



Five good reasons to be sceptical about the 'Arab Spring'

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When a game breaking event takes place in the Middle East once each decade

There is a certain understanding amongst Middle East politics experts that a game breaking event of cataclysmic proportions hits the region once every ten years or so. September of this year will mark the 10th anniversary of the unimaginable acts of terrorism which were perpetrated in New York in September 2001 by Arab suicide bombers. These acts of violence catapulted America's 'War on Terror' to the centre of Washington's foreign policy agenda, opening the way for renewed civil war in Afghanistan and the US-led invasion of Iraq of 2003. Roughly ten years earlier, in 1990, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait – the first time one modern day Arab state invaded another – resulted in the gathering of forces to liberate Kuwait and the eruption of the Gulf War of 1990-91. The Gulf War, together with the end of the Cold War, re-shaped Middle Eastern geopolitics for years to come, ensuring that Pax Americana became the new reality in the strategically vital Gulf zone. Some ten year prior to the Gulf War, 1979 was likewise a watershed year for the Middle East, witnessing pivotal events such as Iran's Islamic revolution, the signing of the Camp David Accords which heralded a new peace between Israel and the leading Arab state of the time, Egypt, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The impact of these ground-breaking events would be felt in the region for years to come and is indeed being felt across the Middle East at present.

And so it is that some ten years following Al Qaeda's attacks on New York, 2011 once again appears to be a game breaking year for the Middle East. Indeed, the popular, street level uprisings that started in the North African Maghreb in January, before spreading to Egypt and the Middle East proper seem to be unprecedented, particularly

given the swiftness and seeming relentlessness of the domino effect which they started across the region. Furthermore, the fact that the Arab street has on these occasions remained united and determined to effect regime change, appears to have caught Arab rulers (as well as Middle East experts) totally by surprise. This was reflected most sensationally last January and February, when two of the Middle East's long-standing authoritarian presidents, Tunisia's Zine el Abidine Ben Ali and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, yielded to the protests and abdicated their presidential thrones in the wake of people power. As the street revolts spread to Jordan, Yemen, Iraq, Bahrain, Libya, Algeria, Morocco and Syria, analysts began to speak of the events as the Arab Spring, with 1989 (the end of communism and the start of democracy in Eastern Europe) being its reference year.

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Now that some six months have passed since the departure of the Tunisian and Egyptian presidents, the Arab Spring faces a fairly uncertain future, however. While Arab street revolts and the departure of the Tunisian and Egyptian presidents raised the expectations of many Arab citizens across the Middle East, believing that the way that Arab countries are governed is about to undergo momentous change, renewed hope of such prospects seem to be fading fast at present. With the political environment across the Middle East looking fairly mixed and full of uncertainty in mid-2011, here are five good reasons to be sceptical about the Arab Spring in its capacity to act as a catalyst for major change in the nature of governance across the region.

Reason No.1: Egypt and Tunisia are not the leading states in the Middle East

Egypt was without much doubt the most important Arab state in political terms during the 1950s and 60s. The country's 1952 revolution set the pace for other revolutions across the Arab world, inspiring top-down military coups against pro-Western Arab monarchies in other Arab countries and igniting the region with its brand of revisionist Arab nationalism. Later, during the 1970s, Egypt both shocked and divided Arab opinion by its decision to make peace with Israel, effectively putting an end to the coordinated resistance of the Arab states against Israel in wars which had been raging since 1948. However, Cairo's level of political influence and overall standing amongst its Arab peers has declined significantly since that time. While the manner in which Egyptians stood up to Hosni Mubarak's regime earlier this year may prove to be an exception, events taking place in Egypt have provided little inspiration for the rest of the Arab world in recent years. Indeed, it is perhaps a testimony to the decline of Egypt's regional leadership in the Arab world that Egyptians have been followers, rather than leaders in this year's Arab Spring.

The courageous Egyptian street protestors who forced the departure of Hosni Mubarak were inspired not by the country's iconic leaders of yesteryear, such as Gamal Abdel Nasser, but rather by the desperation of a small town Tunisian street vendor, Mohammad Bouazizi, whose act of self-immolation sparked the current uprising on the Arab streets. Whilst one should not, by any means, negate the courage of the countless thousands of Tunisians and Egyptians who stood up to their regimes last winter, the capacity of either of these countries to provide a governance leadership model for other Arab countries to follow is limited by their comparatively lesser standing in the region as a whole at present.

Reason No.2: Neither Mubarak nor Ben Ali were nation builders

Both Ben Ali and Mubarak inherited the political-economies over which they presided directly from their predecessors. The men who came before them (Nasser, Anwar Sadat and Habib Bourguiba) were state builders who introduced and oversaw the implementation of major novel approaches that spearheaded development in their countries, setting precedent throughout the region. Both Ben Ali and Mubarak

stepped in to fill shoes which were, in effect, too big for their feet at the time. They were left to manage the systems created by their predecessors, rather than capable of building their own. Given that neither Ben Ali nor Mubarak created the systems over which they ruled, these very systems are more likely to outlive their departure. Change will be more difficult to implement than would have been upon the death or departure of a state builder, since the legacy of the state builders tend to be more difficult to outlive that of their successors. The ghosts of Nasser and Sadat are far more likely to continue haunting Egyptians into the future than those of Mubarak, whose departure is less likely to generate the risk of a power vacuum in the country. The same can be said of Ben Ali and his predecessor, Habib Bourguiba, independent Tunisia's first president and a leader often compared to Turkey's Attaturk, due to the secular reforms he introduced in his country during his three decades in power.

Reason No.3: The army remains the bedrock of power across the Arab world

Most of the Arab regimes which came to power through violent revolution during the Arab nationalism years of the 1950s and 60s remained in power for decades not only through the backing of the military: the regimes were themselves the military. The situation in Egypt and Tunisia was no different, with both presidents Ben Ali and Mubarak coming from the military establishment and remaining in power largely due to alliances with key actors in the military and intelligence services. While most Arab regimes have civilian constitutions, Arab civil society remains subject to numerous emergency decrees – effectively martial law, or arbitrary military rule. Egypt has been ruled by emergency decrees throughout the Mubarak years and although the Egyptian army played a key role in overseeing Mubarak's departure last February, a Faustian pact between Mubarak and the president's former acolyte, 76-year-old Field Marshal Tantawi, over the aging Mubarak's departure was overly likely.

While it does not appear that the Mubaraks have received full immunity from Tantawi (who is in essence Egypt's present head of state), they have hardly suffered the fate of many of the Arab world's ousted monarchical rulers during the region's 1950s-60s revolutions, when death or exile awaited many. In the Maghreb, the military played a major role in the resignation of Algerian President, Chadli

Benjedid, in 1992 and there is little transparency about the arrangements made between Tunisia's Ben Ali, the Tunisian military and the Saudi royals in the brokering Ben Ali's departure for Saudi Arabia last January. In Egypt, many thousands have returned to Cairo's Tahrir Square in July to protest against the fact that the generals – many of the old faces – still remain in power and despite the promise of elections, change in governance is hardly around the corner.

Reason No.4: The West's strategic outlook towards the region needs to change

As already mentioned above, many analysts have been referring to the street revolts in the Arab world as a similar phenomenon to that which took place in Eastern Europe in 1989, when people poured out onto the streets in overwhelming numbers, finally overpowering long standing authoritarian rulers. While this is a tempting comparison, it is flawed from two perspectives. First, East Europeans were revolting no less against Soviet political patrimony in their countries than they were against their own regimes, most of which were merely Moscow's clients in the region. Second, the US-led West wanted communist regimes in Eastern Europe to fall, given that this would be a strategic set back of catastrophic proportions for the Soviet Union, precipitating the Soviet defeat in the Cold War. In contrast, it could hardly be said that it was in the strategic interest of the West for Arab regimes to fall at any point during the Arab Spring, since most Arab states are propped up by Western military and political aid amounting in the billions of dollars. Despite their authoritarian nature, many Arab regimes play a key role in maintaining the West's vital strategic interests in the Middle East – including containing Islamic radicalism, ensuring that Gulf oil supplies flow freely to international markets and that the no-war-no-peace standoff between Israel and the Palestinians does not escalate into a larger conflict.

While Washington monitored closely the Mubarak and Ben Ali departures, and has taken an aggressive stance towards the regime in Libya, it seemed to close its eyes when columns of US-made Saudi tanks and other elements of military hardware rolled across the King Fahd causeway to prop up the Bahraini royal family in March. Unlike the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia: the August 1968 Prague Spring, it seems that the West was not overly disturbed when Saudi Arabia practiced its own 'Brezhnev

doctrine' in Bahrain. Until the West's strategic outlook towards the region changes fundamentally, from one advocating democracy but practicing realpolitik, the prospects for the Arab Spring in heralding real change in many of the key states of the region will remain under a cloud.

Reason No.5: There are no fresh ideas to inspire the region

Arab nationalism swept across the Middle East during the 1950s and 60s, inspiring new ideas about national development for the entire region in wake of declining European colonial rule. Egypt and Tunisia were at the heart of such secular, nation building experiments. Arab nationalism declined in the region during the 1970s and 80s, when a combination of liberal capitalism and Islamism became more prominent. Leftist ideologies have also left their mark on the region, while a democratisation agenda has been largely pushed into the Middle East by external forces and has never really cemented itself. The self-immolation of Mohammad Bouazizi in Tunisia had far less to do with democracy and much more with the deeply engrained Muslim concept of social justice, as well as the lack of gainful economic opportunities without which justice is impossible to attain. With the exception of the wealthy Gulf States, the Arab world has stagnated tremendously in social, economic and political terms during the last three decades – to the degree that most of the regimes have lost all legitimacy in the eyes of the people. This is in essence why the Arab street stood so firm in its rejection of the Ben Alis and Hosni Mubaraks, simultaneously inspired and symbolised by the tragedy of the simple Tunisian youth, Bouazizi.

But now that these long-standing rulers are no longer in power in the two countries, where do these seemingly leaderless Arab revolts take Tunisians and Egyptians, and how will they effect change to their systems of governance ? Virtually all previous revolutions in the region have involved top-down, military-political phenomenon. Nasser inspired both Egypt and the Arab world with the revolutionary changes he sought to implement at all levels of Egyptian society. In Iran, the Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile in Paris to provide ideological and organisational inspiration for the establishment of the Islamic Republic amidst the ruins of the Pahlavi monarchy. Neither Arab nationalism nor radical Islam is sweeping the



hearts and minds of the region with universal conviction at present, however, while liberal capitalism is largely associated with social injustice, endemic regime corruption and ultimately the stagnation in which much of the Arab world now finds itself. It is true that the Arab Spring is bringing more democracy, or political plurality, to countries like Egypt and Tunisia, where voters may well have a genuine opportunity of electing new rulers in national elections due to take place this autumn. While this may indeed be the case, there is little evidence suggesting that the political groups competing in those elections will have any viable solutions capable of providing new leadership for these countries and effecting any meaningful governance change capable of lifting the Arab street out of its present quagmire.

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