-state either because of its interest in participating within the mainstream model or because it lacks the necessary resources and political momentum. It remains to be seen whether this more conservative approach will serve Turkey's long-term geopolitical and political endgame.<sup>12</sup>

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# LE BA NON

a delayed uprising?

Given Lebanon's chronic instability, no one expected that the 2011 uprisings would be merely another transient crisis in Lebanon. However, the protests that started in 2019 may be signaling a 'delayed' Lebanese spring. What has changed almost a decade later that allowed the dynamic re-emergence of demonstrations in Lebanon?

**A**SGHIDA TAYAR APTLY PUTS IT, 'Lebanon has never been stable in its century of existence, amid wars, assassinations, and popular uprisings',<sup>1</sup> but in 2011 Lebanon seemed ready for an uprising that would have more long-term and structural ramifications. Hundreds of thousands of Lebanese march along the demarcation line in Beirut protesting against the sectarian system. The Uprising of Dignity of January 2011 was not an outcome of a simple domino effect of the regional uprisings. Instead, it was the domestic issues, similar to what triggered the October 2019 uprising, that burdened the people of Lebanon. However, what halted the 2011 uprising were the sectarian tensions that were emerging within Lebanon but also in Syria. The international Special Tribunal of Lebanon regarding Hariri's assassination was at the forefront of the political developments with the pro-Hariri coalition, March 8 and Hezbollah-led coalition March 14 still in conflict. At the same time, the Sunni-Shia violence in Syria was spilling over some areas within Lebanon.<sup>2</sup> Given Lebanon's civil war (1975-1990) trauma and how fast the Syrian uprising became sectarianized, both the people and the elite tried to quell any dynamics that could enhance sectarian tensions in the country.

On the contrary, the 2019 uprisings have been careful to avoid any notion of sectarianism, promoting a pan-Lebanese and cross-sectarian platform. The demonstrators have managed to remain resilient to sectarian polarization. Indicative of the cross-sectarian character of these demonstrations is that the protests are not solely centered in Beirut but also in other cities, such as Nabatiyeh, a mostly Shia area in South Lebanon.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, contrary to the general perception that Lebanon's protests have been ad hoc and short-lived responses, they appear to be a long trial and error process.<sup>4</sup> Much of their activities are geared towards people's immediate needs with grassroots, independent and community-based initiatives that emerged and have crystalized in the span of a decade, if not more.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the people on the street have remained united regardless of being a diverse group from different political and ideological backgrounds. It may be argued that the demonstrators have cultivated an understanding of 'agreeing to disagree' on issues such as Hezbollah's weapons, what economic model (liberal or socialist) is best for Lebanon, whether they want a secular or sectarian system or even whether the demonstrations are geared towards a revolution or an uprising. It is interesting to note that up-to-date, the protests seem to have mainly two principles in common: first, they do not want to be represented by the establishment and, second, they demand a functional state. Finally, the demonstrators have forced the Lebanese political landscape to admit that the status quo is not acceptable anymore. Unlike their counterparts in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere in the region, the protesters in Lebanon, hitherto, have been able to remain united, attentive to traps and consistent in working through the cruxes and obstacles of being in the streets.

Another dynamic that fuels the 2019 protests is the further deterioration of the political and economic elements that held the country together against all odds. In fact, the country is one step away from total financial collapse and the political ruling class has demonstrated its inability to save the country. Additionally, the pandemic and Beirut's port blast in August 2020 have accelerated the meltdown of the economy. Today, Lebanon has the 3rd highest public debt world-wide, which exceeds 150% of its GDP, the Lebanese Lira has been devaluated by 70%, the banking sector is in crisis, the unemployment rate is 50% and 25% of the population lives below the poverty line.<sup>6</sup> The closer the government came to put forth a proposal to save the country from economic collapse, the more it exacerbated the political crisis. This is mostly due to the intertwining between economic and political elites. More specifically,



PM Hassan Diab, who succeeded Hariri, attempted to implement a 10-point economic plan but was met with internal resistance as no part of the elite was willing to share the burden of financial losses that the plan would incur in order to save the economy. In the words of Alain Bifani, former director general of the Finance Ministry, the main issue is that no Lebanese government is able to withstand the financial elite's pressures because every genuine 'effort for change is sabotaged from within'; there is a lack of credibility for the implementation of any change that would put at risk the elite and no institutional mechanism to keep it in check.<sup>7</sup>

The political crisis became even more palpable between March and August 2020. The health crisis and social inequality that was further exacerbated by the pandemic and the humanitarian crisis caused by Beirut's port explosion, amplified other unresolved crises be it the trash crisis, food insecurity, power shortages (which has drastically increased in the last year) or the refugee crisis, to name a few. It came as no surprise when Hassan Diab's government resigned in the summer, leaving Lebanon on 'auto-pilot'. Consequently, an even deeper social crisis ensued, prompting the intensification of the protests. The final straw came with the security forces' crackdown on protesters, using the pandemic as a pretext to dismantle the demonstrations, impose arbitrary curfews and harass activists and journalists.<sup>8</sup>

What is most interesting is the stance of the regional and international actors. The 'usual candidates' that are always keen and quick to meddle in Lebanese affairs are mostly absent. The regional powers are probably having a 'wait and see' approach because the current crisis is not an intra-political tug of war among the elite. And while this most probably provides an insight on Iran's stance, Saudi Arabia, given its deep immersion in Lebanon's financial elite, should have been the first in line. There may be two possible explanations. First, Riyadh's overall strategy to use money for influence in politically unstable countries has changed; mainly due to its own financial insecurity, especially since mid-2020. Second, Saudi Arabia seems to be retreating from various fronts; Yemen being an example par excellence. Even more so from Lebanon, not only because there is little space to counter Iran but also due to the weakened relations with Hariri. Another 'candidate' is France. While there are no signs that President Macron is willing to exert pressure on political issues, he has been proposing various economic (technocratic) initiatives to save Lebanon from total financial collapse.<sup>9</sup> Yet, any monetary aid, be it from the IMF or the EU, requires structural economic and political adjustments. The deep corruption is evident in the fact that 1% of the population owns almost 50% of the country's wealth. Thus, the Lebanese elite's refusal to comply to various proposals is no surprise. According to Bifani, a common practice of the elite is to buy time and delay any reforms not in their interest, rendering the financial crisis a political matter.<sup>10</sup> While many are banking on the new US President-elect Biden, he may have little to

offer to Lebanon. Even if the US temporarily halts the sanctions on Hezbollah and its allies,<sup>11</sup> it will not slow the economic meltdown. Nevertheless, as the foreign players are closely observing Lebanon's developments and, perhaps, hoping for a de-escalation in at least one front of the crisis –sooner or later– some sort of change is bound to happen.

Regardless of the foreign actors' stance at this stage, the political and financial elite is historically entangled with and dependent on re-



gional dynamics. Bearing this in mind, a solution is most likely to be prompted from outside, even though this multidimensional crisis is a standoff between the establishment and the rest of the population. Whether the protests may be a Lebanese spring in disguise is too soon to tell, however one thing is for sure. The ghost of the civil war this time is not hovering over the Lebanese street.

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# Sugarcoating authoritarianism with reforms

Who benefited from the 2011 demonstrations in Morocco?

Dimitris Papanikolaou

The 2011 upheavals in the MENA region were also present in the Kingdom of Morocco, increasing criticism by the Moroccan people towards the regime's policies. Almost a decade later, it is still hard to tell whether the Moroccan social movement or the palace benefited from these demonstrations. In order to assess the effect of the revolts in Morocco, it is essential to examine the dynamics between the evolution of the nascent protest movement in the country and the King's maneuvers seeking to preserve his nearly absolute powers over the state institutions



**MOROCCO WAS AMONG THE COUNTRIES** that were subjected to the spillover effect of the 2011 uprisings. Protesters in Morocco manifested their opposition against the Monarchy's ruling system and the elite surrounding it, known as makhzen. People of incongruous backgrounds, mainly represented by the 20-Février Movement (20F), filled in the streets of various urban centers throughout Morocco, expressing their thirst for drastic constitutional, political and socioeconomic changes. However, they did not want King Mohammed VI to give up the throne, but rather to step aside from some of his nearly absolute powers. Even though most of these actors participated in the protests autonomously and without necessarily being guided by official directives of respective parties, the Islamist party Parti de la justice et du développement (PJD) managed to capitalize on them, won the ideological battle and controlled the F20 movement.<sup>1</sup>

Be that as it may, the response to the upheaval by the monarchy was swift and excessive. The first direct response by the authorities was the suppression of the protesters by the security forces. While opinions vary, some observe that there was indeed violent crackdown by the authorities, as after the death of protester Kamal Amari, even EU officials appeared concerned about the state's response to the uprisings. On the contrary, others state that repression by the state authorities was scant, compared to other countries of the Arab world occurring during the same timeframe.<sup>2</sup>

Relatively shortly after the escalation of the protests, the King announced significant reforms that would strengthen parliamentary monarchy. Following a referendum in July 2011, a constitutional reform was adopted; Mohammed VI stated that the new constitution would introduce major institutional changes, such as the official recognition of the Berber language, or that the appointed Prime Minister (PM) would come from the largest elected party, and not be whoever the King pleases. He proudly announced that the reforms would yield less corruption and foster social justice and good governance. Indeed, in the parliamentary elections in November 2011, the PJD won most of the seats and its leader, Abdelilah Benkirane, became the country's PM.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, despite resembling some of the protesters' demands, the reforms proposed by the monarch and their rapid implementation, in reality, were anything but a victory. A considerable part of the citizens remained dissatisfied with the socioeconomic policies of the palace.

Following a political crisis and the formation of a new government by the PJD in 2016, Moroccan citizens seemed to have lost their faith in the King's reformist model, questioning the potential democratization and economic development of the state. Later the same year in the region of Rif, after the death of fish-seller Mouhcine Fikri, who died trying to retrieve his fish which were arbitrarily confiscated by the police, various protests sparked throughout Morocco, bringing out the Rif Hirak movement. A strong social movement emerged, marking the largest coordinated demonstrations in Morocco since 2011 and stirring up memories of the death of Mohamed Bouazizi and the consequent revolts in Tunisia. This time, demonstrators also asked for more professional opportunities for the graduate youth, free political prisoners and more political rights.<sup>4</sup>

Another interesting element of the post-2011 "street politics" establishment in Morocco is its decentralization. While the 2011 protests were mainly held in urban centers, since 2016, the country experienced a shift of the social mobilization towards semi-



urban and rural areas. A shared feeling of frustration gradually developed a collective identity of marginalization and criticism towards the regime, with residents of rural areas also willing to manifest their frustration by taking the streets. The regime's response to said protests was limited to the suppression by the police and clashes with the demonstrators, as well as the detention of many of the latter.<sup>5</sup>

Even if significant reforms were initially adopted in 2011, along with some of a lower scale throughout the next years, the King managed to stall the momentum of the massive mobilization of Moroccans and reduce the wider "pull-effect" that the anti-authoritarian campaigns could have had.<sup>6</sup> In spite of the nascent protest movement, King Mohammed VI appears well-equipped to absorb or counterweight their impact, using the deeply rooted perception of the palace's role in the Moroccan society and the undisputable religious and political power that it allows for, in his main arsenal.

Moreover, throughout the decades, the palace in Morocco has gained a strong symbolic stabilizing role for the citizens, who even feel that he has some kind of special blessing and are even psychologically dependent on them. Therefore, questioning the King's political role in the system has always been considered a red line for most Moroccans.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, Mohammed VI has been constructing a self-portrait of a modern reformist since he first came to power in 1999, towards both his national and international audience. Throughout his tenure, he kept proposing reforms such as legal ones, or even investigated his father's government for human rights abuses. Nevertheless, most of them were in fact superficial. That way, even if some Moroccan citizens might feel like they are being heard, the monarch in fact retains almost all of his powers and further justifies his authoritarianism both domestically and externally.

A more profound look into the reforms enacted by the King, particularly since 2011, show that he keeps himself at arm's length in order not to take the blame in case any disapproval arises. When a promised change cannot be delivered, the palace points the finger towards the governing parties, disregarding the fact that the political parties do not have sufficient power to achieve any actual change; indicatively, in 2017 the king discharged four ministers because of their mishandling of the 2016 upheavals. Moreover, apart from the scarce or inexistent accountability of the King regarding the policies that the monarchy adopts, those policies are applied top-down so that he can initiate the reforms as he pleases and maintain control over their implementation.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, the nature of the protesters' demands overall indicate that Moroccans pursue more of a socio-economic change, as problems like youth unemployment or people living under the poverty line still persist. Short-term solutions by the palace such as the re-introduction of military conscription in order to tackle youth unemployment were welcomed and managed to somehow calm the unfolding upheavals.



Thus, Mohammed VI finds space to perform maneuvers, distract frustrated Moroccans from the authoritarian political-institutional context and orient them towards other problems that he can solve superficially, in order to win back their acceptance.<sup>9</sup>

Even if most of the reforms were addressing the demands of people in the streets, Mohammed VI appropriated them in order to achieve a dual cause. Firstly, he further conserves and projects his well-painted portrait of a reformist. Secondly, he reminds the Moroccan people that he is the most essential gear of the state mechanism and the only way of achieving change, even if said change stems from the streets and opposes the palace's policies. That being said, it would be interesting to closely watch the developing race between the two sides and to see whether Moroccan social movements can really put the King's role at stake, or if it is so deeply established in society that it is able to stave off any threat.

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# ON THE IMPACT OF THE ARAB SPRING ON THE PALESTINIAN MOVEMENT

Charitini Petrodaskalaki

Despite the fact that the Occupied Palestinian Territories did not experience “Arab Spring” like their neighbors, Palestinians took to the streets in March 2011, demanding political unity and reconciliation between the PA and Hamas. The changes in regional stability inspired some action by the two governments, facilitating their rapprochement and temporarily destabilizing Israel. However, in the end, due to the consequences of the Arab Spring in the region, the Palestinian Question was turned into a secondary one, leaving the Palestinians virtually alone in their struggle against the Israeli occupation.

**INSPIRED BY THE ARAB SPRING UPRISINGS**, Palestinians took to the streets in March 2011, holding the biggest Nakba Day demonstrations in years. However, the so-called March 15th Movement, described as a loose network of young, social media-friendly activists, did not demand a radical shift in governmental institutions or leadership, as it was the case in most of the Arab Uprisings. Instead, it mainly sought political unity and reconciliation, with protesters chanting “People Want Reconciliation” (“Alsha’ab Yureed Al Musalha”) on the streets.<sup>1</sup> The large-scale peaceful protests that were held between the 12th and 15th of March resulted in violent clashes with security forces at Israel’s border with Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, but also inside the West Bank and Gaza.

Nevertheless, the movement did not present any real challenge to the authorities. Ultimately, however dysfunctional their governments, the top priority for the Palestinians will always be the end of the Israeli occupation. In addition, according to a contemporary study, despite their political discontent, Palestinian youth have largely exited from politics, prioritizing personal affairs and leaving political initiatives in the hands of their leaders. It seems that the majority did not consider their daily situation as desperate enough to seek drastic political change, while the rest were weak and fragmented.<sup>2</sup>

Even though the demonstrations were not directed against them per se, both the Palestinian Authority and Hamas governments felt threatened by the protests and suppressed them. Political discontent was evident in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Corruption and nepotism was rampant in the PA, and there was evidence of authoritarian tendencies within the government. The projects for the improvement of living conditions in the West Bank, initiated by the PA’s Prime Minister Salam Fayyad in 2008, were bringing limited results, and the PA was accused of collaborating with Israel. Fatah in particular, the de facto leader of the PA, demonstrated a lack of legitimacy, having lost the 2006 parliamentary elections and allowing for the expiration of Mahmud Abbas’ term as president since January 2010. In Gaza, while Hamas did manage to improve security, its popularity dropped significantly since 2006, and the perception that it aimed at limiting personal freedoms in favor of Islamization was widespread.<sup>3</sup>

It was obvious to both parties that unless they reassessed their positions, popular discontent would grow in the next years. This pressured Fatah and Hamas to engage in reconciliation talks. A power-sharing agreement, facilitated by Egypt’s post-uprising mediation, was signed in May 2011, followed by the Qatari-brokered Doha agreement in February 2012, despite the mutual mistrust, fear and suspicion that made the reconciliation efforts collapse in the future.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the PA sought other routes of pushing the Palestinian Question forward, such as the UN bid for Palestinian statehood in September 2011, a response to those who accused it for lack of progress on the diplomatic front.<sup>5</sup> Yet, public support for the PA officials and for Abbas in particular dropped so low, that it ultimately forced Abbas to resign from his position as President of the Palestinian National Council in 2015 – although this has not yet taken effect.

The Arab Spring brought changes in regional balance that also affected Palestinian politics. The reconfiguration of power in the Middle East, and particularly the ascent of Political Islam in power, strengthened Hamas’ claim to power within Palestinian politics. At the same time, Islamists in the Middle East learned that they had to share their power with other parties, including secularists. Moreover, Hamas’ leadership was able to acknowledge the potential of nonviolent resistance in the rise of Islamist parties, and, in-



spired by the way the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt presented itself, it was able to redefine its interpretation of Palestinian Islamic Resistance.<sup>6</sup> What is more, regional instability directly afflicted Israel, which lost its strategic partners and became deeply concerned with the increasing influence of Islamic political parties and the possibility that the new Arab governments would harden their position towards it.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, the Arab Spring ended up altogether sidelining the Palestinian issue from regional and international politics. Initially, the overthrowing of old regimes was regarded as a positive change that could produce a new era for the Palestinian cause, which was regarded as central to the lasting peace and stability in the region. However, the uprisings were primarily focused on internal affairs rather than foreign policy; with few exceptions, they did not point to the Palestinian cause or the Israeli occupation, while some states even viewed Israel as an important ally against Iran.<sup>8</sup> Already not on top of the Arab political agenda after 9/11 and the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the regional developments that followed the Arab Spring, such as the ongoing Syrian and Libyan war, the rise of the Islamic State, and the refugee crisis, among others, once again turned the Palestinian Question into a secondary one. Under that light, President Abbas's bid to the UN was a maneuver to regain initiative in the absence of allies.<sup>9</sup>

Indifference towards the Palestinian cause was evident in the following years, for example in the diplomatic process led by the US in 2014, or in the limited responses and support towards Palestinians in the deadly attacks in Gaza, particularly in 2014. And, while the Arab states unanimously rejected the idea of recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, as per US President Donald Trump's suggestion in 2017, support for the Palestinians has significantly dropped since. Although Trump's Middle East Peace plan was rejected by the Arab League in January, the Arab states that are close US allies tactfully did not comment on the plan's content, nor did they praise the US government for the attempt.<sup>10</sup> The situation became more complicated in August, when the UAE and Bahrain – with the silent approval of Saudi Arabia - decided to normalize their relations with Israel. As traditional champions of the Palestinian cause, the Gulf countries have now set a new example that other countries could follow. All these demonstrate the limited real support for the Palestinian cause nowadays.

Despite the fact that the Palestinian social movement was not able or did not want to demand a drastic change in leadership, the



March 15th movement showed that people aspired to a unified Palestinian front, while the Palestinian leadership tried to push the Palestinian Question forward. Yet, while geopolitical changes initially showed that they could breathe new air in the Palestinian issue, ultimately the situation on the ground did not change for the better. On the contrary, it has gotten worse since the suspension in 2018 of US funding of many organizations that aid Palestinians, including the UNWRA. The UN agency announced in November that it had run out of money, forcing the EU to step

in in order to keep schools open and maintain core services for Palestinians. What will happen next will depend on the new US president, Joe Biden and whether he will set a new course for the Palestinian issue or solidify his predecessor's steps in order to appease Israel. However, as the diplomatic front has not achieved any real results for some time, it is more likely that change will come from the Palestinians themselves, as their reality on the ground continues to deteriorate.<sup>11</sup>

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# THE ARAB SPRING AND THE CASE OF JORDAN

Özgür Kurşun

The effects of the Arab Spring, which swept through the Middle East and North Africa, were limited in scope and consequences for Jordan. What makes the Hashemite Kingdom a rare case is that the protests did not aim to overthrow the monarchy but rather correct flaws in the existing regime and solve social, cultural and political problems in the country.

**A**LTHOUGH IN MANY ARAB COUNTRIES, such as Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria, the Arab Spring took place in the form of popular, bloody and spontaneous protests with the aim of overthrowing regimes, this was not the case in Jordan.

In contrast to the mass protests in the cities of other Arab countries, street protests in Jordan unfolded as planned and regular demonstrations involving both former government officials and members of the opposition. Most importantly, bloody repressions that occurred in other Arab countries did not occur in Jordan as the monarchy was very cautious about not using violence against the protesters. Protesters on the street hoped they could work with the King to bring about change. They believed that violence would only damage their negotiating positions and thus end an important opportunity for reform. Throughout 2011, Jordan was shaken by street protests which emerged one after another. Unlike Egypt, Libya, Yemen and finally Syria, in Jordan, people from all walks of life such as Islamists, Leftists and tribal leaders, wanted reforms in the regime rather than a change of regime. It is the first time that people from different segments of society came together and called for reforms.<sup>1</sup>

Economic problems and frequent arbitrary changes in election laws had weakened public trust in the state. The Jordanian monarchy did not fear that the protests were to become extreme and overthrow the monarchy, and King Abdullah II responded to the demonstrations by appointing in 2011 Marouf Bakhit as the new prime minister. His mandate was "to take practical, quick and tangible steps to launch true political reforms, enhance Jordan's democratic drive and ensure safe and decent living for all Jordanians".<sup>2</sup> This development was the first outcome of the Arab Spring regarding the political situation in Jordan.

At the same time, King Abdullah II intensified his work on changing the constitution, loosening restrictions on the people's right to protest, and promulgating new laws on political parties and elections. Thanks to this reform, the guaranteed representation quota of women was increased from 12 to 15 in the 2013 elections. Moreover, what was new in the 2013 elections was the addition of 27 seats for national lists, which were to be determined by proportional representation. As a result, Jordanians were given not one but two votes, one for their constituency and one for the national list.<sup>3</sup>

However, the desired progress concerning gender equality was not achieved as conservative values continued to be prevalent in Jordanian society.<sup>4</sup>

The Arab Spring had a serious impact on the future of the Muslim Brotherhood in the country, as in the Arab world in general. Inspired by the successes in North African countries, the Brotherhood of Jordan preferred not to participate in the political process and boycotted the 2010 and 2013 elections, citing that the above-mentioned reforms were not enough. The protest movement gave birth to the popular, and mainly youth, movement of al-Hirak. The al-Hirak movement, mostly based on the Jordanian "East Banker" community which is considered a stronghold of the regime, has become a prominent element in the protests.<sup>5</sup> During the protests, di-



visions were present within the opposition parties, with the emergence of the Zamzam Initiative and its recognition by the government as an official party in April 2015 under the name of the Society of Muslim Brothers in Jordan. This meant the emergence of a new rival for the al-Wasat Party and other Islamic groups in the country. Moreover, the uprisings in the neighboring countries and the ensuing chaos and civil war, the emergence of Daesh and the murder of the Jordanian pilot by Daesh in February 2015, the uncompromising position of the Muslim Brotherhood towards political participation and their boycott of parliamentary elections reduced Jordanian support for the Islamic parties.<sup>6</sup>

The Arab Spring put enormous social pressure on the Jordanian regime. The fact that thousands of people sought refuge in Jordan due to the civil war in Syria further increased the already existing pressure on social services and water resources in an indebted country with a stagnated economy. After 2003, the US invasion in Iraq and the Syrian civil war, Jordan has become the center of refugee crisis in the region, hosting more than 750,000 refugees, nearly 90% of whom are Syrians, according to the February 2019 report of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. Today, only Lebanon has more refugees per capita than Jordan.<sup>7</sup>

According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the number of Iraqi refugees from Christian minorities who fled the attacks of Daesh to Jordan has exceeded 130,000. The number of Syrians who fled due to violence and instability since 2011 reached 1.3 million in 2016, equal to 15% of the total Jordanian population.<sup>8</sup> The Zaatari refugee camp has become the 4th largest city in the country and the biggest Syrian refugee camp in the world.<sup>9</sup>

Demographic imbalance in the country has hence deteriorated, with 50% of the population being of Palestinian origin, 35% native Jordanians, and 15% of Syrian/Iraqi origin.<sup>10</sup>

Regarding the economic situation, the Syrian refugee crisis played a role in the noticeable increase in unemployment rates in Jordan between 2010 and 2017.<sup>11</sup> Today, Jordan is dependent on foreign aid. The country receives more than one billion dollars in foreign aid from the United States each year. Additionally, Jordan is one of the countries to which the USA provides the highest cash aid as budget support.<sup>12</sup>

In sum, when dealing with Arab Spring related protests, the monarchy tried to strike a balance between protest movements and the social, political and economic problems that already existed in the country. Thus, the impact of the Arab Spring in Jordan did not cause chaos or regime change but was instead channelled to painless reforms for the monarchy.



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# EUROPE

GOES WITH THE FLOW

The European Union has adopted a security-focused approach with its southern neighbours, which are buckling under the strain of financial troubles and having to deal with many humanitarian issues. This is based on current perceptions about the foundations of European foreign policy as well as the developments in the domestic environment of the European states.

## in the Mediterranean

Ilias Tasopoulos



**THE MEDITERRANEAN BASIN**, has been a focus point for Europe, if one considers the rhetoric of the European Union and many of its member-states. Much effort has been placed on initiatives, such as the Barcelona Process, which sought to expand the bilateral relations, add a discrete political component and form a comprehensive European strategy, and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), which aimed to improve the effectiveness of previous approaches. These attempts were designed to complement member states' activities and management. They did not change, however, the overwhelming dependence of the EU foreign policy on every state's individual strategy, heavily influenced by internal developments in each state and long-standing views in the domestic political system. This became clear with the latest edition of European grand schemes, the Mediterranean Union, launched by the then French president Nicolas Sarkozy, during his presidential selection campaign in 2007.<sup>1</sup>

These fluctuations do not mean that there are not any signs of continuity in the European foreign policy, as some central ideas have become cornerstones during this period. One senior aim of the Europeans has been to avoid any conflict in their periphery countries that would lead to sociopolitical conflicts and destabilize their region, as this could lead to fertile ground for terrorist or other illegal groups finding their way to Europe.<sup>2</sup> "A ring of well-governed countries to the East of the EU and the borders of the Mediterranean", as former European Commission President Romano Prodi had put it less bluntly in the past.

The European Union has treated its southern and eastern "neighbours" as part of the same puzzle, the ENP serving as the prime example that aims to offer this valuable ring to its members. Eastern European states were presented the opportunity to become members of the EU, on strict condition to reform their institutions, receiving at the same time plenty of resources. Without accordingly high incentives, the EU tried to handle the regional pressing issues of the Middle East and North Africa with the same recipe, wishing for institutions that would enforce rule of law, good governance, protection of human rights and promotion of the market economy. These goals would be attained by making aid dependent on achieving the required reform and implementing the changes agreed, for a potential stake in its internal market.

The period after the 2010 Arab uprisings showed the deficiency of an approach oriented towards technical issues that also resulted in an inadequate way of fund distribution, although the specific level of funding received by the investment facilities is very difficult to trace.<sup>3</sup> After the 2004 big bang EU enlargement, which included a majority of Central and Eastern European countries, the eastern countries experienced strong EU support on both a bilateral and regional level. On the other side, however, the lack of adaptability to the unique needs of the Mediterranean was admitted by the Commissioner for Enlargement and ENP in office during the Arab Spring, Stefan Füle, regarding its relations with the southern partners.<sup>4</sup> The domestic political pressure in Europe resulted in many similar decisions, such as ignoring calls for engagement with moderate Islamists, coming even from the inside Brussels inner circle. The case of Ennahda in Tunisia was typical of the absence of relations with Islamist actors in the Middle East and North Africa before the Arab upheavals in 2011.<sup>5</sup> Although this has not been the crucial factor in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's road from persecution to power and back to persecution, a different path could surely have been chosen in the cases of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine, before they were radicalized. The other side of the coin for their reluctance to start discussions



with forces that have acquired a position of influence in their countries has been the argument that they are not interested in any such engagement, even if they are tempted with economic cooperation. The political cost in the interior and the sensitive and emotional chords that this may touch is probably more important of a factor. All this resulted in a rather small amount of leverage, while the combination of bearing low incentives and inaccurate timing added to Europe being rather soft on Arab political reform and inefficient, when it was needed.<sup>6</sup>

The way that many European countries approached one of the greatest issues that concerned the region was not up to the standards that it set, as the Arab uprisings were followed by a humanitarian disaster and the millions of refugees that the conflicts generated.<sup>7</sup> It would be unfair not to mention that the European Union acknowledged it as such; Europe has been the largest donor of humanitarian aid to Syria and the region, offering support in multiple ways. Over €17 billion in aid has been allocated by the EU and its member states since the start of the conflict in 2011 to help those who have fled the war, both within and outside Syria.<sup>8</sup> This was not however, enough, especially since the European Union represents a unique force in international relations, spreading norms, related to human rights among other,<sup>9</sup> a 'normative power, that intentionally exports norms from which it benefits'.<sup>10</sup> Contrary to that, the narrative that received media attention domestically was that the immigration towards Europe, was a danger and represented a crisis that would threaten their social stability. The very low rate of Syrian refugees' resettlement in Europe, as well as the downgrading of their status as war victims, is a typical example. Although this started from hardline extremists, as well as the correlation with security concerns and terrorism, the whole public discussion influenced the calculations of Europeans and the ability of the EU to have an appropriate impact in the region. This cannot be judged lightly when compared with countries without adequate resources that had to face real everyday crises, such as Lebanon and Jordan with refugees making up more than 20% and 10% of its population accordingly, in one of the most difficult economic periods, especially for Lebanon.<sup>11</sup>

As Europeans discuss widening its strategic perspective, they are actually most concerned with preserving their internal cohesion and sense of stability. Immigration policy is one of the sectors that states prefer to retain control and not dare to rise up to the current challenges. The long-standing security perception that has been building has more severe repercussions for the ambitions

and the capabilities of the European states.<sup>12</sup> The gradual retrenchment of the United States from the region might have been a chance for European states and Europe to present some difference as an actor in the region. France has been trying to expand its influence in Tunisia and establish a new footing in Libya while countering the Turkish influence both there, but also regaining its traditional sphere of influence in the Levant and Syria in particular. Likewise, Italy could move to lead the other Europeans to a consistent Libya policy,



where Germany has expressed its interest in its pacification. However, Europeans are more likely to face accusations of being a self-centered partner that goes with the flow, without the capacity of steering its way.

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# THE ARAB SPRING ON THE WALLS

During the uprisings that spread across the Middle East and North Africa in the early 2010s, the battles between ordinary citizens and governmental forces were fought on public sites: on the streets, the squares, in front of public buildings and government ministries. Previously dominated by authority to showcase its power, public space was reclaimed by citizens through various forms of performance and art, including that of graffiti. Public walls and surfaces were marked and appropriated to express frustration, document political struggle and talk to the government.

Amalia Chappa



**M**ARKING PUBLIC SPACE is an old practice (the word “graffito” was in fact first used for scrawls discovered in the ruins of Pompeii), a global phenomenon and a most politicized genre of artistic expression, which is so closely tied to physical space unlike any other form of art.<sup>1</sup> During the Arab Spring, and along with music, theatre, documentaries, performance, poetry, photography, posters, banners, cartoons and all sorts of visual art forms, graffiti artists produced a vast array of styles, themes, representations and symbolisms at the edge of social and political transformation. Street art became a revolutionary weapon at the hands of artists and ordinary people, an unsanctioned cultural engine which in some cases, even helped shape the political agenda.<sup>2</sup>

Nowhere else was this more apparent than in Egypt, where street artists played an active role in spreading ideas and information as the revolution unfolded. A rare sight in the country before 2011, graffiti started springing up on the walls of Cairo with the outbreak of the uprisings, turning them into a big social network, expressing not only political demands but also practical needs, such as sharing protest calling dates and notices and mobilizing people to continue the uprising against the government. Walls were filled with all types of graffiti styles, from visually translated slogans heard on the streets to freehand murals and large-scale campaigns.<sup>3</sup> One of the most vibrant locations on Tahrir Square, the hub of the events that unseated President Hosni Mubarak on 11 February 2011 after 18 days of deadly unrest and protests, was a fifteen square meter plot created in front of a KFC branch. It became the platform of the Revolution Artists Union, a group of visual artists, writers, actors and musicians, which was founded during the days of the revolution. Camped out the restaurant, the group delivered gatherings of artists, including rappers, cartoonists, caricaturists, poets and painters. Its infamous KFC wall became an informal gallery exhibiting drawings, hand-drawn cartoons, poetic banners, photographs (many of them of the martyrs of the protests) and posters.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the walls of the buildings on Mohamed Mahmoud Street, off the same square, turned into a gallery of street art masterpieces chronicling the evolving events. On a wall owned by the American University in Cairo (AUC), artists created iconic large-scale visual commentaries unfolding in parallel with the revolution, authority figures such as the merging faces of Field Marshal Tantawi and Hosni Mubarak and parades of martyrs and pharaonic armies of women deposing mythical oppressors. Graffiti activism was not limited to Cairo: in Alexandria, Mahalla and various parts of the nation, more artists joined in as the revolution continued, documenting the violations of rights, glorifying the martyrs and the revolutionaries and influencing the masses. Much of this art was never even considered to be permanent: defaced and whitewashed by morning, it would be painted over and recreated the next day.<sup>5</sup>

The impact of revolution graffiti in Egypt still lives on. Street artists who emerged during the uprisings, such as Ganzeer, Ammar Abo Bakr and Alaa Awad, have managed to gain large public recognition and establish an international career. But the afterlife of the painted walls is not a happy one. In today’s Cairo, many of them have been demolished or painted over as part of a general makeover and beautification plan for the city. The authorities in Cairo have repainted many building facades and in 2015, the AUC demolished part of its wall on Mohamed Mahmoud Street and Qasr al-Aini Street after reportedly being ordered to do so by local authorities. After the 2013 coup, space for public expression has shrunk in the country: former armed forces chief Abdel Fattah El-Sisi effected an anti-demonstration law allowing for the arrests of peaceful protesters, including many graffiti artists, as well as raids and closures of art spaces.<sup>6</sup>

Tunisia, where the first protests occurred in December 2011, experienced a different kind of transformation in the country's graffiti history, which before the revolution, was largely absent and restricted to football references. In the wake of the revolution against president Zine el Abidine Ben Ali and within days from the outbreak of unrest in the country, football fanatics turned into revolutionary activists, transforming their football tags into revolutionary slogans calling for resistance against the police. Developing a blend of traditional techniques and fine art, they drew on anti-colonialist figures against France, such as 1940s activist Farhan Hashad who was recreated as a youthful icon of today's struggle. The catalyst of the revolution, Tarek el-Tayeb Mohamed Bouazizi, who set himself on fire on 17 December 2010 in the middle of traffic in Sidi Bouzid after being harassed by municipal officials, was depicted as a symbol of liberation alongside icons like Che Guevara.<sup>7</sup>

Grffiti revolution during the uprisings in Tunisia not only gave a younger generation a voice but also sparked a fresh, post-revolution artistic movement. In 2014, as part of a large-scale initiative curated by Tunisian-French artist Mehdi Ben Cheikh, 150 street artists from 30 countries gathered on the island of Djerba and created 250 murals on the walls of the village of Erriadh. Under the title "Djerbahood", this year-long project would be an unheard-of before 2011. Given its ongoing struggles with unemployment, poverty and corruption, graffiti artists in post-revolution Tunisia still have powerful political messages to share.<sup>8</sup>

Grffiti thrived in Libya too, particularly in Tripoli and Benghazi, where immediately after the fall of Tripoli in August 2011, streets were filled with depictions of Muammar Gaddafi mocking him as a rat, a vampire, an ape, a pirate and a Nazi officer. As fighting between militias evolved, more elaborate murals started sprawling, representing general themes of war and nationalism: paintings of battles with Gaddafi's troops, artillery, and machine guns.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, in Bahrain, which had one of the most developed and organized graffiti movement in the region, street art activism focused on King Hamad Bin Eissa Aal Khalifa, with extreme slogans appearing on walls alongside his pictures. Just like in Egypt and Tunisia, the images of martyrs became widely fixed in Bahraini popular consciousness, particularly that of fourteen-year-old Ali Jawad Al Sheikh who was killed by security forces.<sup>10</sup>

Government tolerance was crucial in shaping the characteristics of each graffiti movement. In Syria for example, where a graffiti message written by a group of children on the walls of their school in Daara in February 2011 sparked the revolution, street art took a less visually sophisticated direction. Given the high risk of abduction, torture and murder by security forces, graffiti in the

country was restricted to improvised and on-the-spot political sloganeering against the Baath regime and the ruling family, devoid of elaborate imagery.<sup>11</sup> Yemen on the other hand, witnessed one of the most sophisticated public graffiti scenes with the walls being very quickly filled with murals combining individual styles with local and international themes. The emergence of a vibrant Yemeni graffiti scene during the Arab uprisings is perhaps best epitomized by the "Color the Walls of Your Street" campaign launched by artist



Murad Subay, who started painting after the revolution of 2011. With his project, Subay sent an open invitation to the public to join in painting the damaged walls of the streets of Sana'a.<sup>12</sup>

Across the Arab world, graffiti has left a powerful imprint. Different countries produced different styles of graffiti, shaped by diverse local traditions, sociopolitical backgrounds and tolerance levels. Whether it took the form of scathing scrawls and witty letterings or pop culture images and pictorially complex murals, it offered a sense of freedom and openness for artists and protestors and provided a collective goal that facilitated collaboration and encouraged participation in the various movements. As a highly visible legacy of the uprisings, which has unfortunately not survived in all cases, Arab Spring graffiti is ought to be treated as a valuable item of tangible heritage which is worthy of study, recording and preservation.

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The Arab Spring brought a redefinition between power, art and theater, breathing new life to a medium paralyzed by censorship. The uprisings have served as a fertile ground for performing arts, particularly theater; inspiring cultural festivals even in places that did not experience the Arab Spring. It infused theater with themes around freedom and women's rights and it became the background for many theatrical plays, portraying these concepts in a sophisticated and polyvalent fashion, while it evolved theater from underground to experimental in order to smooth social tensions.

# THEATER AND THE ARAB SPRING

**a revolutionary stage**

**S**INCE DECEMBER 2010 TO EARLY 2013, the waves of uprisings that overwhelmed the Middle East and North Africa region –known as “Arab Spring”– have been delineated as an “impact event” by Aleida Assman.<sup>1</sup> The dynamics and the interaction of the Arab Spring did not only mark the political and social aspects of the region, but also sparked off various changes in the forms and shapes of artistic expressions, traveling beyond the borders of the Arab Spring countries.<sup>2</sup> In the communal cultural consciousness, art always shares a quota for the promotion of political activism and the rebuke of repressive regimes.<sup>3</sup> Having taken a lot of forms, political art has been driven by the need to question authorities and to call out corruption, or the desire to stand up for social and political ideals. For the Arab world, the Arab Spring represented a fertile ground for performing arts such as theater, which has successfully immortalized snapshots of a population amid historic changes.<sup>4</sup>

### **A revolutionary stage**

Throughout the uprisings, the theatrical stage had turned into an arena of social dialogue and interaction, wherein contestations, subversions and reflections tread the boards. Theater has been turned into a prism that challenged hegemonic discourses and reflected sensitive social issues such as political corruption, religion, and human rights. During these years, several theatrical investments had been announced, while the cultural agendas of Middle East countries had been overwhelmed with numbers of cultural festivals, commencing from the principal countries of uprisings and conveying to the countries influenced by the Arab Spring. In these festivals, a great number of sociopolitical plays infused theater with themes about freedom, such as those in the National Theater in Egypt, or women’s rights, such as those at the Moroccan festival Théâtre et Cultures.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the art of the uprisings became the inspiration for great events such as “Minassa: platform for today’s Arab theater” in Beirut, bringing together actors, writers and comedians from countries affected by the Arab Spring.<sup>6</sup>

Viewing political and social interactions as intrinsically performative and symbolic that embody emotions, art appeared as a handmaid of revolution. The theatrical performance represents a collective aesthetic experience, affecting social consciousness on a massive scale, by decoding the worldview model such as the plays of the Syrians director Omar Abusaada and the writer Mohammad al Attar. Using as a background the Arab Spring in Syria, through their work they tried to acknowledge the contemporary history of their country upon the theatrical stage. In their attempt to deconstruct the complicated situation in Syria and the whole region, they created “The Factory”, while the socio-political context of the country in the post Arab Spring is imagined through metaphors of the human body in their play “While I was waiting”.<sup>7</sup>

Challenging the political regime and the affairs of 2011, Yemen’s Arab Spring has been reflected through the paragon of theatric performances. The theatrical plays shared a social-political character mirroring the way that performing arts have conceptualized, presented and performed the “revolution”. In the play “Wajhân li-‘Umla” (two sides of a coin), performed in 2011 at the Cultural center of Sana’a, Alfred Farag created a hero named Al-Tabrîzî, who imagines to act as an Arab Robin Hood that robs the rich and feeds the poor, aiming to spark a social revolution. While the protagonist was able to develop a revolutionary awareness, through



his performance, he also mirrored the transition from hope to desperation.<sup>8</sup>

The regional uprisings encouraged the voice and the dynamics of performance as forms of artistic expression in other parts of the Arab World, that did not go through the Arab Spring. Inspired by the speech of former Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, before his expulsion to Saudi Arabia, the Jordanian journalist Ahmad al Zoubi invented the “Al’aan Fhmtekom” (Now I Understand You) a theatric play inspired by the revolutionary spirit of the Arab uprising. Abu Saqer is the main character of the play, a petty domestic tyrant, who is panicking at the thought of losing control of his own household, while Arab protests have engulfed the streets of Jordan. The play that has been seen by more than seventy-five thousand people exemplifies the recent sensation that has been resonating among many in the region – breaking through the self-censorship and fear that has captured society for so long.<sup>9</sup>

While the uprisings of 2010-2011 have encouraged the development of theatrical agendas, they have also stimulated the course of theatre in the post-Arab Spring era. Along with other sociopolitical issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, new forms such as experimental theater came up to the surface by using the interaction with the audience and its participation as a way to smooth conflicts and iron out social tension. Having Egypt and the momentum that developed after the fall of Hosni Mubarak as a cynosure, open-ended experimental theater has been used as a medium of social justice interventions from revolutionary Egyptian artists such as Laila Soliman,<sup>10</sup> crossing the borders and affecting the whole MENA region. A project like this is the experimental theater STAR TOO in Dubai, aiming to bridge the gaps between arts and encourage the impact on the cultural landscape of the region.

Ten years on, the Middle Eastern theater stills shares the symbols from the Arab uprisings. In a context of internal tensions and concerns, theater in the Arab world during the 21st century broke up the established order and turned into an expressionist art, incorporating concepts such as “theatrical commotion”, which gained ground throughout the popular protests. While the dynamics of the uprisings have faded from the theatrical playscripts throughout the years, the artistic concepts born from them, have inundated the stages of the countries that had –as well as the others that enveloped– with the Arab Spring.

The storyline of Middle Eastern theater personifies an endless mirroring of socio-political, economic and cultural apprehensions of an intense period. Throughout these social settings, theatrical performances appeared in various territorial and historical settings, stretching from underground to experimental field, reflecting both regional and translocal influences.<sup>11</sup> A redefinition between power,

art and theater has arisen through the Arab Spring, breathing new life to a medium paralyzed by censorship that traveled beyond the Arab Spring countries. Using performance as a prism, theater has encouraged the Middle East population to express thoughts and emotions, to interpret part of their exhilarating history, empowering them not only as citizens but also as human beings.<sup>12</sup>



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# The Arab Spring

A re-appraisal

Most of the “Arab Spring a decade on” special pieces reflect a rather gloomy assessment of the uprisings’ impact on the Middle East. There is no doubt that democratic rights today are nowhere near the aspirations of the rebellious youth in Cairo, Damascus and Tripoli and their prospects are not rosier than they were in 2010. The Arab Spring has nonetheless changed the Middle East dramatically in various ways.

Sotiris Roussos

**IT IS IMPORTANT TO NOTE** that the Arab Spring was the product of three elements. First, the failure of the regimes to address even the slightest part of the social and political expectations of the growing educated youth. Increasing disillusionment with the government had led to the creation of wide informal networks of political and social dissent, particularly in Tunisia and Egypt that became the main vehicles of the uprising. Second, disputes and feuds among groups and members of the upper echelons of the regime and/or fractures in social alliances weakened the capacity of the regime to quell the uprising. The army in Tunisia and Egypt opted either to remain in the barracks and abstain from the political battle or to intervene in favour of the demonstrations, maintaining the role of the guarantor of the nation's unity and integrity. In Syria, the regime lost the support of the Sunni entrepreneurial class as the Assad family encroached their business domain by appropriating lucrative sectors such as the mobile telephone networks. Last but not least, the indecision and vacillation of both the US and the European powers regarding the survival of the regimes. On the one hand, they acknowledged in various ways the need for substantial reforms in the region but, on the other, they feared that regime change would cause instability, opening the gates for unpredictable new rulers. This vacillation created the impression that Washington was behind the uprisings sending shivers down the spine of the Saudi and other Gulf monarchies and driving a wedge of mistrust between the once close allies.

As the sound and the fury of the uprisings faded away, political Islam took over the leadership of the movement. Democratic process both in Egypt and in Tunisia favoured the well-organized and prepared Muslim Brotherhood and brought them to the government. In countries with a homogeneous ethnic and religious base, such as Egypt and Tunisia, the confrontation between the regime and the uprising never turned into a civil war. In the cases of Syria, Libya and Yemen, where there were numerous ethnic, religious and tribal affiliations, radical Panarabism in the forms of the Ba'ath, Gadhafi's idiosyncratic Arab socialism and Yemeni nation-state had failed to produce a cohesive and all-inclusive national narrative. It is interesting, however, to study the resilience of the Arab monarchies to this tide of uprisings. A rather sketchy approach would attribute this resilience to a combination of special domestic conditions (Jordan), pre-modern socio-political patterns and the mechanisms of the rentier-state. Notwithstanding the disappointing course of the transition in Egypt and the bloody wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen, the Arab Spring broke the barrier of fear and exposed the vulnerability of the autocrats. It, hence, sowed the seeds of rebellion that brought the belated uprisings in Algeria, Lebanon and the Sudan.

But, what the Arab uprisings impacted most was the regional balances in the Middle East. As the US seemed to abstain from any direct involvement in regional affairs and the EU was inherently incapable to address issues of security and stability, regional powers, Turkey, Russia, Iran and most importantly the Gulf big-spenders, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE, entered the scene trying to influence the course of events. In the Arab security complex states that used to play a central role in setting the priorities, such as Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Libya, either collapsed or were seriously weakened.

Turkey presented itself as the beacon of a political Islam compatible with democracy and free market economy, in an effort to claim regional hegemony. Qatar has used the power of investments and of global mass media and sponsored the regional outreach



of Muslim Brotherhood in order to play a regional role disproportionate to its military and political strength. Saudi Arabia and the UAE were the powers behind the Restoration of the “Ancien Régime” in Egypt, the defeat of the Brotherhood in the region and the abortive attempt to overthrow Assad’s regime.

Iran managed to keep Assad’s regime alive and to retain its control on Baghdad sacrificing, however, a lot of resources in a period of particular strain for the Iranian society. Pressured by the US sanctions, Tehran has been left with no close allies among the states of the region. Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shiite organization, which has been involved in Syria, Iraq and Yemen is now facing growing unrest in the Lebanese society. Russia tends to counterbalance what it considers U.S. influence and the ascent of political Islam by backing Assad’s regime and the government of Al-Sisi in Egypt. Russian intervention in Syria produced a new type of multilateralism, which gave her a preponderant role in the Middle East, offering Moscow the opportunity to challenge the narrative of the liberal western model for global order.

What is more, Saudi Arabia and the UAE became for the first time in modern history the leading powers in the Arab security complex setting the top priorities in the intra-Arab agenda. The Arab-Israeli conflict and the Palestinian Issue gave way to the regional antagonism between Saudi Arabia and Iran. For the Gulf monarchies, Tehran was far more threatening to their longevity than Tel Aviv. The road was, thus, open for an alliance between Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE against their common enemy. This shift in intra-Arab balances benefited US interests the most, more so since it led to the Abraham Accords, an achievement rather unthinkable in Washington before the Arab Spring.

The crisis of the Arab nation-state, which came ahead with the Arab Spring, led to new forms of sovereignty in the shape of ISIS and the Rojava Kurdish state-like entity. The ISIS hybrid state was perhaps the first model of state organization for the jihadi movement. Until the creation of the ‘Caliphate’, the jihadi movement had a global jihad strategy such as al-Qaeda-type network organization.

ISIS defined its political sovereignty based on three rings: its territory in Syria and Iraq, the allegiance of organizations that operated in the Middle East or Africa (Libya, Sinai, Yemen, Nigeria) and, finally, autonomous cells or fighters that carry out attacks in the name of ISIS in Turkey and Western countries. This ‘mobile’ sovereignty that characterized the ISIS hybrid state, leads to the reconceptualization of the ‘new medievalism’ or, as Jörg Friedrichs describes it, of ‘a system of overlapping authority and multiple loyalty, held together by a duality of competing universalistic claims’. The new Kurdish political-military entity in Syria based itself on grassroots democracy, decentralization and a federal system and it could set a new paradigm of state organization, not only for the Kurds in Turkey, Iraq and -we should not forget- Iran, but also for Arab Middle East states and societies





**Department of Political Science  
and International Relations**

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