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THE ARAB SPRING - A COMPLEX CONFLICT OF INTERESTS AND PROVOCATIONS IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

Theoretical
article

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Abstract

The uprisings of the Arab Spring had a major impact not only on the countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Gulf Cooperation Council Countries but also on the entire world. Analysts in various fields are still debating on the causes that led to such historical events, and also on the effects on short and long term that these revolutions have, or might have. One thing is certain for all: the Arab world entered a new stage in its development.

This paper aims to analyse the Arab Spring from as many points of view as possible, looking to indicators that traditionally define a country's health and well-being, including political and socio-economic markers, various economic crises, the rise of Islamist parties, increases in sectarianism, and other challenges.

Introduction

It is difficult to talk about the position of the GCC Members towards the Arab Spring, without being familiar first of all with the phenomenon of Arab uprisings, events that were in the past and continue to the present. Secondly, we all know that these uprisings started in the countries that do not enjoy the lifestyle of democracy at all, excepting here the State of Kuwait which has been acting in all fields, including the council (Council of the Nation), legislative and regulatory style. But even all the mentioned improvements were done, the Kuwaiti democracy does not prevent the regime direction to be against Arab Spring.

Although members gathered under one organization to win this “war”. The convergence of the ruling regimes in these countries doesn’t prevent the variation in the attitudes of the Arab Spring, being eager to support the drop of some regimes and some of them were conservative for several reasons.

However, The GCC Members considered regarding the Arab Spring that it was a threat as well as a chance that differed on the definition of threats chances.

This difference is influenced by the depth of changes that the Arab uprisings brought to them internally. Hence, their policies differ regarding the countries where Arab Spring took place, like Egypt and Syria.

Division within GCC led to a conflict not only between members of the organization but has become for the Arab Spring countries an arena of conflict between the two camps, a split which led to the formation of alliances and also collisions between the task countries outside GCC (Turkey, Iran, Israel, and Iraq) with one of the camps.

This disputes were also created by superpowers countries considered by themselves as influential in the world, including the exchange of deeds for the purpose of compromising on the interests and under the name of national security for those countries that have done things very complicated.

Which part won and how and which part lost? It is a complex question that would find an impartial current answer that would be developed in time.

The Arab Spring movements and its roots for a better understanding

Given the amplitude of these events, the entire world focused on them, including states and institutions. The diversity of the so-called Arab Spring is as important as the common threads that led to the region becoming the focus of local and international attention as its population struggled to free itself from decades of authoritarian rule. The third chapter brings into discussion the points of view of some of the most important international actors – states and institutions (also highlighting some of their interests in the MENA countries).

The spark that started the domino of revolutions was that act of protest and despair by the Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi (a twenty-six-year old Tunisian fruit seller from the impoverished city of Sidi Bouzid), when, following the confiscation of his wares, he set himself ablaze on December 17, 2010.

Bouazizi was only one of the millions of such young people who live with frustrations over a lack of voice and the ability to have a say and to take individual initiative in building the foundations for a better future. Whereas modernisation and economic growth have generated significant trickle-down and diffusion of economic benefits to most of the indigenous people in the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) countries, the rest of the region has had a lot less of this. Further, the dearth of diverse employment opportunities persists more or less across the board. Many in the overly young population are confronted with a bleak economic outlook (Thomas Andersson, Abdelkader Djeflat, *The Real Issues of the Middle East and the Arab Spring*, New York, Springer Science+Business Media, 2013, p. 36). The Tunisian revolution was named by many “Jasmine revolution”, because here no violence was involved and made it different from the other Arab Spring revolutions

Across the MENA region, traditionally high mortality levels began to decline in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

On average, the Middle East currently has the second youngest population of all regions in the world, after sub-Saharan Africa. Approximately one-third of the total population is currently below the age of 15. A further third is aged between 15 and 29. Fertility rates have remained particularly high in more densely populated but poorer countries such as Iraq and Yemen. Unfortunately, the unemployment rate among the youth of MENA countries is not at all promising.

The figure 1 reveals the global employment trends for youth (aged 15 – 24) in MENA countries, in comparison with the rest of the world. It can be observed that only 36-38% of the targeted population are part of the labour force, as compared to 51% - the average of the entire world. 23-24% of the youth are unemployed in MENA countries, while the average of the world unemployment is 13%.

Dictatorship or absolute monarchy, human rights violations, political corruption are also main causes of the Arab Spring. People talk increasingly about ‘freedom’. They are longing, first and foremost, for freedom to make their own choices and to put an end to corruption, political cronyism and repression.

By 2010, a study done by Transparency International found that domestic populations in the vast majority of surveyed Arab countries perceived

their governments to be more than moderately corrupt, as can be seen in the figure below – Figure 2.

The economy is also linked with the cronies mentioned so far. The Arab state has typically created rents by restricting access to economic opportunities to a dominant coalition, and used these rents to sustain order. Through centralized economic control and restrictive economic barriers, Arab governments have erected a system of economic apartheid that systematically excludes people and firms at the margins.

Arab economies have long been greased through revenues from oil, aid, and remittances. There is now a need to generate alternative revenue streams through trade and private sector development that can replace patronage with production. But it is inauspicious to talk about the necessity of economic reform at a time when the region's political climate is decidedly anti-business (Adeel Malik, Bassem Awadallah, *The Economics of the Arab Spring*, Centre for the Study of African Economies Working Paper WPS/2011-23). The private sector is at once the most despised as well as the most desirable aspect of reform. Business in the Arab world is often comfortably embedded within the state, with the result that it invokes images of crony capitalism.

The MENA states should strongly consider creating new jobs for their population. This employment challenge cannot be addressed without a strong private sector. And, without a strong private sector the human capital gains that the Arab world has achieved over time cannot be translated into solid productivity gains.

An independent private sector also serves a vital political function: it can generate a middle class that can serve as a powerful constituency for political reform. A robust private sector is thus both an economic and political imperative. But this requires a radically different business life: it requires a private sector that is open, competitive, and can operate outside the royal circle. This can be achieved through a genuine *infitah* (economic opening) that dismantles entry barriers, replaces privilege with competition, and ensures a decentralized and rules-based framework for decision-making (Adeel Malik, Bassem Awadallah, *The Economics of the Arab Spring*, Centre for the Study of African Economies Working Paper WPS/2011-23)

Naturally, the occurrence or the consequences of the Arab Spring cannot be understood in isolation. The movement behind the uprisings is linked to a range of other major developments unfolding across our increasingly globalised and interconnected world. It is tied to worsening environmental issues and population growth, which have led to new pressures in commodity markets, rising food prices and social unrest in many

countries. The harsh natural environment of the Middle East, prone to calamities and vulnerabilities, including in access to water and food, is under particular stress since high economic growth combines with producer and consumer patterns that display little concern for long-term sustainability.

The movement is also linked to the international financial crisis that unfolded when the real estate bubble burst in the United States in 2008, the further oscillations of which have combined with unaddressed structural issues to cause an explosion of government debt across much of the developed world and sent convulsions through financial markets. The economic fallout of the Arab Spring thus blends with the crisis in the Euro zone where a divide has opened up between the southern European countries with their lower productivity levels and high trade deficits, and their counterparts in Northern Europe, notably Germany, whose economies are more efficient and performing better under the prevailing exchange rate regime.

Separately, other influencing factor for the movements of Arab Spring was sectarianism, which met increasing levels. Also is the case of Syria, that had deeper sectarian implications than the other states we mentioned in this chapter. The rise of the Sunni-Shiite tensions and its potential impact on domestic and foreign politics is particularly visible in countries like Lebanon, Iran, and Syria. With wealthy Gulf Arabs eager to fund Salafist fighters in Syria, sectarianism became part of a bidding war. Some armed opposition groups, many of which operated independently, found financial benefit in adopting Salafist styles of dress and appearance and invoking sectarian narratives to obtain much-needed funds from Gulf sponsors. These developments in Syria are a prime example of how tolerant societies are warped when religion is used as a divisive tool. Acknowledging religious difference does not necessarily lead, however, to divisiveness and conflict. Indeed, these are the markers of a pluralistic society, and the building blocks of any democracy. While “sectarianism” has long been associated with religious discrimination and violence, the concept can, and should, be rehabilitated to embody appreciation and respect for diversity within politically inclusive societies.

Western thoughts regarding Arab Spring

The revolutionary wave that began in Tunisia in December 2010 caught not only Arab dictators by surprise, but also democratic leaders in the United States and Europe. The unrest toppled Tunisia President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali and then Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. Other dominos seemed poised to fall, as Mubarak's sudden end

sparked civil war or massive unrest in countries as diverse as Bahrain, Libya, Syria, and Yemen.

Several factors shaped Western leaders' thinking as they grappled with these questions and developed a policy response. First, a number of leaders, including President Barack Obama, appeared to believe that the demonstrators were riding a wave of history: change would happen regardless of US policy, so it was often better to embrace it than fight it. Even in the case of close allies like Egypt the United States backed regime change when it seemed inevitable.

Second, strong action, particularly military intervention, involved a search for a high degree of multilateral support and legitimacy, and at the same time, a desire to showcase a new model, where the United States would not necessarily lead.

Third, the United States and its allies sought to balance ideals with recognition of the limits of American power and a desire to maintain alliances with countries like Saudi Arabia, which were not poised for revolution.

Fourth, and unsurprisingly, Western countries were more willing to accept more significant interventions like those in Libya if the perceived cost was low.

Policy, particularly in the United States, was often reactive. The fast changing nature of events, uncertainty as to the nature of the opposition, and domestic distractions for both European and US leaders meant events were often treated as one-off challenges rather than part of a sustained transformation of the region. Inconsistency – not always a bad thing – was the policy result.

Conclusions:

The rapid succession of revolutions in MENA countries took everybody by surprise, with leaders not being able to properly handle the difficult situations in the beginning, some of them even failing until their deposition. International institutions and states in the whole world came with solutions to stop the uprisings, but not in all cases were they successful. One thing is for sure: the Arab world radically changed – not necessarily regarding the governmental decisions, or the economic situation, but categorically with respect to ordinary people's mentality.

A specific significance to the Arab Spring, that has to be considered, is the one given by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the chief architect of a counterrevolution of these events and a regional coordinator, that tried to build a consensus through a proactive diplomacy followed by its leaders.

At the end it has to be mentioned that the significance of GCC states' international relations, considering the reassertion of Saudi leadership within the Group

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Figure 1. Labor Force Participation (LFP) and Unemployment (U) rates (%) among youth ages 15-24, by sex and region, 2009

	Total		Male		Female	
	LFP	U	LFP	U	LFP	U
North Africa	38	24	53	20	23	32
Middle East	36	23	51	20	22	31
Central & South Eastern Europe (non-EU) & CIS	42	29	48	21	35	27
Developed Economies & European Union	50	18	53	20	48	16
Latin America & the Caribbean	52	16	62	13	43	20
South-East Asia & the Pacific	52	15	59	14	44	16
WORLD	51	13	59	13	43	13
S. & S. Saharan Africa	53	12	63	12	52	12
South Asia	47	10	64	10	28	11
East Asia	59	9	57	10	62	7

Source: International Labour Organization, Global Employment Trends for Youth (Geneva, 2010).

Figure 2. 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index (Corruption Perceptions Index 2010, Transparency International, <http://www.transparency.org/cpi2010/results>.)

