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Causes of the Arab Spring: A Critical Analysis

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Research Paper No. 7

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Arab Spring: The Third Wave of Democratization

In December 2010, the self-immolation of a street vendor in Tunisia triggered the Arab Spring – this series of (peaceful) popular uprisings from Egypt in the Fertile Crescent to Tunisia in the Maghreb. This process was symbolically termed the “Arab Spring” in analogy to the “Springtime of the Peoples” in 1848 – the chain political revolutions which shook the foundations of the monarchies in Europe and paved the way for the democratization of the Old Continent.¹

The Arab Spring, however, did not occur in a vacuum. In fact, the Arab Spring in 2010 constituted the last of “three waves of democratization” in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The “first wave” occurred in the late 19th century, the apex of European colonialism in the Middle East, when the secular intellectuals and politicians from the Christian and Muslim élite in Syria, Lebanon and Egypt sought to reform the politics of the Arab World and separate the (Muslim) religion from the state. The “second wave” occurred after the end of World War II and the start of European decolonization in the Middle East, when secular Muslim pioneers of Pan-Arabism and Arab Socialism initiated a top-down reformation of Arab state and society in Tunisia, Syria, Iraq, Algeria and Egypt. Nasser in Egypt and Bourguiba in Tunisia stand out as two prominent reformists who, nonetheless, ruled with an iron fist.²

What propelled the “third wave” of modernization in the Middle East after almost sixty years since the previous one? Why was such an immense chain reaction triggered by a trivial incident such as the self-immolation of a Tunisian street vendor in December 2010? Why, for example, did the intervention of the USA-led international coalition in Iraq in 2003 – and the subsequent export of liberal democracy to the Fertile Crescent – fail to trigger a similar political revolution across the Arab World? This article tries to unearth the real causes behind the seismic revolutions in the Middle East.

Causes and Facilitators of the Uprisings

A. Demographic Explosion

According to Volker Perthes, the Arab Spring originated primarily from the explosive demographic developments in the Arab world.³ Between 1970 and 2010, the population of the Middle East and North

¹ Marc Lynch: *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2012).

² Fouad Ajami: “The Arab Spring at One – A Year of Living Dangerously”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 2 (2012), pp. 56-65.

³ Volker Perthes: “Europe and the Arab Spring”, *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (2011), p.24.

Africa (MENA) nearly tripled (from 128 to 359 million inhabitants), with almost 30% of them aged between 20 and 35.⁴ However, the growth rate of the GDP and the per capita GDP of the MENA did not complement this huge population increase since the latter have been persistently plagued by economic stagnation for years. Accordingly, the younger generation in the MENA has always encountered a stark dilemma: migration to the wealthier European Union countries or poverty and unemployment. In fact, the unemployment and poverty rates for youngsters in the MENA countries remain staggeringly high: 25% and 41% respectively in 2009 – just two years before the outbreak of the Arab Spring.⁵ This deprivation of the myriad youngsters, in conjunction with the anger over the corrupt and repressive regimes across the Arab World, impelled the younger generation to rebel.⁶

B. Revolutionary Social Media

The social media (Twitter, Facebook and YouTube) contributed to the outbreak and expansion of the youth rebellions substantially. Just like the Green Revolution in Iran several years earlier,⁷ Arab youths capitalized on the immense capabilities provided by the internet and digital media to circumvent the tight control imposed by the authoritarian regimes on communication or self-organization. The internet and digital media endowed the disaffected Arab youth to organize mass movements of protest (devoid of any direction by the organized political forces) and communicate with the outside world and, by extension, acquaint themselves with the freedom and prosperity of the West. Questioning the traditional political norms and values through exposure to the outside world resulted in an increasing resentment among the youth and an intensifying democratic orientation.⁸

Unsurprisingly then, the Arab Spring has been termed “Twitter Revolution” since Twitter has been identified as the primary medium through which the political revolution in Tunisia and later in Egypt sprung and spread like wildfire. Although the power of this digital medium should not be exaggerated,

⁴ United Nations Development Programme: “Development Challenges Outlined in New Arab States” (United Nations Development Programme: New York, 2009), p. 22; Perthes: “Europe and Arab Spring”, p. 30.

⁵ Barry Mirkin: “Arab Spring: Demographics in a Region of Transition” (United Nations Development Programme: New York, 2013), pp. 12-14, 17-19, 22-27.

⁶ Aysa el-Meehy: “Relative Deprivation and Politics in the Arab Uprisings” (Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs: American University of Beirut, 2014), pp. 11-14..

⁷ Evgeny Morozov: “Iran Elections: A Twitter Revolution?”, *Washington Post*, 17/6/2009.

⁸ Philip N. Howard and Muzammil M. Hussein: “The Role of Digital Media”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (2011), pp. 36-37, 41-42. See also: Christos A. Frangonikolopoulos and Ioannis Chapsos: “Explaining the Role and the Impact of Social Media in the Arab Spring”, *Global Media Journal: Mediterranean Edition*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2012), pp. 10-20.

one could hardly disagree that the political revolution in Tunisia (or the Jasmine Revolution) would have never acquired such a momentum without Twitter.⁹

C. Political Oppression

Though diverse in nature, the protests throughout the MENA were intrinsically connected to certain common issues: the demands for political freedom, social justice and human dignity (karama in Arabic). When in January 2011 vast crowds assembled in Egypt's Tahrir Square in protest of the repressive regime of Mubarak, the people chanted the slogan "bread, freedom and dignity".¹⁰ This slogan, reminiscent of the rallying cry of the student protest in 1973 in Greece ("bread, education, freedom"), symbolises the urgent demand of younger generations for a new social contract between the people and the states in the Middle East – a region where a patrimonial and paternalistic type of regimes thrived for decades.¹¹

Since their independence from the European colonial powers, the vast majority of the MENA has been consistently ruled with an iron fist by dictators (e.g. Abdul Karim Qassem in Iraq between 1958 and 1963 or Hafez al-Assad in Syria between 1970 and 2000) or authoritarian rulers (e.g. Nasser in Egypt between 1954 and 1970 and Ben Ali in Tunisia from 1987 to 2011). These despots, the vast majority of whom had served as officers in the armed forces, suppressed violently all opposition to their rule and strictly restricted the political liberties of the population; unsurprisingly, the authoritarian regimes in the MENA countries from Iraq to Libya raised and sustained colossal security forces to support their increasingly unpopular rule.¹² The demands for political liberalisation was not restricted to the organisation of free and fair elections; rather, the demands included the abolition of the oppressive security apparatus and the end of human rights violations, the exclusion of the military from civilian affairs, the respect of political liberties, the elimination of corruption and cronyism and, finally, the protection of the rights of minorities – in some cases including the rights of the oppressed LGBT community.¹³

⁹ Ethan Zuckerman: "The First Twitter Revolution?", *Foreign Policy*, 15/1/2011; Armando Salvatore: "A Public Sphere Revolution? Social Media versus Authoritarian Regimes" in Larbi Sadiki (ed.): *Routledge Handbook of the Arab Spring: Rethinking Democratization* (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 343-353.

¹⁰ Nurullah Ardic: "Understanding the 'Arab Spring': Justice, Dignity, Religion and International Politics", *Afro-Eurasian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2012), pp. 15-18.

¹¹ Johnny West: *Karama! Journeys through the Arab Spring* (London: Heron Books, 2011); Kjetil Bjorvatn and Jacob Høigilt: "Youth and the Arab Revolutions" in Kjetil Sevlik and Bjørn Olav Utnik (eds.): *Oil States in the New Middle East: Uprisings and Stability* (Abington: Routledge, 2015) pp. 39-56.

¹² Eva Bellin: "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective", *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (2004), pp. 139-157; Laurel E. Miller et al.: "Democratization in the Arab World" (Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2012), pp. 35-43.

¹³ Mohammed Nouredine Affaya: "The Arab Spring: Breaking the Chains of Authoritarianism and Postponed Democracy" in Khair El-Din Haseeb (ed.): *The Arab Spring: Critical Analyses* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 50-

The increasing political awareness of the younger generations in the MENA countries should be attributed without doubt to the improved education (the number of university students in the Arab World increased five times between 1990 and 2000), the exposure to the political ideals of a Western-style liberal democracy through the extensive Arab diaspora, the massive youth bulge and the widespread use of new technologies (internet and digital media).¹⁴ Several studies have demonstrated that countries with very young and well-educated populations display a propensity for riots, revolutions and (civil) conflict.¹⁵ In short, younger generations had been politically radicalised and showed a strong willingness to embrace and advance democratization.

D. Economic Stalemate and Social Injustice

The economic liberalization of the early 1990s in the MENA was not accompanied by progressive political reforms. In effect, the economic liberalization solely reinforced the power and privileges of the politico-military élite and obstructed the democratization of the paternalistic regimes.¹⁶ Unsurprisingly, economic liberalization (particularly in the poorest countries such as Egypt or Yemen) was implemented at the expense of just governance and the rule of law and, thus, sustained the pandemic corruption and cronyism in these states. Indicatively, the army and the clique of Mubarak profited primarily by the liberal economic reforms in Egypt, centred on privatizations and liberalization, in the 1990s and, consequently, their assets corresponded to almost 30% of the national wealth.¹⁷

Consequently, the inequality in the MENA countries skyrocketed and restricted the potential for social mobility among the youth. In fact, education does not offer a passport to higher social or economic status since the social structure of the MENA (patriarchal, conservative and tribal) perpetuates the high inequality levels in the distribution of wealth and power. In previous years, the paternalistic regimes redistributed the national wealth, albeit unevenly, to the various social strata – though special treatment was reserved for the ruling élite’s tribe, sect or clique. In recent years, however, the paternalistic centralised

70; Laurence Whitehead: “On the ‘Arab Spring’: Democratization and Related Political Seasons” in Sadiki (ed.): *Routledge Handbook*, pp. 17-27.

¹⁴ Andrea Ansani and Vittorio Daniele: “About a Revolution: the Economic Motivations of the Arab Spring”, *International Journal of Development and Conflict*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (2012), pp. 10-14.

¹⁵ For more information, see: Daron Acemoglu et al.: “From Education to Democracy”, *American Economic Review*, Vol. 95, No. 2 (2005), pp. 44-49; Elizabeth Leahy et al.: “The Shape of Things to Come: Why Age Structure Matters to a Safer, More Equitable World” (Washington, DC: Population Action International, 2007).

¹⁶ Raymond Hinnebusch: “Authoritarian Persistence, Democratization Theory and the Middle East: An Overview and Critique” *Democratization*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (2006), pp. 373-395; Omar S. Dahi: “The Political Economy of the Egyptian and Arab Revolt”, *IDS Bulletin*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (2012), pp. 47-53.

¹⁷ Nadine Sika: “The Political Economy of Arab Uprisings” (Barcelona: European Institute of the Mediterranean, 2012), pp. 8-14.

states of the MENA did not redistribute wealth satisfactorily or improve the socio-economic status of the population adequately. The restricted social mobility and severe inequality for the younger generation, coupled with soaring unemployment rates, stirred juvenile dissatisfaction to an alarming extent.¹⁸

E. Environmental Decay

Climate change contributed indirectly, albeit substantially, to the eruption of the successive political uprisings in the Arab World. In reality, climate change acted as a “force multiplier” by exacerbating the already severe political, socio-economic and environmental problems of an arid and over-populated region.¹⁹ Terrible droughts and over-exploitation of the scant water resources in Syria predictably resulted in the internal migration of hundreds of thousands of people to the sprawling cities due to the advancing desertification, condemning the environmental refugees to poverty. The protesters against Assad in 2011 occurred predominantly in the slums of the cities crammed with internal refugees.²⁰ Similarly, Qaddafi used Libya’s oil revenues to undertake the Great Man-Made River Project, a pharaonic and unsustainable project of water engineering; the voluntarism of Qaddafi eventually depleted Libya’s sparse water resources and created myriad environmental refugees and, by extension, dissidents.²¹

In addition, food security constituted another principal source of popular discontent on the eve of the civilian uprisings. In fact, the Arab World has experienced “bread riots” in the past due to food scarcity and food inflation (i.e. the rise of food costs).²² In 2007 and 2008, riots erupted in Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia and Yemen owing to the rising cost of bread (the staple of the Middle Eastern diet). Severe droughts in China caused wheat crop failures and, thus, the bread prices in Egypt – the largest importer of wheat globally – skyrocketed. Quite predictably, the popular discontent in Egypt rose alarmingly on the eve of the Arab Spring.²³

¹⁸ Sika: “Political Economy”, pp. 16-19; Harun Öztürkler: “Economic Factors behind the Arab Spring, Challenges and Opportunities, *Today’s Zaman*, 10/2/2013.

¹⁹ Caitlin E. Werrell and Francesco Femia: “Conclusion” in Caitlin E. Werrell and Francesco Femia (eds.): “The Arab Spring and Climate Change” (Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress, 2013), p. 51.

²⁰ Peter H. Gleick: “Water, Drought, Climate Change and Conflict in Syria”, *Weather, Climate and Society*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (2014), pp. 331-340.

²¹ Caitlin E. Werrell and Francesco Femia: “Climate Change before and after the Arab Spring: The Cases of Syria and Libya” in Werrell and Femia (eds.): “Arab Spring”, pp. 28-32.

²² For more information, see: Larbi Sadiki: “Popular Uprisings and Arab Democratization”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (2000), pp. 71-95.

²³ Caitlin E. Werrell, Francesco Femia and Troy Stenberg: “Did We See it Coming? State Fragility, Climate Vulnerability and the Uprisings in Syria and Egypt”, *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (2015), pp. 29-46.

Sufficient and Necessary Conditions for Uprising

The aforementioned parameters did in fact cause the outbreak of the popular uprisings. However, they did not cause the downfall of these secular, yet despotic, regimes. Two other factors caused the collapse of these regimes: the positive stance of the international community towards the protesters and the neutral stance of the army. The cases of Egypt and Tunisia, the two peaceful transitions in the Arab Spring, can serve as ideal case studies.

In January 2011, the Jasmine Revolution ended in the downfall of the secular regime of Ben Ali after 4 weeks of peaceful protests. Why? Because the army not only stayed neutral during the peaceful protests but also chased off the security forces loyal to Ben Ali. In addition, France and Italy, the two traditional supporters of Ben Ali, did not lift their fingers to help him; instead, they voiced their support for these protests as a sign of democratization in Tunisia.²⁴

The regime of Mubarak in Egypt collapsed in a similar way. Why? Because the army of Egypt did not support Mubarak – a former general himself. But why? Because Mubarak (though a successor to Sadat and victor over al-Gama’*a* al-Islamiyya in the 1990s) intended to install his son Gamal as president. The army of Egypt opposed the establishment of a “dynasty”. Since the rise of Nasser to power in 1952, the military in Egypt acts as the “custodians of a so-called “praetorian democracy” – just like Pakistan and Turkey (the latter until the rise of Erdoğan to power in 2003). In autocracies such as Egypt, Pakistan and Turkey, the army acts as the custodian of a parliamentary and secular regime and overthrows the political rulers at will – while enjoying undisputed autonomy in security and economic issues and legitimacy among the public opinion as the stable institution).²⁵ Last but not least, the president of the USA, Barack Obama, openly supported the protestors in Tahrir Square (despite the strong reservations of traditional US allies such as Israel and Saudi Arabia about the implications of Mubarak’s downfall).²⁶

When the army of Egypt ousted the elected islamist president Morsi in July 2013 with a bloody coup d’état, the Muslim Brotherhood staged mass protests. However, the army responded with brute force and quelled the dissidence. Why? Because the army (and the security apparatus in general) supported the new strongman al-Sisi. How did the international community react? While the West voiced its disapproval for a violent crack-down, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries openly supported (in economic and

²⁴ Nouri Gana (ed.): *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013); Chris Miller: “Four Years After, Tunisia Remains the Arab Spring’s Lone Success Story”, *YaleGlobal*, 5/2/2015.

²⁵ Alexander Kazamias: “From Popular Revolution to Semi-Democracy: Egypt’s First Experiment with Praetorian Democracy” in Reem Abou-El-Fadl (ed.): *Revolutionary Egypt: Connecting Domestic and International Struggles* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 112-133.

²⁶ Bahgat Korany and Rabab el-Mahdi (eds.): *Arab Spring in Egypt: Revolution and Beyond* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2012).

diplomatic terms) the new regime.²⁷ Therefore, the new government under al-Sisi survived despite the fact that the USA did not support it.

In other words, parameters such as environment decay, revolutionary social media, social injustice and economic stalemate, political oppression, and demographic explosion were sufficient and necessary conditions for the outbreak of the uprisings against the authoritarian regimes in the MENA; however, they were sufficient, not necessary, conditions for the overthrow of the regimes. Rather, the stance of the army and international community were the catalysts which determined whether a regime in the MENA would eventually survive or not.

²⁷ Brecht De Smet: "Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Egypt", *Science and Society*, Vol. 78, No. 1 (2014), pp. 1-40; Khalid al-Anani: "The 'Anguish' of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt" in Larbi Sadiki (ed.): *Routledge Handbook of the Arab Spring: Rethinking Democratization* (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 227-239.