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*The long-lasting political impact of
the Arab Spring*

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Introduction

Before understanding how the Arab Spring reshaped the political, social, and economic landscape of the Arab world and the entire world in general, it is best to first understand how the Arab Spring started. As described by Britannica, the Arab Spring is “a wave of pro-democracy protests and uprisings that took place in the Middle East and North Africa beginning in 2010 and 2011, challenging some of the region’s entrenched authoritarian regimes.” (Britannica).

The first demonstration that is considered to have occurred as a part of the Arab Spring is in Tunisia by Mohamed Bouazizi, a jobless graduate who sold vegetables without a permit. After the police seized his cart due to his lack of a permit, Bouazizi set himself on fire and later died. As a result of Bouazizi’s death and Wikileaks publication of US criticism of the Tunisian regime, young Tunisians started to protest. Following nearly a month of protests where 11 people died due to clashes with security forces and cars were set on fire in many Tunisian cities, then president of the country Zine El Abidine Ben Ali bowed down and fled to Saudi Arabia (Huffington Post).

11 years, hundreds of protests, 3 civil wars, hundreds of thousands of civilians dead, and numerous toppled authoritarian regimes later, the Arab world is arguably no better than how it was before.

Definition of Key Terms

Alawite/Alawi: Any member of a minority sect of Shiite Muslims living chiefly in Syria (Britannica).

Arab League: A regional organization of Arab states in the Middle East and parts of Africa, formed in Cairo on March 22, 1945, as an outgrowth of Pan-Arabism (Britannica).

Authoritarian: Believing that people should obey authority and rules, even when these are unfair, and even if it means that they lose their personal freedom (OED Online).

Civil War: A war between groups of people in the same country (OED Online).

Color Revolution: Any of various related revolutionary movements that developed in several societies in the former Soviet Union and the Balkans during the early 2000s, mostly using nonviolent resistance (Wordsense).

Coup d'état: A sudden change of government that is illegal and often violent (OED Online).

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): A political and economic alliance of six Middle Eastern countries—Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman (Britannica).

Intervention: Action by a country to become involved in the affairs of another country when they have not been asked to do so (OED online).

Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS): Since 2014, a transnational Sunni insurgent group operating primarily in western Iraq and eastern Syria (Britannica).

Muslim Brotherhood: A religiopolitical organization founded in 1928 at Ismailia, Egypt, by Hassan al-Banna (Britannica).

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO): A military alliance established by the North Atlantic Treaty (also called the Washington Treaty) of April 4, 1949, which sought to create a counterweight to Soviet armies stationed in central and eastern Europe after World War II (Britannica).

Protest: The expression of strong dislike of or opposition to something; a statement or an action that shows this (OED Online)

Shiite/Shia: A member of the smaller of the two major branches of Islam, the Shia, distinguished from the majority Sunnis (Britannica).

Sunni: A member of one of the two major branches of Islam, the branch that consists of the majority of that religion's adherents (Britannica).

General Overview

After President Ben Ali fled Tunisia, people around the Arab world took to the streets with similar demands for democracy and economic stability.

In Egypt, despite concessions by the Egyptian government, protestors were not deterred. Clashes between protesters and security forces came to such a point that the Egyptian army announced that they refused to use force against protesters, calling for the removal of then-President Mubarak. Mubarak, having lost the support of the military, left office on February 11 and ceded power to senior military officers in the interim (Britannica; Huffington Post).

In Libya, around mid-February, 2011, protests which had been going for a couple of weeks at that point escalated into an armed revolt. The international community, seeing that the rebels opposing Muammar Gaddafi's authoritarian regime were on the verge of defeat, launched a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-led campaign of airstrikes targeting Gaddafi's forces. When the rebels took control of Tripoli,

Gaddafi evaded capture for several weeks and was caught in Sirte. He was then lynched by a mob of angry rebels in the streets and killed in October 2011 (Britannica).

In Bahrain, security forces, aided by a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), violently cracked down on protests. By the end of the month, the protests were largely curbed and dozens of accused protest leaders were convicted of anti-government activity, Shiite workers suspected of supporting the protests were fired and many Shiite mosques were demolished by the Sunni-led government (Britannica).

In Yemen, then-President Ali Abdullah Saleh's base of support was damaged as a large group of the country's most powerful tribal and military leaders aligned themselves with the pro-democracy protesters. In November 2011, Saleh signed an internationally drafted agreement that called for a phased transfer of power to his Vice President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi. Hadi, following the agreement, took power and officially became the president after being the sole candidate in an election in February 2012. Hadi's government failed to improve conditions and establish stability, facing armed revolts and rebellions which led to the Yemeni Civil War in 2014 (Britannica).

In Syria, protesters demanded the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad. Assad brutally cracked down on protesters, so much so, he drew great condemnation from international leaders and humanitarian organizations. The opposition quickly armed themselves and started organizing attacks against government security forces. Despite heavy opposition towards his regime, Assad was able to retain the support of crucial military units which were composed mostly of Syria's Alawite minority—which Assad belongs to. Although an international intervention was in talks, which was decisive in the Libyan situation, the lack of a united international front and the vetoing of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions by China and Russia meant that such intervention was not possible. China and Russia also vowed to oppose any outside efforts in trying to pressure the Assad regime out of power (Britannica).

In addition to the aforementioned countries and conflicts, many more, comparatively minor, events occurred in the Arabian Peninsula and in North Africa. Rulers of Algeria, Jordan, Morocco, and Oman offered varying concessions ranging from the dismissal of unpopular officials to constitutional changes with hopes that the protests would not spread further, leading to chaos as seen previously (Britannica).

After the years 2010 and 2011, the effects of the Arab Spring loomed on and are visible to this day. Unlike what the movement had initially started for, there was no long-lasting democratic change in any country of importance, except Tunisia. Egypt and Libya both experienced short-lived democratic progress between the years of 2012 and 2014 but after a military coup in Egypt and a civil war in Libya, the progress was wiped once again. In terms of freedom of the press, the region is again worse today than it was before. Many governments in the region took decisive action to suppress any criticism in the media. The likelihood that a local or international journalist could get imprisoned is higher as well compared to a decade ago. Most notably, the number of people displaced as a result of the conflict is undeniably high. After the civil wars of Syria, Libya and Yemen many millions were displaced. More than 5 million refugees were created as a result of the Syrian conflict alone. Corruption was also a key element that has yet to change for the better in the region. Although countries such as Tunisia have indeed attempted to

respond for better governance, corruption continues to worsen regionwide (Council on Foreign Relations).

The region also had to deal with a new problem in addition to their already existing ones: Covid-19. These problems worsened with the long-lasting effects of the pandemic and once again resulted in protests around the Arab world (Safi et al.).

Lastly, the Arab Spring widened the divide between Shiite and Sunni Muslims in the region. Especially in Bahrain and Syria where the ruling elite or the military high command is a member of one sect but the majority of the country is marginalized because they are not so (Manfreda).

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

Tunisia

The country of Tunisia has seen the most positive change in the past decade since the Arab Spring. Being the “birthplace” of the movement, Tunisia has ranked higher in democracy ratings such as the Freedom House and held major elections. It is commonly referred to as the “only democracy in the Arab World”. However, lately, the country has been shaken by new protests when its president, Kais Saied, drastically intervened in the country’s politics by disrupting the parliamentary process and assuming most of the functions of the state for himself (Cordell).

Egypt

After the ousting of President Mubarak, Egypt held elections in 2012. Egyptians elected Mohamed Morsi, a candidate which was running with the support of the Muslim Brotherhood. Although his presidency had mostly been under the pressure of the interim military government, Morsi managed to take the upper hand later on in his presidency. Less than a year later, due to worsening economic conditions and allegations towards Morsi that he was putting the interests of the Muslim Brotherhood above his people’s, on July 1st of 2013, the head of the Egyptian Armed Forces, Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, issued an ultimatum, but as Morsi refused to step down, Sisi suspended the constitution and removed Morsi from office (Britannica).

Libya

After the fall of Gaddafi, the country was unable to establish a single stable government. Despite the apparent rebel victory and the setting up of a Transitional National Council by rebel forces that were recognized internationally, the council struggled to exert authority over the country, leading to the 2nd Libyan Civil War in 2014 (Britannica; Huffington Post). Following its civil war, Libya is currently ruled by 2 rival governments. Libya’s population suffered significantly during these years of political uncertainty and this has contributed further to the refugee crisis in and around the region (History.com Editors).

Syria

The Syrian Civil War lasted up until 2019 and forced many to leave the country, seeking refuge in Turkey, Greece, and Western Europe. The civil war in Syria then spread onwards to Iraq with the declaration of a new Islamic caliphate by a radical Islamist organization who referred to themselves as the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) (Britannica). ISIS was mostly defeated in the region but the rule of dictator Bashar al-Assad persists to this day (History.com Editors).

USA

The United States mainly took part in the Libyan and Syrian theaters of the Arab Spring in hopes of toppling the authoritarian regimes. It partially succeeded in Libya but wasted endless resources in Syria as the Russian-backed Assad regime reigns strong. Former President Trump pulled a large number of forces out of Syria, only keeping a few hundred to support their Kurdish partners in the region (Barnes). The Arab Spring has also shown the limits of American power in the Middle East and forced the US to rethink its foreign policy and military strategies (Donegan).

Russia

Russia's stance in regards to the Arab Spring was more of an anti-western one. Moscow described the ousting of Tunisian and Egyptian leaders as "color revolutions" and watched developments closely. However, they did align themselves with the west in regards to Egypt. In Libya, despite opposing the military intervention by the US, Russia also valued good relations with the west, thus abstaining during the UNSC vote in regards to Libyan intervention. Russia aligned itself in an apparent and bold manner when it came to Syria. It opposed United Nations (UN) sanctions against the country heavily and openly aided the Assad regime with funds, weaponry, and fighters (Johansson et al.).

Treaties and Events

UNSC Resolution 1970 (2011) - The resolution imposes an arms embargo, a travel ban, and an assets freeze in connection with the situation in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya.

UNSC Resolution 1973 (2011) - The resolution imposes additional measures in connection with the situation in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya; establishes a Panel of Experts to assist in monitoring the relevant measures.

UNSC Resolution 2042 (2012) - The resolution authorizes an advance team to monitor the ceasefire in Syria.

UNSC Resolution 2043 (2012) - The resolution establishes a UN supervision mission in Syria, with 300 observers to monitor the cessation of violence and the implementation of the Kofi Annan peace plan for Syria.

UNSC Resolution 2118 (2013) - The resolution is on the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian Civil War by the Assad regime.

Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

Most solution attempts in regards to the Arab Spring and its effects have been more or less either through direct military intervention, as seen in Syria and Libya, or through the imposition of sanctions on military and state officials. Mainly, the most consolidated efforts against the effects of the Arab Spring were in regards to the formation of ISIS. The international community was more or less a united front when addressing the terrorist threat. Other than that, the international community was divided heavily when it came to both the Libyan, Syrian and Yemeni Civil Wars. The United States tried to stop Assad by imposing UNSC sanctions, but, every time, was stopped by Russia. Additionally, when it comes to the maintaining of functioning democracies in the region, many actors have either taken a passive approach or were reluctant to uphold democratic processes against actions such as the military coup in Egypt.

Possible Solutions

Delegates must try to find solutions to the political problems caused by the Arab Spring taking into consideration the delicate makeup and culture of the Middle East. To better understand why the Middle East, and the wider Arab world, are filled with controversies and conflicts, delegates should research ethnic, religious, and cultural divisions in the region. The pathway that goes to finding solutions towards stable democracies and accountable governments is not one that is easily crossed, but if delegates prepare themselves to debate upon the issues from both their countries' policy perspectives and through possible opposing lenses, the issues at hand can be swiftly addressed. For example, delegates can consider creating democratic transformation frameworks for the Arab world that are in a more suitable style to the region rather than a western/Roman/Greek democratic system. Delegates may also consider implementing nation-building efforts in the regions of Yemen, Syria, and Libya as their civil wars have heavily devastated the regions. Lastly, delegates must be knowledgeable about why foreign powers that are so far away from their regions of influence have vested interests in the region and risk fighting costly wars to better understand the reasons as to why the region is well-known for its instability and chaos.

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